

Aspects of Cultural Memory in *Jazz*, by Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

The themes produced by Toni Morrison in the last fifty years deal with issues related to the cultural and political resistance of black communities in the United States in the midst of the history of the African American diaspora, addressing race relations, construction of black identity, spirituality and sexuality. The award-winning writer conquered American society and literary criticism by the peculiar way in which she directed her characters in the contexts of political, social, economic, cultural disorders and ethnic conflicts that her engaged writing elucidates. Thus, she exposed very creatively the dilemma of the American black people who struggle to achieve prosperity and racial emancipation without severing the ties of ancestry that are responsible for sustaining the identity of African Americans. This work intends to examine how acts of remembrance are configured as one of the devices used in the novel *Jazz*, published by Toni Morrison in 1992, to narrate the horrors that continued to happen during the years following the abolition of slavery in the United States. Thus, we aim to analyze the memories of one of the protagonists of the novel, the character Joe Trace, in the light, mainly, of the fourth chapter of the first part of Aleida Assmann's book *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, which explores the construction of individual identity based on acts of remembrance. We also intend to analyze how the experiential memories of horror brought by the character make up the artistic strategy of the author Toni Morrison, who thus becomes a disseminating agent of the cultural memory of the trauma of American slavery through literature. Bearing in mind that one of the biggest challenges of the postmodern world is the anti-racist struggle, we would like to demonstrate, once again, how Toni Morrison's literature supports this struggle to be won.

Keywords: Cultural memory, Slavery, Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, African American Diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Even after more than one hundred and fifty years of the abolition of slavery, Americans still experience several clashes between white supremacists and afro-descendants. On August 12, 2017, the small town of Charlottesville in the south-eastern state of Virginia was the scene of a confrontation between extremist advocates of white supremacy and protesters against discriminatory practices. Furthermore, it is widely reported by the world press that such events are not isolated, nor even less recent: the debate, revived in 2015 after a racial conflict in South Carolina, revolves around the symbology of the old Confederacy, which some consider a slave legacy while others consider a gesture of historical identity. To this is added the current context: the mutual nods between white supremacists and former President Donald Trump and the impressive wave of protests following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by police officers in Louisville and Minneapolis, respectively, in 2020.

If in recent years the situation has been highlighted again in the news and social networks, in literature, it has been a motivation since the mid-19th century for numerous authors, such as Solomon Northup, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, Sharon Draper and Toni Morrison, who receives special attention during this work. The themes produced by the writer in the last fifty years deal with issues related to the cultural and political resistance of black communities in the United States in the midst of the history of the African American diaspora, addressing racial relations, the construction of black identity, spirituality and sexuality. The award-winning writer conquered American society and literary criticism for the peculiar way in which she directs her characters in the contexts of political, social, economic, cultural disorders and ethnic conflicts that her engaged writing elucidates. Thus, she exposes very creatively the dilemma of the African Americans who struggle to achieve prosperity and racial emancipation without severing the ties of ancestry that are responsible for sustaining their identity. In a passage of volume 68 of the magazine of University of Oklahoma World Literature Today, Professor Trudier Harris stated: "Nationally, we certainly owe Toni Morrison more than mere groupie applause. She has been in the forefront of stamping diversity upon the face of American literature." (HARRIS, 1994: 10)

This work intends to examine how acts of remembrance are configured as one of the devices used in the novel *Jazz*, published by Toni Morrison in 1992, to narrate the horrors that continued to happen during the years following the abolition of slavery in the United States. Thus, we aim to analyze the memories of one of the protagonists of the novel, the character Joe Trace, in the light, mainly, of the fourth chapter of the first part of Aleida Assmann's book *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, which was translated to Portuguese as *Espaços da recordação: formas e transformações da memória cultural* and explores the

construction of individual identity based on acts of remembrance. We also intend to analyze how the experiential memories of horror brought by the character make up the artistic strategy of the author Toni Morrison, who thus becomes a disseminating agent of the cultural memory of the trauma of American slavery through literature.

It is a fact that most novels by this writer can be seen as attempts to expose how racism occurs in the United States, framing the various impacts suffered by black communities. Like the authors of the Black Aesthetic Movement – an American art movement that lasted from 1965 to 1976, encompassing music, literature, visual arts and theatre, and which valued African racial pride, heritage and culture – Toni Morrison has always fought to end with the racist stereotypes that continued to be reproduced in the United States, publishing works that portrayed the most diverse types of violence suffered by black people.

METHOD

The two protagonists of the narrative are examples of the complicated process of identity reconstruction within a white and racist society. Violet, a hairdresser in her fifties, depends on her ability to learn to resist the dominant discourses of beauty and happiness, which were implanted in her mind since childhood by her grandmother, in order to accept herself as she really is. These idealized standards of beauty and happiness certainly resulted in her ambiguous and opposite behaviors: Violet is torn between the madness of someone trying to disfigure Dorcas' corpse, her husband's young lover, and the neediness of someone who cannot handle the fact of the mother having committed suicide. However, as we read on, we see that Violet becomes able to push away the prejudiced speeches so impregnated in her mind by her grandmother when, metaphorically, she “kills” the woman she sometimes pretended to be: white, young and delicate, acting, finally, as a black woman, of middle age and incapable of bearing a child. While the trajectory of Violet's search for identity is narrated in the third person and linearly from a chronological point of view, her husband Joe recognizes himself as an individual by remembering his past experiences in a fragmented way, exposing separately seven remarkable episodes of his life, as he believed that there were transformed seven times before he met Dorcas: “With her I was fresh, new again. Before I met her I'd changed into new seven times.” (MORRISON, 2004: 123).

These seven “(re)births” narrated by the protagonist himself represent, for the most part, experiences of rejection, denial, displacement, and trauma; and the first-person narration of these episodes makes it possible for Joe to come to a unified sense of his “self”, because only then can he see himself as a complete individual. It would be like a puzzle game: to understand himself, Joe needs to reassemble all the pieces that represent

him to restructure his life and restart his marriage; like a jigsaw puzzle, when a piece is missing the whole assembly process becomes more difficult and, in the end, as much as the whole figure is decipherable, the image will be incomplete, something will always be missing. Joe fondly remembers his stepbrother Victory when he says that he had never told certain things to anyone, not even his brother, but that he had revealed them to Dorcas. "I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself." (MORRISON, 2004: 123). We intend to analyze Joe Trace's memories, in the light, mainly, of the fourth chapter of the first part of Aleida Assmann's book *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, which was translated to Portuguese as *Espaços da recordação: formas e transformações da memória cultural* and explores the construction of individual identity based on acts of remembrance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Joe's first memory is precisely when he chooses his own surname, as he was abandoned by his parents as a newborn and had only received his first name: Joseph. When he questions his adoptive mother who his real parents were, she replies: "O honey, they disappeared without a trace." (Morrison, 2004: 124). So, when Joe (nickname for Joseph) went to school for the first time and needed to give his last name, he said: Joseph Trace.

Aleida Assmann explains to us how the conception of the subject is linked to memory, and how this has changed over time, according to several intellectuals. At the end of the 17th century, the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) proposed a new relationship between identity and the individual: before him, it was common for identity to be attributed to the subject through family trees, that is, the individual had his or her identity, formed only from how their family or dynasty was composed (dukes, marquises, counts, barons, among others). For this reason, people who came from noble or illustrious families, for example, continued to receive titles and possessions throughout their lives and, not infrequently, were even spared from judgments or investigations, precisely because of the title they carried before their birth. Less affluent families obviously could not offer such a privilege to their descendants. Locke then suggests that the concept of identity be linked to the space of the subject's personal life, his life trajectory, and no longer to the titles inherited from his predecessors. As the bourgeois subject of the Modern Era is essentially individualistic and egocentric, so are memories of him.

In the following century, the English romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) portrayed in his verses the intimate feeling of people, emphasizing the importance of memory for the events, time, place and customs in the day-to-day of their lives. For him, the construction of identity only happens through remembrance, being part of a project of autonomous self-constitution of the subject, who sees himself transformed

with time and with the lived experiences – and not by the simple observation of himself as proposed by Locke.

When we analyze Joe's first change relating it to the perceptions of the two authors cited by Aleida Assmann, it is possible to formulate two lines of thought: firstly, when he claims that he had renewed himself seven times before, Joe resumes his trajectory in a way exactly corresponding to the process of remembering according to Wordsworth, that is, during all the moments in which he remembers his changes, the character at the same time reflects on himself, unfolds himself in seven, multiplies by seven, divides himself in seven, clearly seeking, recognizing and also showing to us readers his identity construction trajectory, which is not just one, there are several aspects of identity unfolded in countless "Joes". The second line of thought would be related to the surname issue: Trace. Exactly what until John Locke was taken as an absolute reference of the identity of an individual Joe lacks, because he has no surname, let alone a title; he did not come from a noble family and had been abandoned by his parents, being given the name Joseph by adoptive parents, and giving himself a surname. Let us also observe here the very epic character that the English romantic poet envisions: the very first transformation of Joe takes place in a moment of conception, of reinventing himself, of creating his own surname, the greatest symbol of our identity, of whom we are. At the end of his digressions, when Joe changes the tone of his narration and addresses Dorcas – already dead – he makes another kind of confession:

Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and I made up my mind. My mind. And I made up my mind to follow you too. That's something I know how to do from way back. [...] I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. (Morrison, 2004: 135)

It is evident in the passage that autonomous self-constitution proposed by Wordsworth, when the protagonist assumes that he has always pursued his goals, regardless of the obstacles encountered – regardless of carrying the biggest obstacle "of that time": the color black. And precisely because he was black, he needed to go after the renovations that he remembers, bringing us, case by case, visions of what remained the horror of slavery and its lasting effects at the beginning of the 20th century.

Joe's second change came when he and Victory were chosen by the most skilled hunter in the region to learn to hunt with him, which was a source of great pride for the family. Joe does not name the expert hunter, but admires him deeply and calls him "hunter of hunters"; Joe says that because of what he had learned from him, he was more comfortable in the forest than in the city, and for that reason many people in the county believed that Joe would never adapt to life in the metropolis. With this

recollection, we can once again perceive the implicit importance of the Trace surname: Joe – who chose his own surname – was chosen to learn to hunt, to track his prey, to locate it, to follow it, to find it. Precisely he, a black man, who, like so many others, was the prey hunted by the farmers' employees; and like many, he would be attacked again by members of supremacist clans (in 1917, in New York, when trying to help a boy in the midst of a riot, Joe was beaten and his head was badly bruised). The protagonist shows us how the relations between blacks and whites were configured, even after the slaves were freed, which did not mean the liberation of black people from white's prejudice and cruelty.

When Joe renewed himself for the third time, at the age of twenty, Vienna, his hometown located in the state of Virginia, was destroyed by an arson, forcing him to look for another city to live. So, he met and married Violet, moved to another county, and had their \$180 debt increased to \$800, on account of the sale of the farm where they worked. It took them five years to pay it off until, eight years later, after being tricked into buying land, they decided to move to the north of the country. It was the fourth renewal for Joe, who took a train with Violet to New York. At that time, the Jim Crow Laws – which were in force from 1876 to 1965 – had to be complied with: in public places, black people could not use the same bathroom as whites, much less occupy the same environment and, for this reason, Joe and Violet wagons were changed five times.

They initially settled in the lower part of the city, in the neighborhood then called Tenderloin (now NoMad - Madison Square North), a district of bars, brothels and gambling, where the police were paid not to serve, not to protect, much less to arrest someone. It was with Joe's fifth move, after going through all kinds of jobs, that the couple moved to uptown New York, more specifically to Harlem, initially inhabited by white citizens. Joe tells how the houses and buildings were, in addition to the fact that blacks were subject to paying high rents, which is why Harlem has become a predominantly black neighborhood. It was there that he started selling beauty products and Violet stopped being a housekeeper to work as a hairdresser, starting a good phase in the couple's life. The country man, discredited by his neighbors, contrary to what many in the county thought, had conquered the big city.

With Joe's third, fourth and fifth recollections, we observe the trajectory of change that gives us a small sample of the black diaspora that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: black people in the South of the United States faced living conditions deeply degrading after their release. In the cotton, corn, and tobacco fields, they worked continuously to pay the lease on the land and earn a living. However, illiterate and without legal defense, they were easily exploited, to the point of ending the agricultural year with more debt than at the beginning. To misery was added terror: atrocities perpetrated by the secret orders of the Ku Klux Klan or the White Camelia Knights were frequent and no authority

seemed willing to prevent them, let alone punish them. The clansmen attacked at night, erecting a flaming cross in front of the home of the chosen family. In this climate of humiliation and terror, the north was seen as the promised land, where black people were rarely bothered and managed to lead a decent life.

Thus, from 1916 to 1918, more than four hundred and fifty thousand Afro-descendants left the American South region, in what history has consecrated by the expression “Great Migration” (Tolney, 2003; Wilkerson, 2011). This diaspora in search of hope and freedom lasted until 1970 and was destined to Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York. The transition was not easy: the migrant from the South had to learn the ways and customs of the North, face new challenges, adapt to a different landscape and climate, rebuild, or improvise the family, finally relearn the meaning of “us” – which meant not only the ties between community members, but also between people and the new place chosen to live. In addition to the entire process of identity recognition that the character goes through, it is interesting to note that these last memories narrated by Joe are extremely important for us to understand the historical formation of American society and the territorial occupation of the country, proving what Aleida Assmann says about it. from memory studies:

[...] diferentes questões e interesses se cruzam, se estimulam e se condensam, provenientes dos estudos culturais, das ciências naturais e da tecnologia da informação. [...] Essa variedade de abordagens da questão revela que a memória é um fenômeno que nenhuma disciplina pode monopolizar. O fenômeno da memória, na variedade de suas ocorrências, não é transdisciplinar somente no fato de que não pode ser definido de maneira unívoca por nenhuma área; dentro de cada disciplina ele é contraditório e controverso. [...] different issues and interests intersect, stimulate, and condense, coming from cultural studies, natural sciences and information technology. [...] This variety of approaches to the issue reveals that memory is a phenomenon that no discipline can monopolize. The phenomenon of memory, in the variety of its occurrences, is not transdisciplinary only in the fact that it cannot be defined unequivocally by any area; within each discipline it is contradictory and controversial. (ASSMANN, 2011: 20)

In the specific case of Toni Morrison's novel, the memories of the African American diaspora, in addition to acting as reconstructors of the protagonist's identity, bring to the reader important vestiges of one of the largest and cruelest institutions created by humanity, its consequences and how they influence society today.

The sixth change that Joe underwent was due to a violent episode in the summer of 1917: when trying to help a boy who had fallen while running, he was beaten by a group of whites and saved from death by a fair-skinned person. Joe mentions what has been called the “Lynching Era” in

the United States (when more than four thousand four hundred African descendants were exterminated), which began shortly after the American Civil War ended in 1865; its peak was between 1890 and 1930. (Pfeifer, 2010; Pfeifer, 2011; Rushdy, 2014). At that time, newspapers advertised and made invitations for light-skinned people to attend beatings, hangings, quarterings, among other atrocities imposed on black people in public. Let's see how Joe recalls what happened:

I don't know exactly what started the riot. Could have been what the papers said, what the waiters I worked with said, or what Gistan said – that party, he said, where they sent out invitations to whites to come see a colored man burn alive. (MORRISON, 2004: 128)

According to Aleida Assmann, the transition between generations can be interrupted when there is a loss of common knowledge. The author explains that cultural memory can be stored through countless supports; communicative memory, on the other hand, is that transmitted orally by individuals who witnessed or have knowledge of the facts that occurred. Joe, in the scope of our analysis, is a victim, witness, hero of a story he remembers in detail, that is, the construction of the character Joe is one of the artifices used by author Toni Morrison to transmit memories of American slavery through the act of memory of the protagonist, through the literary work *Jazz*. However, the term “Lynching Era” is not explicit in the pages of the novel and the reader who wants to know more needs to be willing to search in historical sources, thus resorting to supports that store cultural memory.

Joe's seventh renovation took place in 1919, when American troops returned home with the end of World War I. Joe remembers accompanying the 3,000 black soldiers of the 369th US Army Infantry Regiment (better known as “Harlem Hellfighters”); it was during the reception that took place in February, when they were cheered by the New York population on the streets of Manhattan, to the sound of the regiment's jazz band.

[...] in 1919 when I walked all the way, every goddamn step of the way, with the three six nine. Can't remember no time when I danced in the street but that one time everybody did. I thought that change was the last, and it sure was the best because the War had come and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two. (MORRISON, 2004, p: 129)

In this excerpt, we consider possible to infer that Joe has his heart broken in half as a reference that the author Toni Morrison wanted to make to the two greatest icons of the performance of the Harlem Hellfighters in France: corporal Henry Johnson and private Needham Roberts.

Perhaps no finer tribute to the Regiment's lasting significance could be given than that by Toni Morrison in her 1992 novel *Jazz*, in which the homecoming parade of the fighting "three six nine" filled protagonist Joe Trace with so much pride that it "split his heart in two." (SAMMONS; MORROW JR., 2015: 3).

Even today, it is possible to say that receiving a war decoration is a source of pride for combatants and their families. However, regarding corporal Henry Johnson, private Needham Roberts and so many other black servicemen in 1919, this was clearly not the understanding of the American authorities. Even after being aware that the 369th Regiment had performed well on the battlefield, the American government issued a memorandum to the French head of state requesting that he did not let the fighters know that they could compare themselves to whites, as it did not want the black military to return to America demanding equal rights. All that was left for Henry Johnson was the downfall, since, after arriving in American territory, he was unable to work due to having been wounded in combat. There was no record of his name in the regiment's enlistment, and for that reason the corporal received no assistance from the US Army. Johnson died ten years later, totally forgotten, and penniless, to, in 2015, posthumously receive the Medal of Honor – the highest American military decoration.

Joe describes the moment with such precision that, if we search the images of that day of celebration, we will even see the regimental band at the head of the platoons. It is, as Joe himself says, the most pleasant memory he has, such was the happiness he felt. The moment even made Joe dance among the other citizens on the street, as was the custom since the emergence of jazz in New Orleans, even before the beginning of that century. Joe's sense of pride and the collective joy shared on the parade are evident; for this reason, we cannot fail to consider that, of all the memories previously narrated by the protagonist, this is the one that contrasts with the others, with a traumatic content. It was as if slavery was about to be abolished once again, as if from that moment on, things could finally begin to change for Afro-descendants, and the pride of being black could, for the first time, also be felt by whites. Unfortunately, this was not the continuation of either Joe's narrative or the real story.

CONCLUSION

It is evident the weight that a work like *Jazz* has among the discussions, the past clashes and the current circumstances linked not only to American slavery, but also to Brazilian slavery, since our country was equally marked by this institution. Not by chance, author Toni Morrison connects different cultural aspects to build the narrative with a direct and provocative tone at the same time. If we consider that a good part of people in United States do not even know or have forgotten about the Lynching Era or the Harlem Hellfighters, we can see the importance that *Jazz*, has on the

fight against racial prejudice and social inequality, both in USA and in Brazil (when we think about its translations). Diaspora, identity, and music intertwine and follow together from the first to the last Joe's recollections – and from the first to the last line of the novel – without the terms themselves being spelled during the narration. In fact, the word jazz is present only in the title and in no other of the more than two hundred and twenty pages of the book: the reader is induced to think about jazz always through the words music, rhythm, dance, lullaby, sound, melody. In the preface, the author states that she did not intend to simply allude to great musicians, records or songs during the narrative, but that she would like to structure it with the characteristics of the musical style, registering the personification of the African American experience during the 1920s: feelings of displacement, change, inventiveness and improvisation during migratory movements. In Aleida Assmann's study, it is possible to verify exactly this function that art assumes when connecting to cultural memory:

A nova arte sobre a memória, que desenvolve o trabalho de recordação no modo do “como se”, coloca um espelho diante da memória cultural. Essa memória cultural se torna reflexiva por meio da arte. A arte sublinha principalmente a materialidade, a “coisidade” à qual a memória se prende sob o signo de uma desmaterialização ubíqua de todos os dados. Em uma cultura que não se lembra mais do seu passado e que também já esqueceu a sua falta de lembrança, os artistas põem atenção reforçada sobre a memória, à medida que tornam visíveis as funções perdidas, por meio de simulações estéticas. A arte, pode-se dizer, lembra à cultura o fato de que ela não se lembra mais de coisa alguma. The new art on memory, which develops the work of remembrance in the “as if” mode, places a mirror in front of cultural memory. This cultural memory becomes reflexive through art. Art mainly emphasizes materiality, the “thingness” to which memory clings under the sign of a ubiquitous dematerialization of all data. In a culture that no longer remembers its past and that has also forgotten its lack of remembrance, artists place reinforced attention on memory as they make lost functions visible through aesthetic simulations. Art, one might say, reminds culture of the fact that it no longer remembers anything. (ASSMANN, 2011: 398)

We believe it is important to emphasize that all this discussion about memory is allied to the language of the means used for its dissemination, that is, it is vital to re-emphasize the importance of the connection between memory and fictional construction, in this case. It is a fact that Toni Morrison has a very well-established literary project over more than thirty years of production, as her publications invariably deal with the trauma of slavery in the USA. The author, in fact, in her praise of the Jazz Age, pays homage not only to jazz but also to the activity of incessant repetition and revision of the past that is the activity of memory in both history and literature, supporting the anti-racist struggle, one of the biggest challenges of the postmodern world.

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