

Genre Polyphony in African American Literature

Dialogic Readings of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*
and Toni Morrison's *Love*

Inger-Anne Søvting

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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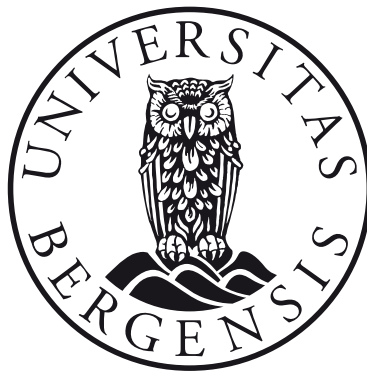
UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN



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Introduction

November Cotton Flower

Boll weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground –
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before;
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.

Jean Toomer's poem "November Cotton Flower" from *Cane* (1923) can be read symbolically as a poetic rendering of the unseasonal emergence of African American literature at a time and a place that hardly seemed ripe for a literary flowering; slavery would appear a barren season for literacy, yet flowers appeared. Its near traditional form, a sonnet in rhyming couplets transposed onto southern American soil, evidences this literature's aesthetic eclecticism. African Americans, more than any other ethnic group in the United States, were from the very beginning forced to adopt and appropriate elements from white American society. Slaves came from different African cultures, speaking different languages, and, for obvious reasons, did not have the same opportunities for cultural consolidation as other groups. To add to the complexity, some came by way of the Caribbean and had already encountered other western cultures than that of North America. Generally, the preservation of their native cultures was not a possibility, but certain elements still survived insofar as conditions made it possible. Simultaneously, their access to white dominant culture was restricted as this culture had no desire to see the black slaves fully assimilated and integrated into American society. Despite this rather disadvantageous starting point, or perhaps, paradoxically, because of it, African Americans have contributed significantly to American culture, for instance in the field of literature. Due to their lack of freedom and opportunity, African Americans were from the very beginning forced to construct a new platform of traditions through a negotiation of features from both black and white traditions. This sense of

two-ness, the sense of belonging within, or between, two cultures, what Du Bois in 1903 called “double-consciousness,” is reflected in black American literature from its earliest days, and has been a noticeable feature since. The history of this literature is, among other things, a history of aesthetic hybridity, cultural negotiation – and self-invention.

This study acknowledges and further explores through textual analysis the claim that African American literary texts are culturally hybrid constructions rooted in two main cultural traditions, one African American and one European American. These terms in themselves indicate cultural duality and highlight the complexity of intercultural mechanisms, something which is made less obvious with the use of terms like “black” and “white.” “Black” and “white” indicate a polar relationship between opposites whereas “African American” and “European American” underscore the twoness inherent in these concepts as well as their affinity with each other. African American genres – sometimes referred to as black since they contain elements traceable to African cultures, be that vernacular elements like storytelling or musical genres like the blues and jazz, or an African American literary ur-genre like the slave narrative – are thus in themselves already hybrid constructions and the results of encounters and negotiations. European American genres are similarly often the result of intercultural contact. When terms like “black” and “white” are used it is important to bear this complexity in mind.

African American literature, through its double heritage, reaches out beyond American traditions to, for instance, its European roots and the history of genres like the novel and the short story as well as to African traditions proper. It is therefore unfortunate to discuss the designation “African American” in opposition to “western” since written African American literature is also western, although historically not thought of as part of the western literary or cultural canon. Consequently, finding the adequate terminology is difficult; a term that is applicable in one context may present problems in another. In this study the term “African American” will mostly be used when referring to genres that could also be labelled “black.” The term “European American” is, however, sometimes problematic as a designation for genres that could be labelled “white” since some of the genres in question are more aptly thought of as European or, more broadly, western. The terms “European” and “western” will therefore at times alternate with “European American,” although the potential shortcomings of these terms are acknowledged.

The aim with this study is to throw light on the diverse manners in which this hybrid, double heritage manifests itself textually. It will do so by exploring the workings of various genres in three African American novels from different time periods: Jean Toomer’s *Cane*

(1923), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Love* (2004). It seeks to show how genres at work in these three texts open them to literary discourses and thematics from other times and places, and thus expand the texts' literary horizon. Via a reading of these genres, intertextual relationships between the three chosen texts and texts in the African American and the European American, or even European, traditions will be identified and discussed. Such relationships are important since they form what could be termed the texts' literary memory. If a concept like "African American tradition" is to be adequate, or helpful, it must not be used in ways that close this tradition to other traditions, but, on the contrary, be inclusive of African American texts' relationship to various aesthetic practices. Therefore, genres and intertextual relations are important in this work as sites where the chosen texts join a wider literary and cultural discourse.

This study will examine the generic textual manifestations of the two traditions and their encounters in the texts in order to investigate how they intersect and interact in what could be called the architectonics of the text. Michael Holquist, in his work on Mikhail Bakhtin, describes architectonics in general terms as concerning "questions about building, questions about how something is put together" (1990, 149); it is "the general study of how entities relate to each other" (150), while aesthetics is to be considered a subset that "concerns itself with the particular problem of consummation, or how specific parts are shaped into particular wholes" (150). These descriptions are relevant also in relation to this work. In other words, it is the aim to show how the two traditions, manifested through different genres, relate to each other and cooperate in constructing the texts' meaning as well as form. It is, however, not the intention to attempt a thematic or stylistic outline of the African American tradition as such a proceeding necessarily would be reductive.

Du Bois' concept "double-consciousness" and Bakhtin's theory of the novel and dialogism form a theoretical foundation for this study. Double-consciousness does not primarily describe an aesthetic as much as a psychological or social phenomenon – conflictual, yet potentially regenerative. It describes a relationship between the individual and society that has been internalized in the individual. However, this double-consciousness can also manifest itself aesthetically, as it does in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), an inherently and consciously eclectic and hybrid work, from the point of view of culture as well as genre, comprising history, psychology, the arts and folklore. Du Bois problematizes the nature of this doubleness as an either-or, or a both-and, and presents the African American individual as a site where black and white co-exist. This is a parallel to the simultaneous co-existence of differences that form the basis for Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. In an utterance, two voices

can sound simultaneously, enhancing each other in the process. This works as an image of the African American text where both white and black traditions, both oral and folkloric and literate, written traditions, sound together and carry the aesthetic and thematic architectonics of the text. It could be argued that African American texts' aesthetic hybridity – their mixing of genres and literary discourses, with its subsequent attention to boundaries as such – also is reflected in the texts' thematic concern with intersubjective relations. Du Boisian double-consciousness predisposes for porous subject-object relations, and in all three texts such relations are to some extent thematized and investigated.

African American literature is not characterized by the textual presence of vernacular culture, or any one genre, expressive mode, trope or theme *per se*, but rather by its ability and willingness to adopt and adapt various genres and expressions, from white as well as black culture, in the creation of something new. It evinces openness and a creative attitude towards the recycling of aesthetic forms and their ideological and historical implications, a recycling which involves recontextualization and often remediation. If we look at African American literature in a historical perspective it becomes evident that this recycling and revision of old materials is a central aesthetic element in this literature's quest for a tradition. As writes Zora Neale Hurston, "the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is reinterpreted for his own use" ([1934] 1994, 86). Black texts are thus *avant garde* in relation to our contemporary culture's focus on reinventions or reuses, in other words recontextualizations, of the past. Cultural critic Paul Gilroy, with particular focus on black music, describes black diasporic cultural forms, of which African American culture forms a part, as modern and modernist partly because they "have been marked by their hybrid, creole origins in the West" (1993a, 73). Christopher Mulvey implies a similar view when he claims that early African American literature

has profited from a new appreciation of a literature of crossing, passing, and mixing. In its own language, it is a "mulatto" literature. It is a literature that does not wish to make clear distinctions between black and white, between African and American, between authentic and fictitious. Instead, it offers a complex view of life that speaks directly to the twenty-first century, a century in which we are all mulatto. (2004, 30–31)

Similarly, in her work on early African American fiction, M. Giulia Fabi seeks to establish the literary qualities of texts from this period by paying attention to the ways in which they formally experiment with and revise, rather than merely mimic, already existing novelistic genres (2004, 34). If the meeting and mixing of peoples, cultures, traditions and genres is the

principal mode of the twenty-first century, then African American literature, with its high awareness of the processes of crossing and mixing, could be seen as a forerunner.

Two genres dealt with, briefly or extensively, in all three chapters are the Gothic and literary derivations of African American musical genres, like the blues and jazz. Since they will be central in my reading of all three primary texts they will be introduced and discussed in chapter one while other genres will be introduced and discussed in the chapter where they are relevant only. The influence of the Gothic and music is noticeable from African American literature's inception until today. It is, however, not my intention to cement these two genres as the sole formative elements in African American narrative; other genres are also important in my readings of the different texts. My reading aims to highlight the way that the texts seek to wrest usable meaning from existing structures, i.e. genres and established expressive modes, by placing them in different literary environments and new intertextual collocations in what could be seen as a process of cultural, textual cross-fertilization. The African American text becomes an enunciative third space where two traditions meet and interact in a chorus of different genres.

The three texts examined in this study are chosen for their differences as well as their similarities. They belong to different time periods and each text to some extent represents the time in which it was written. Toomer's *Cane* is a text from the Harlem Renaissance, that peculiar period when black vernacular culture found its way into the arts. Walker's *The Color Purple* marks a feminist turn in African American writing, whereas Morrison's *Love* reveals a self-conscious concern with tradition and narrative structure characteristic of much of the literature, as well as criticism, of the more recent period. Stylistically, the overall impression is that they are highly dissimilar texts: *Cane* is a generically undecidable collection of shorter texts penned in poetic language; *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel written in the black vernacular, and *Love* is a multi-perspectival novel that combines standard written English with poetic qualities and a black vernacular tone. Both men and women authors are represented and the perspective is thus not that of one gender only. However, despite their obvious differences, there are factors that connect them. Firstly, all three texts are complex generic mosaics that use collocations of various genres creatively in their discourses. Secondly, *Cane* could be seen as a mother text for the novels by Walker and Morrison; its attention to traditional as well as modern forms and genres is deliberate, experimental and searching, and it opens doors to genres and forms that Walker and Morrison can enter. The same could be said for its focus on gender and race, which are central concerns in all three books. For these reasons, when considered together the three texts provide ample space for

intergeneric and intercultural readings without delineating these processes to a specific period or particular literary style.

Chapter one, “Concepts and Contexts,” will discuss central concepts and critical terms in this study, such as hybridity, double-consciousness, dialogue and genre. It will also discuss African American literary criticism in a historical perspective in order to place both the chosen texts and this work in a context. Chapter two, “Music and the Gothic in a Modernist Tune: The Transitional Discourse of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” investigates how the complexities and ambiguities of African American existence in the early parts of the twentieth century are conveyed through the workings of the Gothic, African American music and modernist forms, such as French Symbolism. Its dialogic, open-ended discourse gives it a timeless relevance that equals the best of modernist texts. Chapter three, “Everyday Blues: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* as Epistolary Neo-Slave Narrative,” focuses on how a simple story of an individual’s path from servitude and oppression to freedom and self-reliance is made complex through the novel’s intricate web of genres and expressive forms: the slave narrative, epistolary narrative, the Gothic, and the blues. In chapter four, “African American Folklore Enters the Gothic Family Romance: Dialogic Characters in Toni Morrison’s *Love*,” the intertwined lives of the female characters and their relationship to the novel’s central patriarch, Bill Coosey, are interpreted in light of a variety of genres: the blues, the Gothic, trickster tales and the Cinderella fairy tale.

Chapter One

Concepts and Contexts

Who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The word in language is half someone else's.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*

1. Concepts

Theorizing the Double: Hybridity as Double-Consciousness and Dialogue

The term “hybrid,” or “hybridity,” is frequently used in this work, along with “double-consciousness” and “dialogue,” when referring to the heterogeneous many-voiced nature of the chosen texts. The term “hybridity” is today commonly used to designate an object or subject which is in some way mixed or heterogeneous in terms of offspring and/or composition. It is used in a variety of fields; “the contemporary work in hybridity is cross-disciplinary, evident in studies of popular culture, media, immigrant populations, subaltern studies, and history, as well as expressive culture” (Kapchang and Strong 1999, 243). Its connotations today are predominantly positive and associated with creativity, innovation and changeability. However, this has not always been so. Hybridity, although currently a fashionable academic and critical term, is not a modern coinage. As Robert C. Young reminds us, “[t]he word ‘hybrid’ has developed from biological and botanical origins” (1995, 6) denoting the offspring of different races, and the *OED* states that it can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century (6). However, the term was not in common use until the nineteenth century: “‘Hybrid’ is the nineteenth century’s word. But it has become our own again. In the nineteenth century it was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one” (6). Hybridity was used in racial theories to denote a degradation of humanity, as well as of other species. The hybrid offspring of two species was a regenerative dead end as it would not lead to further offspring. This is quite the opposite of its current usage in the cultural field where it as often as not is used to celebrate culturally heterogeneous elements, and is indeed the sign of creativity and fertilization. Language develops and words gain new connotations and thereby also new usages over time. The word hybrid is thus itself, as Robert C. Young points out, a hybrid, and is as such an enactment of its own meaning. The texts by Toomer, Walker and Morrison

illustrate how hybrid forms represent innovation as well as continuation; old forms are put to new use.

A possible problem with the term, at least in a cultural and a literary context, is that it appears to infer the existence of something which is not hybrid, that is, the existence of purity. It could be argued that no such thing exists, that absolute autonomy and purity are impossible. For instance, no literary genre emerges *ex nihilo*. The Gothic is a notoriously hybrid genre containing elements of, among other things, travel narratives, personal letters and diaries. The slave narrative is also very much a genre identifiably composed of different elements: the autobiography, the narrative of *Bildung* and the trickster tale, to mention but three. If we decide that all is in one way or other hybrid we do not strictly speaking need the term as there is no opposite phenomenon, no purity, we need to distinguish it from. However, when we wish to draw attention to the phenomenon of hybridity we need a term to refer to what we are talking about. All modern literary genres are hybrid as they have all sprung from more than one source.

Hybridity as a phenomenon is central in the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois as well as in Bakhtin, although these thinkers present it differently and in different contexts and use other terms for it. For Du Bois it is, initially, related to the individual's experience of the world whereas for Bakhtin it is primarily a phenomenon of language.

Du Bois has been described as “the ‘founder’ of African American thought” (King 2008, 132) partly because of “the way his own thinking encompassed most of the intellectual, literary, and cultural concerns preceding him and, in turn, established the intellectual and ‘spiritual’ agenda for those who came after him” (132). He is in other words a figure that cannot be avoided when dealing with questions pertaining to the concept of an African American identity, whether this is individual, social or aesthetic, and he is no less relevant today than he was in his own time.¹ In *The Souls of Black Folk* from 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the term “double-consciousness” to describe the conflictual “two-ness” that he saw as characteristic for the African American's situation, and this has remained one of the most frequently quoted presentations of the African American experience to date. He famously describes “the Negro” as being

gifted with a second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of

¹ For instance, the opening of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is a mild rewriting of Du Bois: “Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness” (Gilroy 1993a, 1).

a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. ([1903] 1999, 10–11)

His description of this double-consciousness is curiously ambiguous and it is impossible to ascertain whether it is to be seen as a debilitating or facilitative phenomenon. The second-sight, or second perspective – that is, seeing one’s self through the eyes of others, in other words, seeing oneself as other – is a perspective African Americans have acquired because of their disadvantageous and subservient social position. It could be argued that Du Bois describes it as a layered phenomenon, or a palimpsest; he “always” sees and measures himself through the spectacles of a world that “yields him no true self-consciousness.” This sounds like a perfect case of alienation; he is denied direct access to his own self and can *only* see himself as others, his adversaries, see him. However, Du Bois also describes this second perspective as a gift, and in order for it to represent an advantageous enhancement of his existence, it is necessary that he not *only* sees through the eyes of others, but also simultaneously has access to a perspective that is more truly his own, a perspective that does not view his values and existence with contempt. Since he repeatedly refers to his *two-ness*, himself as self and himself as other, we must infer that both perspectives are involved and that they exist side by side.

Between these two worlds or perspectives there is an ever ongoing strife; “[t]he history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” ([1903] 1999, 11). Again we are reminded of the negativity of the two-ness as he lacks, because of it, self-conscious manhood. The solution to the strife between his two perspectives is a merging of his two selves where they both remain intact:

In this merging he wished neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes it to be possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. (11)

In other words, he desires a dialogic rather than a dialectic movement. What is desired is a tripartite structure; in order for his doubleness to be a co-existent both/and rather than a warring either/or he needs a third space where the two perspectives can co-exist side by side.

Du Bois’s term “double-consciousness” is not his own coinage but is traceable to various philosophical thinkers, American as well as European, something which underscores the protean, eclectic and culturally hybrid nature of his work. Dickson D. Bruce Jr. writes that

[i]n using the term ‘double consciousness,’ Du Bois drew on two main sources. One of these was essentially figurative, a product of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. The other, not entirely unrelated and mentioned briefly by historian Arnold Rampersad in his own analysis of DuBois’s work, was initially medical, carried forward into Du Bois’s time by the emerging field of psychology. (1992, 299–300)

His two American progenitors in this context are Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James.² Emerson used the term in his essay “The Transcendentalist,” delivered as a lecture in 1842. In his use of the term it refers to the conflict between a transcendental pull and the demands of society and everyday life (Bruce Jr. 1992, 300), in other words it denotes a kind of suspension in mid-air caused by upwards- and downwards-pulling forces. It describes two conflicting demands working on the individual, yet is a very different form of double-consciousness than that discussed by Du Bois:

The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and, with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves. (Emerson [1842] 1981, 106)

Emerson sees no happy union between the two components of his double-consciousness and expresses a desire to be free from the double bind; he wants freedom from society, whereas Du Bois expresses a desire to reconcile the two and be free *in* society.

When we look to European sources of influence Hegel is an important reference, as has been noted by for instance Shamooin Zamir (1995). Hegel’s account of a developing self-consciousness in the master–servant discussion in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is probably more central to Du Bois than is Emersonian Transcendentalism. For Emerson and the Transcendentalists, the impact or influence of the other could represent a threat to independence and could thus work against the transcendence of the individual, while “[t]he struggle for recognition remains, as it were, the pivotal moment in the Hegelian philosophy of self-consciousness. On this account, the self is what it is primarily through its relation to other selves” (Steven B. Smith 1992, 100–101). Hegel describes the relationship between master and servant as one of interdependency; the existence of each depends on the other’s recognition. However, since the master is superior to the servant, the servant’s recognition is of little consequence: “The master is somehow greater than any mark of recognition he might receive” (Steven B. Smith 1992, 103). At the same time he realizes his dependency on the

² In the field of psychology it was used by William James to denote a split personality, a state where two opposing but equal consciousnesses were confined within one body (Bruce Jr. 1992, 304).

servant and is forced to accept that his self-consciousness is not autonomous. The servant recognizes his dependency on the master and his need for the master's recognition. In this way the external strife between the two is internalized in the servant, in a fashion similar to Du Bois' double-consciousness: "Du Bois's 'double-consciousness,' like Hegel's 'unhappy consciousness,' is the internalization of the dialectics of struggle and confrontation" (Zamir 1995, 145–146). A more fully developed self-consciousness is created in the servant than in the master but it is also an unhappy self-consciousness since it implies the realization of dependency and subservience. This reflects the ambiguity in Du Bois' description of double-consciousness. The experience of this double-consciousness is of a higher order than the absence of it, but it also follows that its complexity is problematic.

This situation is also relatable to slavery and to the slave narrative, often referred to as the ur-genre of African American literature. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself* from 1845 is generally seen as the most accomplished of these narratives, and the moment in Douglass' text when he realizes the mechanism behind his own dependency on his white master could be described as a "Hegelian-Du Boisian" master–slave moment in literature that illustrates the development of the slave's self-consciousness; he sees himself as his master sees him but also understands the antithesis of his master's view. In Hegel, the servant can realize himself through his work and contribute to growth and development while the master in fact remains static and less productive and also dependent on the work of the servant. It is through his work and not through his master, that the servant gains a freedom of self: "Thus precisely in labor where there seemed to be merely some outsider's mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through this re-discovery of himself by himself, of having and being a 'mind of his own'" (Hegel quoted in Steven B. Smith 1992, 103). In Douglass this is his discovery of his double-consciousness, and a realization of the role of his work. He realizes that to his master a good slave is an ignorant slave and, consequently, in order to free himself and gain his own manhood, he must act subversively: "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man" ([1845] 1986, 78). The empowering element lies in the recognition of the importance of one's work, for oneself and not for others. This moment in Douglass is a moment of genesis for African American culture and literature; understanding the other's view of you, but also the importance of developing an oppositional consciousness. This is a moment that links selfhood, literacy and freedom, repeated again in Du Bois' "discovery" of double-consciousness.

Through his choice of a term like double-consciousness, Du Bois grounds the actual African American social experience in history and philosophy. Bruce Jr. argues that by using a term already familiar within western Romanticism, thus locating African spirituality within the realm of the universal human soul, Du Bois “lent much more weight to his assertion of the possibility of an African message to the world” (Bruce Jr. 1992, 302). African spirituality was explainable in recognizable philosophical and psychological terms, and could not be written off as racist primitivism. More than this, it posits the African American as a kind of representative western human being.

Du Bois’ discussion of African American identity as double-consciousness can be transferred to the field of literature as a description of an aesthetic literary double-consciousness, comprising discernible elements from both the African American and the literary and European American cultural traditions. A literary double-consciousness involves an awareness of these traditions’ co-existence, but also an awareness of the nature of the relationship between them. Western literature and its traditions and genres have occupied a hegemonic position and determined the standards by which African American writers have been assessed, assessment later to be challenged by African American writers. Du Bois’ use of double epithets for chapter headings in *The Souls of Black Folk* underlines this work’s twoness and the simultaneous co-existence of European American and African American traditions. Each chapter opens with some lines from a poetic text in the western literary canon – represented authors are for instance Lord Byron and Schiller – which are followed by some notes from an African American song. As writes Du Bois in “The Sorrow Songs,” “[t]he result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian” ([1903] 1999, 158). The exception is the last chapter, “The Sorrow Songs,” which opens with a few lines from a “Negro Song,” thus symbolically placing the African American vernacular expression in the place of the canonized literary text.

African American texts are composites, embodying both traditions; they are discursive third spaces where the two traditions meet. The intercultural dynamics in the text does not eradicate the twoness in a dialectical process but enhances and illuminates the relationship between them through a dialogic interplay of differences and parallels. This double-consciousness, that is, the awareness of the interdependency of self and other, the awareness of the self as other, is also something that is found thematically in a number of the most prominent texts in the African American tradition, including the texts in the present study.

The longed-for simultaneous creative co-existence of two within one expressed by Du Bois echoes two terms that are foundational in Bakhtin’s writings; polyphony and dialogue.

Bakhtin has for a long time been a central critical name in the field of literary and cultural studies. Indeed, since he was “discovered” by western academia in the 1980s, after his death, references to his work appear to be almost ubiquitous.³ His theory has been convenient for describing American studies as a complex multicultural field consisting of a variety of voices. In his writing Bakhtin displays a clear preference for terms denoting openness and plurality, like “polyphony,” “dialogue” and “heteroglossia,” and his theory is fundamentally anti-authoritarian, refusing to give priority to any one side in the dialogue. This is easily understood since he lived and worked in a totalitarian regime and was himself sentenced to several years of exile in Kazakhstan by Stalin.⁴ Bakhtin’s writings about literature do not so much offer a theoretical apparatus for analyzing literary texts as it presents an ideology of literature, discourse and language that accentuates non-finalizing, open, dynamic structures. In this study, Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue as novelistic discourse, with its ideological and structural implications, forms an ideological foundation, and also to some extent offers guidelines for readings of intergeneric and intertextual relationships.

Polyphony is a term used by Bakhtin to describe one of the most salient characteristics of Dostoevsky’s novels; their multi-voicedness, and it is also suitable in descriptions and explications of the multiplicity of genres at work in African American texts. The term itself derives from musical theory, although Bakhtin asserts that “the material of music and of the novel are too dissimilar for there to be anything more between them than a graphic analogy, a simple metaphor. We are transforming this metaphor into the term ‘polyphonic novel,’ since we have not found a more appropriate label” (1984b, 22). Polyphony in music means the coexistence of different voices, interdependent and of equal importance in the creation of the whole, yet rhythmically and melodically independent. This is also what polyphony means in Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky: “...polyphony presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work – for only then may polyphonic principles be applied to the construction of the whole” (34). Bakhtin focuses on the different characters in Dostoevsky’s texts as representing different, independent consciousnesses and thus different worlds. It is,

³ He is frequently used and referred to in African American studies, for instance Bakhtin’s thinking heavily informs Gates’ influential *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), a book offering a theoretical approach to African American literature.

⁴ Social and political oppression is an experience that groups of Russians shared with African Americans. The parallel histories of African Americans and Russians and their literatures are investigated in Dale Peterson’s *Up from Bondage* (2000) where he writes that “Russians and African Americans have battled for years to assert the existence of an authentic cultural particularity and to create decolonized modes of ethnic self-expression. Their struggle has been complicated by the need to be acknowledged by a dominant civilization that has historically denied cultural content and human rationality to the creative utterances of the black slaves and Russian serfs who comprised the folk base of the national identity” (4).

however, not the individuality of these consciousnesses he finds significant but their interaction and interdependence; “what happens *between various consciousnesses*” (36). In the texts by Toomer, Walker and Morrison it is the coexistence, but also the interdependence and interaction of traditions and genres that is of essence.

Bakhtin writes that “[t]he polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through” (1984b, 40), dialogue being the organizing principle of polyphony. Dialogue is a central concept underlying most of Bakhtin’s thinking.” In “Discourse in the Novel” Bakhtin writes that

[t]he living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (1981, 276–277)

Bakhtin’s statement is general and reflects his view of language as such. In Bakhtin’s theory, language *is* dialogue, *is* interaction: No word relates to the world in a singular way (276), and the idea of a strictly monologic discourse is therefore an illusion. The word, whether spoken or written, inevitably engages in social discourse; inevitably engages in discourse with other words. However, for some groups more than others, such as African Americans, the social context of language has been acutely felt as the written African American word always has been in the line of cultural and political fire, and frequently has been subjected to quite politicized analyses of adherence and representation. The use of a certain form, such as a certain genre, has not only been seen as an aesthetic but also as a political choice; a genre has been used previously by others in other contexts and comes with connotations and denotations.

Michael Holquist reminds us that Bakhtinian dialogue is a manifold rather than a binary or dyadic phenomenon, but that it for practical purposes can be reduced to a structure consisting of three elements: “an utterance, a reply, and the relation between these” (1990, 38). In this tripartite structure the relation between the two, between self and other, is of primary importance since this is where the dialogic exchange of meaning takes place. In Bakhtin’s view of language as dialogue, self and other are but points of departures for meaning – they each configure themselves in contact with the other. Holquist writes that

the self is like a sign in so far as it had no absolute meaning in itself: it, too (or rather, most of all), is relative, dependent for its existence on the other. A conventional sign is not a unitary thing, but rather a differential relation between two aspects, a signifier and a signified. In this triad it is the relation that is absolute, not the elements it yokes together, for neither of the two elements exists in itself; neither has any meaning on its own, without the simultaneous presence of the other. Nor is the “self” a unitary thing; rather, it exists in a relation, the relation between self and other. (35–36)

However, it must simultaneously be kept in mind that there can be no dialogue without the identifiable existence of the participants in this dialogue. All through the dialogic process self and other exist in a mutually dependent yet independent relationship. There is no dialectical movement or moment when the participants in dialogue merge and transcend the dialogic situation. The dialogic third space where interaction takes place is both the nature and goal of dialogue.⁵

If we transfer the situation onto a textual study this means that the text inevitably engages in dialogue with other texts. Because of its dialogic interactive existence the given text as self is not a stable and finite entity, but always in the process of being formed and reformed through its interactive dialogic relationships. What we pursue in a dialogic reading is this text's relation to other genres and to other texts. For instance, the focus can be on how a given novel relates to already existing genres, such as the slave narrative and the Gothic novel, as well as texts belonging to these genres. The text does not exist in isolation from other texts; it is textually situated and is only fully constituted when read in light of other texts.

In order to analyse not only how a text relates to other texts and genres, but also how other texts and genres interact within a given text it is necessary to open up the dialogic space further. In an analysis of this dialogic third space we do not only analyse how a text relates to another text but also how the other text relates to other "other" texts within our text. In a dialogic reading of an African American text as a hybrid construction we do not only analyse how it on the one hand relates to the African American tradition and how it on the other hand relates to the European American one. We also need to focus on the simultaneity of this relationship, that is, on how the two traditions relate to each other within the text; where they converge and where they conflict. Once these other genres or texts have entered the third space, the extended space, of "our text," they are no longer properly speaking other. They have been adopted by "our text" and "our text" has been adopted by them; they mutually impact each other: "After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines" (Bakhtin 1981, 276–277). Such intertextual and intergeneric relationships can be seen as destabilizing, since they imply that a text's meaning at least to some extent exists in a flux and cannot be arrested

⁵ The resemblance between Bakhtinian dialogism and Du Boisean double-consciousness is thus striking.

in the text alone. However, they can also be perceived as representing a certain stability, even closure, as they situate the text in a web of textual relationships.

For a comparative reading of traditions, genres and texts to be of interest there should be both similarities and parallels between them. Centripetal and centrifugal forces are the guarantors for the existence of a comprehensible dialogue. Centripetal forces work to keep texts together whereas centrifugal forces work to open and disperse texts. In order for there to be a continued dialogue there must be sufficient confluence or parallels between them as well as distance, or difference. There is thus an internal strife in the utterance between what unites and what disperses:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirement of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. (Bakhtin 1981, 272)

Bakhtin's description of the word in a dialogic context could also be seen as the description of how different genres and different texts relate to each other in a textual environment.

Centripetal forces harmonize in intertextual relationships while centrifugal forces create dissonance:

The word, breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others, is able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone. (277)

What ensues is repetition with a difference, or, continuation as well as change.

The Mixing of Genres as Development of Tradition

The concept of genre is central in this work, and the reading of the three texts takes as point of departure their (re)use and mixing of genres. The concept itself is not entirely unproblematic. Its perceived importance as a vital element in contemporary literary theory has for a while been in decline and “[p]erhaps the major reason for this is the continuing prevalence of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a restraint on literary energy” (Frow 2007, 1627). Traditional studies of genre have tended to be essentialist and to view genres as absolute categories (de Geest and van Gorp 1999, 36). In search of a taxonomy of genres, such genre studies have typically favoured the most easily definable genres and classifiable texts, and left as their residue less decidable and more ambiguous cases.

Therefore, such approaches are problematic and create as many problems as they solve, and a

reconceptualization of genre has consequently been deemed necessary by literary scholars and theorists.

Less essentialist approaches to the study of genre have been suggested, for instance by Derrida in his much quoted essay “The Law of Genre” and in theories inspired by cognitive psychology and linguistics. Genres as dynamic categories are also suggested by Bakhtin. In “The Law of Genre” Derrida states that “a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” ([1980] 1992, 230). Since many texts will participate in more than one genre it follows as an implication that genres are often mixed, despite Derrida’s ironic injunction “genres are not to be mixed; I will not mix them” (223). The word “participate” resonates with Todorov’s *transgression*, these being two sides of the same issue. Responding to Blanchot’s assertion that “[a] book no longer belongs to a genre; every book stems from literature alone” (quoted in Todorov 1990, 13), Todorov states that

[t]he fact that a work “disobeys” its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist. It is tempting to say “quite the contrary,” for two reasons. First because, in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law – precisely the one that is to be violated. We might go even further and observe that the norm becomes visible – comes into existence – owing only to its transgressions. (1990, 14)

Such non-essentialist approaches to the study of genre also correspond to Bakhtin’s dialogic view of language, text and genre: “Centripetal and centrifugal forces interact most forcefully with each other at the level where their mutual struggle creates the kind of space we call texts, space that gives structure to their simultaneity. Space of this kind is available only at the level where a given discourse coalesces into recognizable genres” (Holquist 1990, 70). Centripetal forces create unity and coherence, and they can thus imply a consolidation of a law, while centrifugal forces open up and engage in heteroglossia, which entails elements of transgression. Both these forces are present at the same time, securing the existence of, yet also problematizing, the boundaries of genres.

So, genres exist and are important to the way we relate to and interpret texts, but their boundaries are blurred. However, it remains a fact that some texts are more difficult to determine and describe generically than others; in other words, some texts seem more clearly representative of a given genre than do other texts. For instance, it would not be contentious to claim that Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is a Gothic novel; in a way it could be described as one of the founding texts of the Gothic genre. Toomer’s *Cane* and Morrison’s *Love*, however, in different ways and to varying degrees participate in the genre of

the Gothic novel, but they also transgress it or deviate from it. Prototype theory, as developed in the field of cognitive linguistics, could be a point of departure for an alternative model for thinking about genre. In this context, membership of a category is a question of degree rather than of objective belonging: “A particular element (a singular text, in our reasoning) may therefore ‘more inherently’ and ‘to a larger extent’ belong to its category (a definite literary genre) than another element although in the final analysis both instances may (in other respects) be considered as equally valid instances of the same category” (De Geest and van Gorp 1999, 40). Texts exist along a generic spectrum rather than inside/outside generic boxes. Genres “are structured on the basis of one (in some cases possibly more than one) ‘prototype,’ an instance which functions cognitively as an optimal representation of the entire category” (41). Such categories have a definable core but then “fade into fuzziness at the edges” (Frow 2008, 54). Some texts are similar to such prototypical generic models while others deviate noticeably from them, yet retaining sufficient family resemblance to justify membership in the genre. “Membership,” as used by de Geest and van Gorp, is akin to Derrida’s “participation” rather than a more absolute notion of belonging. In Bakhtinian terms, it could in this context be argued that in some cases the centripetal forces are stronger than the centrifugal forces; if the centripetal forces are strongest a text adheres to a genre more than it diverges from it, and vice versa.

In this work genres are conceived as identifiable but porous constructions whose boundaries are unstable and ever-changing. It is the dynamics of genre that is in focus, and necessarily so, since the overall aim is to illuminate textual and cultural strategies of interaction and negotiation. Genres are not seen as representing curtailment of literary freedom, quite to the contrary. Acts of generic transgression could be seen as innovations rather than imperfections – it could even be said that “the ‘best’ texts are almost by definition exceptional cases which clearly are, at least in some aspects, atypical” (De Geest and van Gorp 1999, 43). In this context genres are seen as sources of innovation. The aim is not to ascertain whether a text properly speaking belongs in a genre or not, but to illuminate in what ways it participates in given genres as well as how it deviates from them. It is for instance not an objective to prove that Toomer’s *Cane* is a Gothic text or that Walker’s *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel. Rather, it is interesting to elucidate what the different genres bring to the texts in question and in what way the texts revise these genres.

In order to read the significance of the genres in the primary texts, it is necessary to pay attention to the history of these genres; what they have meant previously as well as what they mean to the texts in this project. This reminds us that genres are content as well as form

and that they are related to, or spring from, specific contexts/situations. They are not used randomly or for formal reasons only but because of the discourses they bring to the text; for their thematic concerns and social and historical contexts and conditions. Genres are not stable and ahistorical phenomena defined by a set of fixed criteria but are complex entities that come with formal, historical and ideological content – come, in a sense, with a memory. A genre can thus be seen as a repository of memory (Erl and Nünning 2005, 264). This memory is not a permanent or static image but rather a series of contexts that have formed and conditioned a genre through history. Its use through history constitutes its mnemonic route.

A literary genre, when considered as a repository of memory, also involves what Erl and Nünning call an intertextual mnemonics and “[t]he memory of literary genres’ is a phenomenon of intertextual relations and thus a further expression of intertextuality as ‘the memory of literature’” (2005, 264). This means that also “[w]ithin literary works there is a memory of previous texts” (264), and intertextual relationships are important in the formation of canons and literary traditions. Such intertextual meetings are crossroads while the different genres are diachronic lines: “Genres thus operate at a higher level of generality than texts: they are structures rather than events” (Frow 2007, 1630). Investigations into literary tradition, genre and genre participation necessarily entail discussions of a given text’s relationship to other texts and my readings of the texts by Toomer, Walker and Morrison seek to establish such intertextual encounters.

Considerations of genre entail an element of meta-generic discourse; it becomes not only a discussion of the individual text but also of the genre(s) as such. Genre in this sense reflects Bakhtin’s view of language as having the ability “to represent another language while still retaining the capacity to sound simultaneously both outside and within it, to talk about it and at the same time to talk in and with it” (1981, 358). This implies a perspective simultaneously from the inside and the outside. The use of a genre like the epistolary novel, for instance, can be both a continuation of the genre and at the same time a revision of it or comment on it. The same point is made by de Geest and van Gorp, who argue that genre features embody metatextual dimensions: “In this way, each text comments (either implicitly or more or less explicitly) upon the genre and its conventions and well as upon the literary system and the tradition” (1999, 43).

It is not my aim to arrive at a new taxonomy of genre, but one final point that should be mentioned about literary genres in general in order to avoid terminological confusion is that some genres seem to be of a higher order than others. The novel, the short story, the play

and the poem seem to be of a higher order than the Gothic novel and the epistolary novel, for instance, which seem to be more conveniently labelled sub-genres. It is not a given how these levels of genres and discourses should be regarded. John Frow suggests that terms like “Gothic,” “pastoral,” and “fantastic,” to mention but a few, should be seen as “modifications of particular genres” (2008, 65) and described as modes rather than genres. An alternative view is represented by Gérard Genette, who in his influential book-length essay “The Architext” sets out to explain the often confusing treatment of the distinction between mode and genre: “Therein lies the essential difference between genres and modes: genres are properly literary categories, whereas modes are categories that belong to linguistics” ([1979] 1992, 64). In other words, mode has to do with the mode of enunciation and not with thematics, which is quite the opposite approach to “mode” than the one applied by Frow. Referring to the classic triad dramatic, epic, lyric, Genette suggests that these originally were to be considered modes rather than genres, and that the view of them as genres is due to what he calls the “romantic reinterpretation of the system of modes as a system of genres” ([1979] 1992, 58). Genette chooses the term archigenres for this triad: “*Archi-*, because each of them is supposed to overarch and include ... *-genres*, because ... their defining criteria always involve a thematic element that eludes purely formal or linguistic description” (64–65). In my discussion of Toomer’s *Cane* I have chosen to refer to the poetic, the dramatic and the narrative aspects of the text as modes, as forms of enunciation. The texts by Toomer, Walker and Morrison could be described as novels, although there exists no critical consensus that *Cane* is most aptly labelled novel, something which is discussed in the chapter on *Cane*. The epistolary novel, the Gothic novel, and literary derivations of musical genres I most often refer to as genres, or sub-genres, although the point could also be made that such sub-genres are characterized by their mode. For instance, a novel written in a Gothic mode could be described as a Gothic novel. Sometimes it is convenient to talk about the Gothic and epistolary, referring to these discourses more in general. In discussions of genres in *Cane* it is necessary to discuss modes and the overarching genre of the novel as well as sub-genres.

“So Black and Blue”: The Gothic and African American Music

The genre of the Gothic and African American musical genres like the blues and jazz are, to varying degrees and in various ways, relevant in the three literary texts that form the focus for this study. Connections between literature and music have been noted at different times in history, and often music has been considered an aesthetic benchmark, something for literature to strive towards. For instance, Walter Pater famously stated that “[a]ll art constantly aspires

to the condition of music" ([1893] 1980, 106), because music came the closest to achieving the desired conflation of form and content, of perception and intellect. However, music is not literature and cannot without modification be treated as a literary genre or sub-genre, with the exception of song lyrics, which could be read as poetry. Literary texts can relate to music in various ways. Music can be present in the diegesis of the text, in the story itself, in the form of lyrics, characters who are musicians, or as an explicitly present topic or theme. Music can also be present in the discourse of the text in less explicit ways, for instance as structure, symbol, or theme in a wider sense. Bakhtin's use of the term polyphony as a designation of characteristics of Dostoevsky's literature is an acknowledgement of the latter. Such presence is less concrete and obvious, and perhaps as much a feature of interpretation as of actual textual presence. Discussing the justification of the term "blues novel," Steven C. Tracy claims that "to call a work a 'blues novel,' the blues should likely be present concretely and substantively in its social, historical, political, musical and/or aesthetic context, its presence necessary to the central meaning of the work" (2004, 126). In the texts by Toomer, Walker and Morrison, music is of importance as a feature of both story and discourse, and I would argue that African American musical genres, like the blues and jazz, can be considered literary sub-genres in a manner similar to the Gothic.

It could be argued that both the Gothic and African American music have been of great importance in the development of African American literature since its emergence and until today, and the reason for this is found in the socio-historical origin of these genres as well as in these genres' formal qualities and development. It is, however, not my contention that these genres constitute *the* formative elements in the literature of African Americans, and the focus in this work is not on these genres only but on the way they interact with each other as well as with other genres, like the slave narrative, the epistolary novel and other black vernacular traditions in the texts.

Both the Gothic and African American music are marked by their hybridity. The Gothic, for instance, has a set of prototypical features at its core but grows increasingly fuzzy at the edges. Similarly, the blues and jazz have identifying prototypical features, but are also known for their openness and variations. Jerrold E. Hogle states that the Gothic is associated with hybridity, formally but also thematically in that it is a genre preoccupied with transgression of boundaries:

Threats of and longings for gender-crossing, homosexuality or bisexuality, racial mixture, class fluidity, the child in the adult, timeless timeliness, and simultaneous evolution and devolution...: all these motifs, as possibly evil *and* desirable, circulate

through Gothic works across the whole history of the form, differing mostly in degree of emphasis from example to example. (2002, 12)

As Andrew Smith states, with reference to David Punter, “one of the key terms in the Gothic is that of ambivalence, because the Gothic so often appears to delight in transgression” (Smith 2013, 3). This predilection for transgression, both aesthetically and socially, can be seen in light of the Gothic’s subversive function; its association with disruption and destabilization.

The Gothic is a flexible and amorphous genre with a long history, and its American branch is commonly considered as somewhat divergent from its British roots. It has gone from being an American genre *non grata* to being regarded as one of the most significant genres in American literature. The Gothic as a genre is notoriously difficult to define because it is used differently in a variety of different contexts. In their introduction to *The Gothic* (2004), Punter and Byron suggest several paths of definition. It can be regarded as

a historical phenomenon, originating (in its literary sense, but not necessarily in other senses) in the late eighteenth century. Equally, it has seemed to many critics more useful to think of it in terms of a psychological argument, to do with the ways in which otherwise repressed fears are represented in textual form. A more radical claim would be that there are very few actual literary texts that are “Gothic”; that the Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the western literary tradition. (xviii)

Their final suggestion is to see it as a collection of sub-genres, such as the ghost story and the horror story (xviii).

Despite the problems with delineating the modern Gothic there is agreement that the literary origin of the term can be traced to Britain in the mid-eighteenth century where it emerged as “a nativist answer to the hegemony of French-influenced neo-classical aesthetics” (Monnet 2010, 3). The Enlightenment, with its neo-classical ideals and belief in reason, progress and civilization, conceived of itself as modern, and in this context “the word ‘Gothic’ assumes its powerful, if negative, significance: it condenses a variety of historical elements and meanings opposed to the categories valued in the eighteenth century” (Botting 2012, 13). The formative period for Gothic literature, or its heyday, was from the 1760s until 1820 when authors like Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Mary Shelley, and in an American context, Charles Brockden Brown, published their popular but not always highly critically acclaimed novels. Later, with the Romantic period, its aesthetic focus on the irrational, even the fantastic, on darkness and horror, found resonance within Romantic philosophy, but the Romantics relegated the Gothic to the sphere of vulgar fiction and it has, until quite recently, been seen as representing sensational and melodramatic literature of fairly low quality. It has been regarded as an escapist genre designed primarily to create a sense of

horror in the reader, although this view has been challenged by modern scholarship. Modern critics have identified more complex issues at stake in the Gothic. Hogle states that occupying a space in between serious and popular literature it continuously deals, in various ways, with the relationship between high and low (2002, 9), and he also points out that “the Gothic has long confronted the cultural problem of gender distinctions, including what they mean for western structures of power and how boundaries between the genders might be questioned to undermine or reorient those structures” (9). Ever since Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the Gothic has frequently featured women entrapped by despotic males and patriarchal social structures.

When we turn to look at more recent literary manifestations of the Gothic it becomes clear that Derrida’s perception of genre as a porous unity based on degrees of participation appears highly appropriate in the context of the Gothic. It is characterized partly by generic instability, or impurity, by what Teresa Goddu calls mutability (1987, 5), and as Hogle phrases it, it has “scattered its ingredients into various modes” (2002, 1). Such textual dispersion, it could be argued, has a ring of Bakhtinian dialogue, and Justin D. Edwards describes it in terms of Bakhtin’s concept of organic hybridity (2003, xix). He clarifies by stating that “[t]he gothic’s hybridity, then, may be understood in at least two ways: as a Frankensteinian creation that it patched together from various textual features to create a new life or, as a revolutionary process, creating new life out of the dialectical merger of outdated textual productions and world views” (xix). The Gothic has been enormously popular since the Second World War (Bruhm 2012, 259), and many different texts, as well as films, could be said to participate in the genre by adopting and adapting its themes and formal elements.

The Gothic is today seen as having occupied a central position in American literature but it has not always been so. The existence of an American Gothic has generated a discussion that affects the understanding of *Gothic* as well as of *American*: “Just as *gothic* unsettles the idea of America, the modifier *American* destabilizes understandings of the gothic” (Goddu 1987, 4). In the eighteenth century, the heyday and formative era of the Gothic,

Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilized; crudity as opposed to elegance; old English barons as opposed to the cosmopolitan gentry; often for the English and provincial as opposed to the European or Frenchified, for the vernacular as opposed to an ‘imposed’ culture. Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society. (Punter and Byron 2004, 8)

These primitive and wild elements came to be seen as positive and as “representing virtues and qualities that the ‘modern’ world needed” (Punter and Byron 2004, 8). The subversive powers of the Gothic were considerable and some of its aesthetic hallmarks were “[r]epresentations of ruins, castles, monasteries, and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess” (Andrew Smith 2013, 4). In light of this it is perhaps not surprising that “[o]nce upon a time the words ‘American’ and ‘Gothic’ seemed so unrelated that putting them together created unpredictable ripples of irony” (Monnet 2010, 1). In a country founded on Enlightenment ideas of optimism, progress and future orientation, and where the belief prevailed that one could bury the past without the attendance of ghosts, indeed, that the past, or even the lack of a past, was of no consequence, the Gothic seemed unsuitable and improbable. As it has been flippantly put, “Gothic ought to have been reported to the House Un-American Activities Committee. It is pessimistic, anti-progressive, reactionary [...] By contrast, American culture was puritanical, progressive, optimistic, earnest and ostensibly egalitarian” (Davenport-Hines 1998, 266). The American Gothic, in other words, was an oxymoron and did not exist as a substantial tradition. Since the 1980s, however, the topic has received much critical attention. The Gothic, it is argued, “embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of ‘the American dream’” (Savoy 2002, 167).

Leslie Fiedler was the first critic who with some force stated that there existed a significant tradition of Gothic literature in the US, only it was slightly different from its European progenitor. Writing about Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* Fiedler states that “[i]nsofar as *Gordon Pym* is finally a social document as well as a fantasy, its subject is slavery; and its scene, however disguised, is the section of America which was to destroy itself defending that institution. It is, indeed, to be expected that our first eminent Southern author discover that the proper subject for American gothic is the black man, from whose shadow we have not yet emerged” ([1966] 1997, 397).⁶ Some thirty years later, Toni Morrison, reading the same passage from Poe, examines how “the image of a reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona” (1992, 38–39). The ghosts that perform this American haunting are thus

⁶ It could be mentioned that although race is the ghost that haunts in the American Gothic it should not solely be read in the context of African Americans. In his preface to *Edgar Huntley* [1799] (2012) Charles Brockden Brown, referring to the Gothic genre, wrote that “Puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology” (6).

not otherworldly but very much of the flesh, and one is reminded of the opening of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man. No, I'm not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind" (Ellison [1952] 1965, 7). As illustrated by Ellison's novel, the othering performed by American society as an act of self-preservation can backfire; the invisible man, like the slave narrators, returns with a vengeance through his revelatory narrative to expose it all.

Today it has become more or less a commonplace to state, as does Goddu, that "the American gothic is haunted by race" (1997, 7).⁷ The haunting spectres of racism and slavery were destabilizing elements that threatened, and still threaten, the Republic, both because the very principles on which they were based were refutations of the ideologies of liberty and equality that formed its foundation, and because the presence of a racial other represented a threat to the purity of whiteness – the threat of a loss of self, a fear of miscegenation.

This places the American Gothic in a special position in relation to African American literature as it invests it with the power to haunt – to threaten and scare. At the heart of any Gothic expression lies in one way or other an element of fear or anxiety; a fear which attains depth because it springs from foreboding intimations of something unknown. While known dangers can be frightening the unknown is even more horrifying because it makes our responses to it uncertain: "Because *not knowing* is the primary source of Gothic terror, the essential activity of the Gothic protagonist is interpretation" (DeLamotte 1990, 24.) And nothing is perhaps as frightening as the ultimate unknown, as one's own death in the most extreme case, or some other form of loss of self: "Traditionally, the Gothic represents the fearful unknown as the inhuman Other: the supernatural or monstrous manifestation, inhabiting mysterious space, that symbolizes all that is irrational, uncontrollable and incomprehensible" (Anolik 2004, 1).

This anxiety, obscurity and uncertainty seen as central components of the Gothic can be regarded in light of Freud's concept of the uncanny and it is also related to the notion of the sublime. The sublime and the uncanny are staple categories in what could be termed a Gothic aesthetic, "there are, historically speaking, two major intellectual contributions made

⁷ The nexus race-Gothic is not reserved for the American scene. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), a Victorian novel that draws on the Gothic, the swarthy-looking and racially indeterminate Heathcliff represents an element of alterity that destabilizes the English scene, and in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the exotic and the deranged appear as a joint threat in the character of Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in the attic. Not to mention the Gothic undertows of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). This illustrates that "[i]n Britain at the *fin de siècle* ... concerns about racial otherness were closely tied to anxieties about imperial decline" (Andrew Smith 2013, 102).

to an understanding of the Gothic – Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) and Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ (1919)” (Smith 2013, 10), and at the core of both there is an unresolved ambiguity and feeling of uncertainty. Ernest Jentsch, in an essay quoted by Freud, ascribes the uncanny to a feeling of intellectual uncertainty and lack of orientation:

He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is, as it were. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it. (Freud [1919] 1963, 21)

Freud himself deems this definition to be incomplete, but it nevertheless points to a crucial component of the uncanny in Gothic literature. The sense of not knowing, of epistemological uncertainty, can indeed produce an uncanny effect, also in the reader, and perhaps especially when things are never clarified. An example of this is a text like Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), which “made an important contribution to the ghost story because it casts doubt on whether the ghosts are ‘real’ or merely projections of the governess’s somewhat overwrought imagination” (Smith 2013, 92). Freud uses the double terms *unheimlich* and *heimlich* when trying to account for the psychological sensation of uncanniness. *Das Unheimliche* is related to something frightening, and it is contrasted by *das Heimliche*, which gives associations of security and domesticity (Smith 2013, 13). An experience of the uncanny occurs when what is *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich*, when what is alien and frightening suddenly appears familiar, and vice versa. This vacillating movement between what is known and what is unknown creates a sense of insecurity similar to the intellectual uncertainty identified by Jentsch.

The uncanny is similar to the sublime in that it represents a kind of blurring of boundaries; a frightening and unsettling obscurity that destabilizes the subject: “Freud’s view of uncanniness is allied to Burke’s notion of terror because it represents an attempt to account for fear” (Smith 2013, 13). Generally, it could be said that the sublime is an intimation of something that lies beyond both human understanding and language: “Sublimity, then, refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated” (Shaw 2006, 3). In other words, it refers to something unfathomable and inexplicable that overwhelms the subject and destabilizes it. According to Edmund Burke, “no passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers and reasoning as fear” ([1757] 2008, 53), and he further claims that “whatever is qualified to cause terror, is a foundation capable of the sublime” (119). Pain is therefore a sensation more closely associated with the sublime than pleasure: “the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degree of labour, pain, anguish,

torment, is productive of the sublime” (79). Yet, this terror and pain is accompanied by a feeling of delight, “not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a kind of tranquillity tinged with horror” (123). Of the qualities in objects that are able to produce such emotions Burke lists among others vastness, infinitude and obscurity. Especially obscurity, lack of clarity, creates a feeling of sublimity as it involves a blurring of boundaries and obfuscation of perception and perspective : “To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (54).

In Toni Morrison’s view, the Africanist presence in American literature, the Africanist persona, is the manifestation of this fear. This places the slave narrative, which can be described as the ur-genre of African American literature, centre-stage in ante-bellum creations of nation and self, because it destabilizes the relationship between self and other. Ironically, it creates a Gothic effect by being aesthetically the antithesis of the Gothic. One of the most important functions of the slave narrative was to present the atrocities of slavery, but it did not employ modes of presentation investing its descriptions with supernatural or unrealistic features.⁸ To the contrary, since many ante-bellum slave narratives, like Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative...*, were intended as truthful testimonies in the fight against slavery, credibility and realism were of utmost importance. The slave narrative inverted the self-other dichotomy positing slavery as an institution, as well as slave owners and overseers, as representing evil and barbarism, while the Africanist persona appeared like an embodiment of cherished American Enlightenment values; the slave as narrator came across as an educated, reflected, self-reliant individual in just pursuit of freedom and happiness. The Gothic other had become enlightened self, evoking “the Gothic suspicion that the dark evil Other, is, after all, a projection of the darkness at the heart of whiteness (DeLamotte 2004, 27). In Freudian terms it could be said that there is a blurring of the distinction between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in the slave narratives’ representation of American society; the home, the plantation, as an American microcosmos, had become a dangerous place, and not only to the slave. It was a place where fathers sold their children, and white men whipped their mistresses, and where children were forcefully removed from their mothers; it was, in short, a place where degradation and moral depravity reigned.

Douglass and other slave narrators, in their narrative (re)presentations of self also foreshadow Du Bois’s concept of the double-consciousness and suggest that this has a certain

⁸ This is, however, not to say that they did not use colourful language, such as (melo)dramatic contrasts, and also sometimes pathos, to dramatize slavery.

Gothic potential. Douglass, the slave writing the story of his life and of American society, is both Gothic other and enlightened self, both slave and free. He *is* a slave and knows slave life from the inside, yet, simultaneously, he looks at his slavehood from the outside using a perspective gained partly from the reading of books like *The Colombian Orator*.⁹ His discourse is thereby a hybrid, coming both from the outside and the inside of slavery and spans two subject-positions.

This split subject also brings to mind the notion of the Gothic double. Many of the Gothic texts appearing in the period from 1865 to 1900 deal with elements of doubling or double identities, and “[t]he Gothic’s use of doubling is a clear indication of the internalisation of ‘evil’” (Andrew Smith 2013, 94). This is seen in such novels as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Psychology and social issues are deeply intertwined in the Gothic but during this period there was a noticeable turn towards psychology and a focus on the internalization of evil (Andrew Smith 2013, 87). This can be seen as part of the Gothic’s more general concern with boundaries and barriers, what DeLamotte calls “an anxiety about boundaries: those that shut the protagonist off from the world, those that shut the protagonist in, and those that separate the individual self from something that is Other” (1990, 19). In novels by African Americans from around the same time, such as Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1899) and Pauline E. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* (1899), the double is found in the figure of the tragic mulatto, whose life is inescapably conditioned by racial tensions.¹⁰ This is again reminiscent of Du Bois’ concept of the double-consciousness as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois [1903] 1999, 11). Du Bois’s term, as already discussed, derives from the fields of psychology and philosophy and it is used by Du Bois to describe a psychological condition arising from a particular social situation. It may not be directly the internalization of evil but it is the internalization of the view of the outside world, which often amounted to a negative view of the black self. “Boundaries and barriers,” DeLamotte writes, “are the very stage properties of Gothic romance: veils, masks, cowls, precipices, black palls, trap doors, sliding panels, prison walls, castle ramparts” (1990, 19). The veil was Du Bois’ metaphor for describing the boundary that existed between himself and the other world: he describes

⁹ A book containing shorter texts on various subjects, among them slavery.

¹⁰ Especially Hopkins’ novel contains clear Gothic features. The gruesome deeds of the past, the violence that destroyed the Montfort family, haunt the descendants and later threaten to destroy them.

himself as being “shut out from their world by a vast veil” ([1903] 1999, 10), and thus relegated to a marginal place in society.

The Gothic double has been interpreted as a reflection of the psychological and social complexity that characterizes modern existence. Writing about one of the core texts in the Gothic canon, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, John Paul Riquelme argues that “*Dracula* provides a model, replicated in later works, for the emergence of hybridity as the character of the future and of modern experience [...] The doubling characteristic of Gothic writing evokes the mixed, ambiguous character of human experience, which holds the potential for both destructive and creative transformation” (2008, 8–9). In an American context, probably no other group has experienced the ambiguities of modern existence as precariously as African Americans.

It is perhaps not surprising that the Gothic, with its inherent aesthetic hybridity; its thematic focus on double, complex, often contradictory identities; its concern with transgressive elements and in an American context, association with race as well as gender, has been a strong presence in African American literature. It is of importance in all three texts in this study.

The Gothic is from its inception a white, western genre. Musical genres like blues and jazz, however, are originally African American. When literature is compared to music from an aesthetic viewpoint it is often in order to point to its transcendent qualities. Music, thought of as non-referential and non-mimetic, could appeal directly to the emotions, to the inner life of humans, and thus go beyond language and reason (Bucknell 2001, 26). For artists and theorists in the Romantic vein this was seen as one of music’s assets. Its non-referential nature and perceived ability to go beyond language has also appealed to later writers. Music was of great importance for modernist writers, and for many modernists, “decadents and Symbolists alike, music came to stand as the ideal form of ‘disinterested’ expressivity” (Nicholls 2009, 48), somehow disconnected from its social context: “on the wings of a ‘pure’ music the artist may apparently escape the bonds of mimetic desire and ascend to a vision of genuinely original intensity” (49). In contrast, referentiality and specificity are frequently important when connections are made between African American literature and music; African American musical genres like spirituals, the blues and jazz are typically, and significantly, perceived as grounded in a specific culture. They are expressive responses to specific cultural and historical experiences, and there are those who would argue that they are inseparable from African American culture. Pianist McCoy Tyner expresses something to this effect when he states that “[t]his music, *even though it’s universal*, moves only as far as black people move in

this country” (quoted in Grandt 2004, xii). It has even been argued that black artists must resist “the conventional assumptions about music: that it is non-representational and cannot carry ideological, political, or other kinds of content” (Fox-Good 2000, 9), as this arguably would reduce its political potential. As writes Michael J. Meyer: “In literature, Black music stands both as a model of aesthetic perfection to be emulated and as a symbol of African American national identity” (2002, 204).

Many claims, some of them quite extensive, have been made for African American music and its function and importance in black American culture. Ben Sidran, for one, claims that “black music is not only conspicuous within, but *crucial to*, black culture” and he even goes on to say that “music is not only a reflection of the values of black culture but, to some extent, the basis upon which it is built” ([1971] 1995, xxi). This makes the study of black music an elaborate investigation “of the black mind, the black social orientation, and, primarily, the black culture” (xxii). Similar broad claims are made by Leroi Jones in *Blues People*, a book from around the same time: “In other words, I am saying that if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro’s existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, *ie*, society as a whole” (1963, ix–x). Both Sidran and Jones represent the views of the Black Arts Movement. Some twenty years later, literary and cultural critic Houston Baker Jr. makes different yet extensive claims in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* when he describes the blues as “the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (1984, 4). Baker, too, sees the blues as a key to black American culture, but whereas Sidran’s and Jones’ approaches are firmly sociologically and historically grounded, Baker’s discursive context is theoretical and poststructuralist and deliberately removed from ideas of essentialism. To some extent he strips the blues of its social and even personal aspects in order to distil its timeless and placeless patterns: “Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation – a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation – of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. The blues singer’s signatory coda is always *atopic*, placeless” (5). What these different critics have in common is that they each in their way make of black music the *sui generis* of African American culture and discourse, and, in the case of Baker, literature more specifically. This music thus becomes a key to, or a repository of, the African American experience.

African American music is often described as something that separates black and white, as it does in the writings of Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. In his *Narrative...* Douglass draws attention to this music's origin; the experience of slavery from the point of view of the enslaved, a perspective alien to white people. Sometimes white people who came to the South thought slaves sang because they were happy, and interpreted the tone of the slaves' singing as being joyful when the opposite was in fact the case; "[t]hey told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish" ([1845] 1986, 57–58). Perhaps this is what Baker would have called "species experience" (1984, 5). Still, when Douglass writes about the slaves' music it is mostly in a demystifying manner that presents this music as a human response to a concrete time, place and situation. For many writers of the 1920s it seems to be the music's African elements that cause a gulf. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Langston Hughes writes: "But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" ([1926] 1994, 58). Zora Neale Hurston underlines even more strongly how a black and a white audience respond differently to African American music:

I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something – give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in the seat, smoking calmly. ([1928] 1979, 154)

The music, its African elements in particular, speaks to her inner self in a way that it does not speak to a white person experiencing the same performance

In Douglass, Hughes and Hurston, African American music, be that blues or jazz, is described as something that delineates black and white, but the hybrid nature of this music should not be forgotten: "Jazz was born in the encounter between black and white. That is why it originated where this meeting took place in the most intensive fashion; the Southern part of the United States" (Berendt and Huesmann 2009, 10). More specifically, jazz is generally thought to have originated in New Orleans, which, perhaps more than any other region in North America was propitious for cultural syncretism. Ted Gioia describes its creole culture as "an exotic mixture of European, Caribbean, African, and American elements"

(1997, 13), something which made it into “perhaps the most seething ethnic melting pot that the nineteenth-century world could produce. This cultural gumbo would serve as a breeding ground for many of the great hybrid musics of modern times; not just jazz, but also Cajun, zydeco, blues, and other new styles flourished as a result of the laissez-faire environment” (13). Sidran ([1971] 1995, 46), Gioia (1997, 13) and Alyn Shipton (2007, 15) suggest that French and Spanish culture were more accepting of Africanisms than the Anglo-Protestant ethic found elsewhere in the US. Gioia lands on the following outline of the western and African elements of jazz music: “The instrumentation, melody, and harmony of jazz are in the main derived from Western musical tradition. Rhythm, phrasing, and the production of sound, and the elements of blues harmony are derived from African music and from the musical conception of African Americans” (1997, 661).

Often jazz and the blues are seen as representing different ideas. Whereas jazz typically is perceived as art music and as modern, urban, experimental, and as a vehicle of change and movement – “the quest for or achievement of spontaneity, immediacy, and ultimately, freedom” (Tracy 2004, 127) – the blues is typically associated with southern rural folk culture, with the lower classes, and thus “a blues critique can lend itself much more easily to a mythology of ‘pure’ and ‘undiluted’ origin, to a discourse of authentic blackness” (Grandt 2004, xii). The blues could be seen as representing continuity and authenticity, and also to some extent purity, and could thus be used in the building of an African American tradition of literature with an identity distinct from mainstream American literature. However, the blues, like jazz, is a hybrid form and an amalgamation of such elements as west-African antiphonal features, work songs, and the western ballad tradition. It could be argued that the hybridity of African American musical forms, like blues and jazz, is what represents the element of authenticity in this context since it reflects African American culture’s propensity for mixing.

This turn to folk culture, folk music, in quest of a cultural identity, is found in other contexts as well and should not be seen as something applying singularly to African American literature. For instance, Steve Newman has analyzed “how the lesser lyric of the ballad changed lyric poetry as a whole and, in so doing, helped to transform ‘literature’ from polite writing in general into the body of imaginative writing that becomes known as the English literary canon” (Newman 2007, 1), and it has been pointed out that in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century the oral tradition acquired status as “a legitimate fund of cultural authority” (McLane 2008, 213) to the extent that it engaged the interest of every major British poet (213). Looking at the American scene and the American quest for a

cultural identity, the interest in music and orality as legitimate funds of 'original,' literary poetry is a case in point. When Whitman set out to write the great American lyric he envisioned himself as singer, a singer tapping into the depth of the American soul and transforming this simultaneous element of commonality and particularity into original American poetry. "Song of Myself" and "I Hear America Singing" are but some of his uses of the metaphor of singing. When Langston Hughes and others some decades later set out to deliberately create a black American poetry it was to some extent done in a Whitmanesque spirit.¹¹ Hughes' "I, Too, Sing America" could be seen as Hughes' answer to Whitman, and in his blues and jazz poems he contributes to American polyphony. However, regardless of the view that "[t]he dialectic tension between specificity and universality, between racial identity and cultural production, between tradition and appropriation, is comparatively heightened in jazz" (Grandt 2004, xii-xiii), the same tensions are also present in the blues. Both jazz and the blues are hybrid expressions with a penchant for transgressing old forms and creating new ones.¹²

In all three texts in this analysis, music, mostly the blues, occurs in the context of gendered issues, and in this context the lives of artists and blues lyrics are sources frequently exploited in the texts. This is incontestably a fact in Walker's novel, which has a strong feminist focus, but also in Toomer's *Cane* and Morrison's *Love*. Especially novels by black women writers like Walker and Morrison feature female characters who are strong, unconventional and controversial. Despite the often rather blatant misogyny of male blues, some critics have seen the blues as representing an empowering discourse for black women writers as well as black women in general. In the forefront of these critics are Angela Davies and Hazel Carby. The blues was a form in which black women could express a sexuality that offered a more urban alternative to the image of black women as folk heroines offered by Zora Neale Hurston (Carby 1998, 471). In the most concrete way, the entertainment field, including minstrel troupes and vaudeville shows, which provided employment for many black female blues artists, was an arena where black women could express themselves more independently than they could in the other areas open to them, such as the church, domestic work, and prostitution (Leroi Jones 1963, 93). The classic blues of the 1920s and early 30s, which is almost exclusively associated with female artists, was the first black music to become entertainment in a formal context (86), and it was an opportunity for these female

¹¹ And, it could be argued, in a Romantic spirit.

¹² It bears mentioning that African American musical genres also have inspired European classical composers, like Igor Stravinsky, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy and Antonín Dvořák.

artists to become public personas. Although they dressed in fancy dresses, furs and jewellery, the lives of many of the female blues artists, like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, were far from rosy, quite the contrary, but they became known for their forceful personalities and willingness to fight oppression – from black as well as white. Giles Oakley states that “[t]o this day Bessie Smith has remained a symbol of resistance to defeat and oppression” (1977, 109–110) and he quotes her biographer, Chris Albertson, who said that “Bessie wasn’t fooled by those Southern crackers smiling at her. She wasn’t scared of those white people down there. Not Bessie – she would tell anybody to kiss her ass. Nobody messed with Bessie, black or white, it didn’t make any difference” (110).

Women’s blues, like blues in general, is often seen as a realistic and gritty expression where life in all its problematic complexity can unfold itself: “The blues idiom requires absolute honesty in the portrayal of black life. It is an idiom that does not recognize taboos: whatever figures into the larger picture of working-class African American realities – however morally repugnant it may be to the dominant culture or to the black bourgeoisie – is an appropriate subject of blues discourse” (Angela Y. Davies 1998, 107). This is shown in the list of themes in women’s blues that Davies derives from Daphne Duval Harrison’s discussion of the topic:

advice to other women; alcohol; betrayal or abandonment; broken or failed love affairs; death; departure; dilemma of staying with man or returning to family; disease and addictions; erotica; hell; homosexuality; infidelity; injustice; jail and serving time; loss of lover; love; men; mistreatment; murder; other woman; poverty; promiscuity; sadness; sex; suicide; supernatural; trains; traveling; unfaithfulness; vengeance; weariness, depression, and disillusionment; weight loss. (Angela Y. Davies 1998, 13)

Many of these themes would be unacceptable elsewhere, and many of them have a sensational potential sometimes exploited by the record companies in the sales posters for the artists, and, as comments Davies, “[i]t is revealing that she [Duval Harrison] does not include children, domestic life, husband, and marriage” (13); conventional middle-class life was not a topic for the blues.

Although the women’s classic blues had a wide thematic range, their signatory topics were relationships between men and women and matters of sexuality and love. The image of black women emanating from the various women’s classic blues is many-faceted and nothing if not unconventional by those days’ standards. Duval Harrison concludes that the female blues singers “introduced a new, different model of black women – more assertive, sexy, sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive” (1988, 111), and she sums up the essence of blues women as “autonomous, indomitable, versatile, ambitious, industrious, and

sensuous” (219). One could indeed say that they introduced a new model of women, regardless of colour, although they were labelled and placed, out of harm’s way so to speak, in the category “race records.” However, not all the images of women corresponded to this image of women as strong and assertive. The grand old ladies of classic blues often sang about bad men who mistreated them, and in some of the songs the women’s attitude to their men and to their own situation is painful and pathetic to observe, such as in “Outside of That,” recorded by Bessie Smith, where it appears as if the female persona more or less accepts violence as a part of their relationship:

I love him as true as stars above
He beats me up but how he can love
I never loved like that since the day I was born (Clarence and Trent [1923] 1998, 325)

Another blatant example would be Ma Rainey’s “Sweet Rough Man”:

He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet
He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet
But the way he love me makes me soon forget (Rainey and Randall [1928] 1998, 247)

Such lyrics could be seen as pandering to stereotypes, presenting black women as submissive and black men as violent. An alternative view is presented by Angela Davies who interprets Bessie Smith’s performance of “Outside of That” as ironic by saying that she uses her voice to ironize and criticise the female blues persona, but there is still nothing to indicate that the text itself is ironic. The female persona of “Sweet Rough Man” knows that her man is mean and that the world sees him as such: “People says I’m crazy, I’ll explain and you’ll understand” (Rainey and Randall [1928] 1998, 247), but she condones him because of his loving and she also expects her audience to understand. She appears without a sense of honour and a sense of pride. The only thing that is potentially subversive about such lyrics is that they draw attention to and present domestic violence in general and black men’s abuse of women more specifically. Occurrences like these were normally kept hidden. It should not, however, be assumed that there is an autobiographical relationship between singer and song or even that the singer defends the female persona’s attitude and response.

Subversive female behaviour and resistance to oppression and victimization is easier to discern in other blues performed by women, and many of these are frequently referred to by black female critics as examples of female resistance. One of the most well-known examples is Ida Cox’ “Bad Women Don’t Have the Blues,” which Davies describes as “the most famous portrait of the nonconforming, independent woman” (1998, 38): “Wild women are the only kind that really get by / Cause wild women don’t worry, wild women don’t have

the blues” (Davies, 38). In some cases the women threaten to leave their men, as in “Cold in Hand Blues,” by Bessie Smith: “I’m gonna find myself another man / Because the one I’ve got has done gone cold in hand” (Gee and Longshaw [1925] 1998, 271), while in other cases they propose even more drastic means, like in “Hateful Blues,” also performed by Bessie Smith: “If I see him I’m gon’ beat him, gon’ kick and bite him, too / Gonna take my weddin’ butcher, gonna cut him two in two” (E. Johnson, 287) and “Mistreatin’ Daddy”: “I’m like the butcher right down the street / I can cut you all to pieces like I would a piece of meat” (Porter and Ricketts [1923] 1998, 312). This image of revengeful women ready to murder their deceiving men expresses operatic passions and is far removed from other images of women prevalent in popular music and sentimental literature. Such images of women as active, assertive and independent individuals who will take the law in their own hands when wronged subvert images of women as temperate symbols of motherhood and domesticity promoted by western bourgeois culture.

Another signatory feature of women’s classical blues is their explicit treatment of female sexuality. Hazel Carby describes the classic blues as “a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as the sexual and sensuous subjects of women’s song” (1998, 472). It is a statement that brings to mind, for its contrast, the female portraits in the first part of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. These women are presented to us as, if not mute, then at least as non-verbal characters whose sexuality remains an intangible, mysterious textual presence. The representation of black female sexuality is a challenge since it inevitably encounters already existing white stereotypical images produced by “ideologies that define black female sexuality as primitive and exotic” (Carby 1998, 472). In order to avoid this trap of primitive exoticism black female writers have often responded with “the denial of desire and the repression of sexuality” (472). To counter the assumption that black women primarily were exotic and erotic subjects, sexuality as such was downplayed or omitted.

In the 1920s, women’s desires and experiences of physical pleasure were not represented or representable. In women’s blues, the direct treatment of this otherwise suppressed world lead to some of the lyrics being labelled semi-pornographic. Although expressed metaphorically, the metaphors are not to be misunderstood, as in Bessie Smith’s “Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl”: “I need a little sugar in my bowl / I need a little hot dog between my rolls” (Williams et al. [1931] 1998, 319). Carby describes this as “the exercise of power and control over sexuality” and lauds these women for “having no respect for sexual

taboos or for breaking through the boundaries of respectability and convention” (1998, 481). There is still reason to question the expressive freedom that for instance Carby underscores and to ask whether these blues women did not precisely fall into the trap of exotic eroticism. It is in this context a case in point that women’s blues in the 1920s was mostly composed by men, relatively few of the songs were composed by the female artists themselves. The situation brings to mind the eighteenth century and the growth of the epistolary novel when the success of men writing epistolary novels with female heroines was partly due to the audience’s craving for the woman’s voice. But these voices were often not authentic female voices but men’s projections of the female voice. In the context of music voice becomes an issue, and a rather convoluted one, as a woman literally speaking is giving voice to a man’s projection of a woman’s voice. It is perhaps correct to assume that the kinds of female personas that emanated from the lyrics of the female blues artists of the 1920s were scripted and based on commercial considerations of what the audience wanted. Duval Harrison says that “[s]ome audiences expected raunchy lyrics and singers gave them what they wanted” (1988, 100), and the raunchy, and thus sensational, aspect of their music was often, as already mentioned, fronted in marketing. However, she argues that they still “represented a distinctly female interpretation” (111) reflected in various ways through their performing style.

Regardless of these questions of autonomy, many of the female personas found in blues lyrics represent images of women that are quite different from the images of women normally available in literature and music. These women are on the one hand individualistic, assertive, tough, and independent, but on the other hand they are vulnerable and marginalized. They can thus serve as models of inspiration for literary representations of oppression and liberation and of the tension between the two.

2. Contexts

Finding a Double Voice: The Quest for an African American Aesthetics

It could be argued that African American literature has a heightened sensitivity to tradition because it has never been in a position to take the existence of its tradition for granted. It is an illustration of Stephen Prickett’s claim that “[c]rises of both legitimation and epistemology ... underlie the development of new literary forms” (2009, 20). It is a self-conscious tradition constantly in the process of (re)inventing itself, a reminder that “*all* traditions ... are the product of some degree of self-conscious creation” (15) and do not merely grow organically without the interference of purpose and deliberation. African American authors have not just

been seen as individual artists, but have been perceived as representatives of their cultural group, and they have generally been expected to represent their group in such a manner that it would further its social and political interests. Aesthetics and ethics have in other words been intertwined.

The history of African American literature's relationship to its own double identity with its attendant critical debates is a necessary frame of reference for this study. The dual pull towards a black, or African American, and a white, or European American, tradition has been regarded differently throughout history. At times black literature's affiliation with European American literature has been emphasized and valued positively; at other times it has been more pertinent to underline its differences from the same and develop a separate aesthetics. The point could even be made that African American texts discursively have more in common with postcolonial literatures¹³ from other parts of the world than with most American texts. This shows that texts can participate in several traditions and discourses simultaneously and need not be conclusively defined within one tradition. These matters of aesthetics, tradition and ethics are as old as African American literature itself, symptomatic of its cultural and aesthetic double-consciousness, and of its political significance.

The first period of African American literacy¹⁴ is frequently returned to by modern scholars and authors, and special attention has been given the nexus literacy – humanity as well as these authors' binds to white hegemonic culture. The first African writers living in the western hemisphere as slaves did not have the freedom to write as they wanted to, but were limited by considerations of audience and publishers. Although they represented a different perspective from white culture, they were mostly expected to express themselves in accordance with the parameters of a white aesthetics. They were very literally evaluated on the basis of their race and cultural background, and one of the most central issues in the critical discourse about these texts was the historical authenticity of both author and text. Because it was not commonly assumed that Africans were intellectually capable of producing original written material, it was important to ascertain the authenticity of the alleged authorship. For this reason, authenticating documents, like letters written by prominent citizens vouching for the author's reliability and sincerity, were appended to the texts. At no time in history was more at stake for the black writer than during this period, and these slave narratives were subversive political acts; written language and western literary forms were

¹³ Still, it is problematic to refer to African American literature as postcolonial as this term more logically could be applied to early American literature and its attempts to free itself from its British roots.

¹⁴ The first period of African American literacy is here considered as the period before the abolition of slavery.

used to deconstruct slavery. Being able to read and write could even be seen as a symptom of the African's humanity, and the writings of the individual writer were not only proof of himself but of his people. As writes Henry Louis Gates Jr.: "through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black man could become a human being by an act of self-creation through the mastery of language" (Davies and Gates, Jr. [1985] 1990, xxiii). Literacy was associated with humanity; black people were trying to inscribe themselves into humanity by having their voices accepted into the western canon of writing, and self-representation through the medium of written language therefore became an important issue – and has remained so ever since.¹⁵ Modern writers who turn to the slave narrative and its thematic concerns and discursive strategies, such as Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, also typically confront issues concerning humanity, self-representation and language.¹⁶ These are central and frequently recurring themes in African American literature.

Later, after the notion of an African American literature had been established, it became important to show difference from mainstream American literature. The 1920s represent a watershed in this context, and the awareness of black form, of a black aesthetics, was awakened during this period. This makes the 1920s one of the most important decades in the history of African American literature and a period that cannot be disregarded in a discussion of a literary identity. Whereas Douglass' discovery of the mechanisms of slavery has been described as a master-slave moment in African American culture, the Harlem Renaissance with its propagation of a black aesthetics could be perceived as a similar moment in the context of African American arts. In his seminal essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" from 1926, Langston Hughes advocates the view that the black writer should take his African American heritage as point of departure, with regard to theme as well as form. The artistic credibility of the work of art depended on the writer's personal and authentic relationship to both form and subject matter. Hughes is "ashamed for the black poet who says, 'I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,' as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world" ([1926] 1994, 59). Black folk culture, which earlier had been largely discredited, gained significance, and was seen as a viable repository of inspiration for the

¹⁵ This is a theme that resonates within the larger picture of American literature where identity and self-(re)presentation have been central elements since the self-investigative writings of the Puritans and Benjamin Franklin's autobiography.

¹⁶ Sometimes slavery and the slave narrative are even treated playfully and with humour, as in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982), which opens as a comedy of errors of a sort as the white master suggests that he and his slave change marriage beds, and in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) where the underground railroad is an actual railroad underground.

writing of literature, instead of its antithesis. Hughes' own poetry was a reflection of these ideas.

However, one of the texts analyzed in this study, Jean Toomer's *Cane* from 1923, represents these ideas in a more complex manner than Hughes' texts.¹⁷ Whereas Hughes' appropriation of black vernacular culture for literary use resulted in texts that were structurally simple and sometimes seemed indistinguishable from their sources of inspiration, such as his blues poems, Toomer's modernist appropriation of these same features defamiliarized them. Aesthetically, *Cane* is clearly inspired by traditional black vernacular culture, both by storytelling and music, and its thematic focus is the lives of common black people in the South and in the northern cities. At the same time, it is a modernist text that experiments with literary form and with basic literary concepts like unity, coherence, and genre, and complicates the very concept of tradition itself. In addition, Toomer, along with other authors from this period, like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, brings to the fore the issue of gender, in thematic as well as representational ways, and it is partly for this reason that *Cane* is an important ancestor text for the later generations of black women writers, such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

There was a change of climate in the next decades, visible in the divergence of opinion between Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, over the appropriate representative mode of African American literature. This conflict clearly illustrates the troubling pull of the two traditions. In his influential manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Richard Wright stated that black writing was protest writing ([1937], 1994), thus echoing the words of Du Bois, who ten years earlier had claimed that all art was and should be propaganda.¹⁸ African American literature had a function to fill and a mission to complete in society, and consequently needed to use the appropriate aesthetic forms in order to achieve

¹⁷ Hughes expressed great admiration for Toomer's work: "Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson it is truly racial" ([1926] 1994, 58). One would perhaps have expected that since *Cane* is one of the finest and most experimental American modernist texts and at the same time a text that relies so heavily on folk culture it would have found a broad audience. This was, however, not the case. Despite favourable reviews, *Cane* only sold 500 copies during its first year (Bone [1958] 1972, 88–89) and seems to have fallen between stools. In Langston Hughes' words, "[t]he coloured people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the coloured people who did read *Cane* hate it" ([1926] 1994, 58).

¹⁸ In "Criteria of Negro Art" Du Bois stated that "[t]hus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" ([1926] 1994, 66). It should, however, be noted that using the term propaganda Du Bois does not mean that black literature had to be of an agitative and/or naturalistic kind. In his review of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) he much prefers Larsen's finely tuned psychological realism to the boldly painted "drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint" ([1928] 1997, 760) of McKay's work.

this. This was a stance that both Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin found severely restraining, and in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” Baldwin even argued that Wright’s “Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle” ([1955] 1994, 155). In “The World and the Jug” Ellison protested against the role of protest writer assigned to him as a black author. He felt expected to express “‘black’ anger and ‘clenched’ militancy” ([1963/1964] 1972, 120), something which placed him at the service of social ills rather than at the service of literature. It was during this period that the modern African American novel really came of age, and a novel like *Invisible Man* (1952) is almost unavoidable as a reference for later novelists.

Ellison’s novel has received extensive critical attention and will not be dealt with in any detail in this project. However, with its professed eclecticism, its cultural aesthetic hybridity, and its motif of quest for freedom and voice, it is a central work in the African American tradition. At the same time as Ellison acknowledged his inspiration from authors like Joyce, Dostoevsky, Stein and Hemingway ([1955] 1972, 168), he also underscored the importance of folklore as a source for understanding what he calls “the specific *forms*” (170) of his people’s humanity. It is a novel founded on the western literary tradition as well as on African American folkloric traditions, and it is a work in which both previous and subsequent African American texts meet. With his modernism and subtle aesthetic hybridity, Ellison is a descendant of Jean Toomer, and his invisible man is related both to Toomer’s invisible narrator in the first part of *Cane* and the blindly running Kabnis in part three. Ellison is also one of the most important literary forefathers for Toni Morrison. Charles Johnson even argues that Morrison is Ellison’s direct descendant in both style and sensibility (Johnson 1988, 101). Ellison, Toomer, Walker, and Morrison show through their writing that all forms of humanity are specific but still no less universal; blackness is as universal as whiteness. The universal humanity of the black experience is implied by the invisible man’s often quoted final words in Ellison’s novel: “Who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” ([1952] 1965, 469).

After Baldwin’s and Ellison’s attempts to underline more universal artistic aspects of African American literature instead of its aesthetic and social function as propaganda and protest literature, the radicalism of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s may appear to represent a reactionary stance. Larry Neal opened his essay “The Black Arts Movement” (1968) by declaring that Black Art “is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power

concept” ([1968] 1994, 184), thus unambiguously underscoring the connection between politics and black art. It advocated aesthetic separatism from white aesthetics, “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (184). Protest fiction was eschewed because it tried to appeal to white morality, but Wright’s contempt for black authors “who went a-begging to white America” (Wright [1937] 1994, 97) for acceptance and praise was retained. Black artists should write to express the black experience from a black point of view, using black aesthetic forms, and they should write for a black audience. Although the separatism and angry polemics of the Black Arts Movement did not survive past the 60s, its insistence on the importance of identifying a separate black aesthetics is visible also in later authors, like Toni Morrison, and in African American criticism and theory. In “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature” Houston Baker, Jr. calls the poetics of the Black Arts Movement “romantic Marxism” because their concept of “‘Blackness’ is not a theoretical reification, but a reality, accessible only to those who can ‘imagine’ in uniquely black ways” ([1981] 1994, 295). He applauds their “holistic, cultural-anthropological approach,” but simultaneously acknowledges the need for “serious literary-theoretical” (324) excursions into the field of African American literature.

From the 1970s onwards, one of the most noticeable shifts in African American literature is the prominence of black women authors, and Du Boisian double-consciousness is thus given another dimension. Authors like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, different though they are, have placed emphasis on the lives of poor black women in a way this had not been done before, and, in the words of Charles Johnson, “it is clear that the double burden of being both black *and* female adds another layer of complexity” (1988, 95) to questions of being. Both Walker and Morrison have shown, to borrow Paul Gilroy’s reworking of Stuart Hall,¹⁹ that *gender* is the modality in which race is lived (Gilroy 1993a, 85). These authors have taken their cue from earlier writers like Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), Frances E. W. Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and even Jean Toomer, and thus nurtured seeds already sown. The harvest has sometimes been seen as problematic, however, since many of these texts have contributed to a negative presentation of black culture through their representation of black male violence, an accusation directed against Alice Walker in particular.

Another major development that has come about since the 1970s is the drive towards theorization. This has made a strong impact on African American criticism, and, it could even be argued, on African American literature. The same push and pull movements between black

¹⁹ Stuart Hall’s statement was that “race is the modality in which class is ‘lived.’” In *Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance* (1980).

and white traditions are visible in the field of literary theory as in the field of literature itself. It has been important to determine what theories, if any, are able to unravel the African American text with integrity. In “Text and Pretext” (1978) Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was among the first to call for a treatment of African American texts as works of art rather than social documentation: “black literature is verbal art like other verbal arts” and “is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity” ([1978] 1994, 254). In this project the intertwining of aesthetic and ethical concerns has persevered. There has been fear that the involvement of western literary theory could lead to an appropriation of the African American text. For example, in her essay “The Race for Theory” (1987) Barbara Christian expresses concerns over the imperialistic position of western theory and philosophy in the field of literary criticism and their status as universal. She questions whether western theory will be able to do justice to, in particular, much black women’s literature, for “people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” ([1987] 1994, 349). The underlying premise is that African American literature is somehow different from other literatures and demands special treatment. Counter to her views, there has also been the fear that the exclusion of theory in the study of African American literature would imply an undesirable neglect of this literature. Michael Awkward, for one, argues that in order for the literature of black women to “continue to make inroads in the canon” it is necessary that “its critics continue to move beyond description and master the discourse of contemporary literary theory” ([1988] 1994, 365). Few would today dispute such a view.

One answer to this dilemma of academic theory vs. tradition was the construction of culture-specific literary theories; tailor-made theories of reading that sought to meet the text on its home field by basing themselves on theorizations of elements in African American culture. The *magnum opuses* of this tradition are Houston Baker, Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) and Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). In his search for “the distinctive, the culturally specific aspects of Afro-American literature and culture” (Baker 1984, 1), Baker arrived at the blues as a matrix, but this is a blues matrix conceived through the eyes of Marxism and poststructuralism. Gates derives his matrix from African folklore and the figures of the Signifying Monkey and Esu-Elegbara, and he claims that in his book he does not construct or invent a theory but analyses “a theory of reading that is there, that has been generated from within the black tradition itself, autonomously” (1988, xx). Gates uses the term “signifyin(g),” when referring to intertextual practices, or formal revision, within the African American literary tradition (xxi). However, his theory is deeply indebted to modern academic intertextual reading practices, and to the work of Bakhtin,

something which he is quite aware of himself, saying that “[n]aming the black tradition’s own theory of itself is to echo and rename other theories of literary criticism” (xxiii). Both Baker’s and Gates’ culture-specific literary theories are therefore hybrid constructions, as are the literary texts they seek to analyze. However, although Gates professes the view that the writer of African descent participates in at least two traditions, a European or American tradition and a black tradition, and thus can claim a double heritage for his texts (Gates 1984, 4), his own work “explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition” (1988, xix). Other works have focussed on the folk roots as well as the literary heritage of African American literature, like Bernard W. Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987). The problem with these attempts to outline the specifics of African American literature is that they can become prescriptive.

African American literature can also be seen in a wider perspective as part of a transnational diasporic black culture. In an attempt to avoid what he calls “ethnic absolutisms in cultural criticism,” Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) focuses on black culture from a transcultural perspective, as “the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world” (Gilroy 1993a, 3). He sees the slave ship and the middle passage as both metaphor and actual site for cultural meetings. This notion of a black Atlantic culture is not only of relevance to modern trans-national or global conditions but also to the slave narratives, the earliest of which were written before American independence and many of whose authors travelled between the African, the American and the European continents. This is observed by Gates and William L. Andrews in their collection of early slave narratives, *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic* (1998), which “attests to the key role that autobiography played in launching a cosmopolitan, transnational literary tradition by African-descended writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Andrews 1998, viii).

Many of the concerns that have shaped African American literature and criticism throughout history are still paramount today. This is evidenced by Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book-length essay *Between the World and Me* (2015), an essay that focuses on the contemporary situation with regard to race in the US, but is replete with more or less direct references to previous works in the African American tradition. This is a personal exploration of the author’s experiences as a black man in the US, written as a letter to his son, and it thus bears resemblance to James Baldwin’s letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time* – in terms of form as well as subject matter. In 1903 Du Bois wrote that “the problem of the twentieth

century is the problem of the colourline” ([1903] 1999, 17), and like Du Bois, Coates investigates the nature and effect of the invisible line that separates him from parts of American society. He concludes that its cause is not an intrinsic quality in himself, or even his actions, but the image of him created by white society: “the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever do” (2015, 120). Coates situates the ever-threatened black body at the centre, as did the slave narratives, and as does the poem by Richard Wright which gives title to Coates’ book,²⁰ and he warns his son that he will not be held accountable only for his own actions but also for those of others: “Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which somehow, will always be assigned to you” (71). As a black man he will not be seen as an individual as much as a representative of a group; a black man. Baldwin is heard in the background of Coates’ words. The child, Baldwin says, “must be ‘good’ not only in order to please his parents and not only in order to avoid being punished by them; behind their authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel” ([1960] 2017, 30-31). The African American’s association with his or her ethnic group entails responsibility but is also a burden.

Coates’ text points to the centrality of race in American culture, even today, as well as the desire, but inability, to transcend it. He wants his own son to know no racial boundaries and to move freely in culture and society: “I wanted you to claim the whole world, as it is. I wanted ‘Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus’²¹ to immediately be obvious to you” (2015, 68). However, he realizes that even today white America’s intransigence in these matters will restrict his son’s access to the world, as it has restricted his own.

Although the position of the white western tradition versus the African American tradition has varied throughout history, the awareness of these traditions’ co-presence is something that has shaped African American literature as well as its theory and criticism from the very beginning.²² The contemporary critic and scholar of African American literature can benefit from the insights gained by this history of critical discussion, eclectically harvesting the best insights from each phase. Many terms can be used to describe the processes going on between the two traditions: negotiation, adaption, adoption, revision, recycling. A common

²⁰ In “Between the World and me” by Richard Wright, the persona stumbles across the remains of a human body as he walks in the forest. Coates’ title also brings to mind Du Bois’ phrase “Between me and the other world” ([1903] 1999, 9) from *The Souls of Black Folk*.

²¹ This was journalist and cultural critic Ralph Wiley’s answer to Saul Bellow’s question of who was the Tolstoy of the Zulus.

²² Use of traditional folkloric elements often incites discussions and demands of authenticity whereas use of forms referred to as art triggers expectations of originality.

denominator for them all is change and movement; re-use through recontextualization and/or remediation, and their source can be found in African and African American vernacular traditions, and in an early written form like the slave narrative, as well as in the western written tradition. James A. Snead identifies repetition as an important creative impulse in African American culture and sees it in its most characteristic shape in music, dance and language (Snead 1998, 70). Snead argues that “transformation is culture’s response to its own apprehension of repetition” (62). Repetition and change are also the mechanisms of Gates’s term to “signify,” derived from the figure of the Signifying Monkey.

Repetition and change are of course general phenomena but, according to Snead, what matters is the relationship a culture has to repetition; whether it is defined negatively or positively. As he sees it, African American culture has perceived it as something positive while western or European culture has defined it as something negative: “Strangely enough, however, what recent Western or European culture repeats continuously is precisely the belief that there is no repetition in culture but only a difference, defined as progress or growth” (1998, 63). In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot defines “the distinctive quality of the great European literary tradition” as “its capacity for innovation and change” (Prickett 2009, 24). “Novelty is better than repetition” (Eliot [1921] 1960, 4) and individuality better than mimicry, but this does not mean that the past is absent from good literature. Tradition involves “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (4). Change, as it exists within the western literary tradition, despite representing something new, contains within it an awareness of the past. Prickett argues that such sequences of change and retention are “only possible in a literate and textually based society” (24). In a society based on orality, “[a]ccuracy of repetition is absolutely paramount” (23). Although experimentation, deliberate changes and ruptures are characteristic of cultures of writing – and modern African American literature, despite its influence from oral sources, is first and foremost a written tradition – oral and vernacular culture is of course also susceptible to change. Evidence of this is the transculturation of African folktales but also a modern genre like jazz, based on improvisation and repeated structures. Retention and change, repetition and difference, for instance as seen in *Cane*, *The Color Purple*, and *Love*, come to African American literature through the western written tradition as well as through African American vernacular forms.

Chapter Two

Music and the Gothic in a Modernist Tune: The Transitional Discourse of Jean Toomer's *Cane*

I am moved by fancies that are curled
around these images, and cling;
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.
T.S. Eliot, "Preludes, IV"

I can see my future and I can feel my past
When Henry plays his steel guitar
Keb' Mo', "Henry"

1. A Profoundly Hybrid Text

Much modern African American literature can be traced back to Jean Toomer's *Cane*. In this relatively short book from 1923 Toomer problematizes issues that were to occupy African American authors for generations: issues of gender and sexuality; of culture and race; of region and history; and issues of aesthetic form and tradition, to mention but a few. Despite its brevity, it is one of the most complex works of literature in the American tradition as it avoids simplifications and refuses to explicate conflicts or resolve contradictions.

Cane is a literary intersection where binaries communicate: the past and the present; the South and the North; male and female; the spiritual and the carnal; fragmentation and coherence; black and white culture and traditions; the local and specific and the more universal. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it, "[e]xistence, in the world of *Cane*, is bifurcated, fundamentally opposed as represented by all sorts of binary oppositions" (Gates 1988, 178). However, any attempt to locate it firmly within any one element of these binary oppositions, or within any one binary opposition, fails to observe the dialogic heart of *Cane*; the meaning of *Cane* arises from the unresolved and interactive tensions between differences, and any reading that wishes to do justice to Toomer's remarkable book must be sensitive to this fact.

Few, if any, African American texts reflect Bakhtinian dialogue and Du Boisian double-consciousness as succinctly as does *Cane*. They are foundational principles as they embody the simultaneous strife towards unity and closure, on the one hand, and polyphony and openness, on the other. *Cane* focuses on transitions and hybrid or impure conditions, on

desire, rather than on completion and fulfilment. It is an aesthetically restless text constantly in the process of forming. This is symbolically rendered by the fragments of circles that introduce each of the three parts as well as by the book's imagery. The circle fragments are reminders of fragmentation as well as intimations of the possibility for completion, but when placed together they do not form a complete circle. It is also visible in the imagery, especially in the first and third parts where images like sawdust, dusk, smoke and fires evoke transitional states and change. Dialogism implies constant movement and interaction rather than closure, and a thorough reading of *Cane* involves attention to textual movement and dynamic processes. This dynamism is also reflected in the characters in *Cane*, who represent the creative strife between opposites, among these self and other, thus reflecting Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness as they are constantly reminded of society's view of them. Identities in *Cane* are always ambiguous and never clearly delineated. On all levels, Toomer's text focuses on transitions, in-between spaces and porous subject-object positions, and presents encounters with the other and with otherness on an aesthetic as well as a thematic level.

Identity and hybridity are relevant in the context of Jean Toomer's life, as well as in the context of his masterpiece *Cane*. The autobiographical circumstances surrounding Toomer's writing of *Cane* in themselves invite thoughts of transition and change and are frequently evoked in readings of his work. Shortly before its publication, Toomer said to a black journalist: "In so far as the old folk-songs, syncopated rhythms, the rich sweet taste of dark-skinned life, in so far as these are Negro, I am, body and soul Negroid. My style, my esthetic, is nothing more nor less than my attempt to fashion my substance into works of art" (qtd. in Benson and Dillard 1980, 33). This feeling was inspired by Toomer's three-month stay in Sparta, Georgia, in the autumn of 1921, where he worked as a teacher. He identified with its black folk culture and felt that it released his own creative forces. When he returned to Washington DC he started writing the texts to become *Cane*, enthusiastic about his newly found inspiration. Around the time of its publication, however, Toomer no longer associated himself with blackness and he did not support the promotion of *Cane* as a black book, a book about "Negro" life written by a black man. In a letter to his publisher, Horace Liveright, he wrote: "Feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you. For myself, I have sufficiently featured Negro in *Cane*" (Toomer [1923] 2006b, 171). Ironically, the situation seen from Toomer's perspective was that *Cane* had been appropriated and embraced as an expression of blackness, a blackness he as its author did not identify with. Consequently, it became difficult for Toomer to acknowledge his own book since he no longer entertained the idea of himself as a black person. At this point in life he was not

interested in debating race problems, but was instead intent on emphasizing the common ground everyone had as human beings, not as black or white, and the common ground people living in America had as Americans. The southern folk culture could be a part of him as an American but not as an African American. Toomer himself eventually sought confirmation of his own identity not through identification with a specific race or ethnic group but through the mystic transcendentalism of George Gurdjieff. In this context of Toomer's ambivalent cultural identity, *Cane* is today often read biographically as Toomer's voicing of his own black identity before he passed and merged into white society. It could, in other words, be seen as representing a phase in Toomer's life, being the swan song of his black identity as well as of the black rural culture it seeks to capture.

In terms of style and genre, *Cane* is, on all levels, a profoundly hybrid text. It varies between and weaves together poetry, narrative and drama, something which also complicates the question of genre. When we look at the individual texts that *Cane* comprises, it is far from obvious what genre designations are the most appropriate. Although frequently used, the term short story is not entirely satisfying in the context of many of its short narrative texts; their language is often highly poetic, at other times it is influenced by drama; their characters are vague and poorly outlined; in fact, they are barely characters at all, and their plots are presented summarily. For many of these short narrative texts the term *sketch* is more appropriate than *short story* and is also often used. The last part, "Kabnis," is an indeterminate hybrid of prose and drama, although closer to a play than a short story. The stylistic and generic hybridity of *Cane* as a whole, as well as of its individual components, represents a literary otherness that challenges attempts at generic categorization and highlights the permeable boundaries between different genres and modes.

When we look at Toomer's major *oeuvre* as a whole, the critical question has been whether or not *Cane* could be called a novel. In 1958 Robert Bone wrote in *The Negro Novel in America*, a book that contributed significantly to a revived interest in Toomer, that *Cane* ranked "with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement" ([1958] 1972, 81). He also called it "an important American novel" (81). The view that *Cane* is best thought of as a novel has survived, and in *Invisible Darkness* Charles Larson states that "[a]lthough Toomer himself apparently did not regard *Cane* as a novel, there is little reason to consider it anything else" (1993, 27). Malcolm Bradbury elaborates slightly on the term novel and calls it a "prose and poetry novel" (1992, 80), whatever that may be. Other critics have been of the opinion that the term novel is inappropriate in the context of *Cane*. Brian J. Benson and Mabel Dillard hold that "*Cane* fails

to meet the standard criteria of the novel form” (1980, 49), and conclude that “no word has yet been coined which would properly classify *Cane* as a work of American literature” (50). There has been no shortage of attempts to coin genre designations specifically for *Cane*; Benson and Dillard note that it has been called “a collage of fiction, songs, and poetry,” “a mosaic of poems, short stories, and intense sketches” and a “novel-poem” (50). All of these coinages fail to take into consideration the impact of drama, and, moreover, are not really very helpful when it comes to finding a suitable generic designation for the work.

The only already existing genre label that can express both *Cane*’s unity and fragmentation is the novel, but the term novel cannot be used in a self-evident manner in the context of Toomer’s book. Several factors indicate a fragmentation that disrupts the manifestations of unity normally implied by this term. Firstly, as already mentioned, *Cane* comprises narrative, drama and poetry, and although narrative could be said to be most important, the three forms exist side by side and none could be said to be subsumed by the others. Secondly, there is no plot in the conventional sense of the word, and, thirdly, there are no central characters that unambiguously bind the three parts together. Nonetheless, *Cane*’s composition does not give the impression of being a random collage of disparate material. It could also be argued that the individual texts of *Cane* lose something when taken out of their context within the book as a whole, which implies that they rely on the company of the other texts for a full release of their meaning. Additionally, it matters in what order the parts of the text are presented; it is significant that the book begins in the South, then moves to the North, and in the final part returns to the South with a northern protagonist. In spite of its attempts at disrupting unity and perpetually postponing closures, there arises from *Cane* the impression that its fragmentation is meaningfully composed.

Cane’s orchestration of parallels and related differences reflects a heterogeneous system of interaction between differences, a multi-styled heterogeneity, seen by Bakhtin as a characteristic of the novel. According to Bakhtin, stringency is not a novelistic ideal and discursive diversity is not a problem; quite the contrary:

The stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of these subordinated, yet still relatively autonomous, unities (even at times comprised of different languages) into the higher unity of the work as a whole: the style of the novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its ‘languages.’ (1981, 262)

Although Bakhtin probably did not have in mind a work as fragmented and heterogeneous as *Cane*, his theory might shed light on the composition of Toomer’s book. The different styles, or genres, could be said to be subordinated the work as a whole while they at the same time

remain “relatively autonomous.” The style of *Cane* is characterized precisely by its combination of modes and genres rather than by any one of them only – this is why categorization presents such a problem. There seem to be remarkable similarities between one of Dostoevsky’s literary projects and Toomer’s *Cane*. Bakhtin quotes the following sequence from L.P. Grossman’s “Dostoevsky the Artist”:

Dostoevsky himself pointed out this compositional vehicle [of a musical type – M.B.] and once drew an analogy between his structural system and the musical theory of “modulations” or counter-positions. He was writing at the time a short novel of three chapters, each with a different content, but internally unified. The first chapter was a monologue, polemical and philosophical; the second was a dramatic episode, which prepared the way for the catastrophic dénouement in the third chapter. Could these chapters be published separately? asks the author. After all, they echo one another internally, in them different but inseparable motifs sound, and while this does permit an organic shift of tonalities it does not permit a mechanistic severing of one from the other. [...] *These are different voices singing variously on a single theme.* This is indeed “multivoicedness,” exposing the diversity of life and the great complexity of human experience. “*Everything in life is counterpoint, that is, opposition*” said one of Dostoevsky’s favourite composers, Mikhail Glinka, in his *Notes*. (Bakhtin 1984b, 41–42)

Principles for musical composition are transferrable to literary works. As a close reading of *Cane* will reveal, its different parts and texts are precisely internally linked, “*singing variously on a single theme,*” or at least on the same themes, and “counterpoints” show in its key notes, in its many binary oppositions.

The composer referred to in the quote, Mikhail Glinka, was a composer of classical music. African American musical genres can serve as reference for an explication of the overall structure of *Cane*. Antiphonal call and response mechanisms and patterns of repetition and variation are central to the blues and jazz, and are for instance visible in the classical AAB stanza of the blues where the two first lines are calls, often with some variation between them, and the last line is the response. Mechanisms of call and response are visible on various levels in *Cane*. Barbara E. Bowen states that “*Cane*’s most successful moments come when Toomer opens up for is what it means to turn the call-and-response pattern into literary form” (1984, 196). Call and response can be observed at work between *Cane*’s three main parts as well as between its individual texts. As regards its overall structure, the AAB pattern of the blues stanza is reflected in *Cane*’s tripartite structure. Its first two parts are syntactically parallel, that is, they are parallel in composition as they both consist of narrative texts interspersed with poems, but differ in setting. The third part of *Cane*, the near-drama *Kabnis*, differs structurally from the two first parts, consisting only of one text, but retains many of their central dichotomies, such as North-South and self-other. This merits the term blues

novel as a possible label for *Cane*. It could, however, also be called a jazz novel; its sequence of different texts of varying length could be associated with the syncopated rhythm of jazz, and the texts themselves, sharing the themes of loneliness and longing, could be compared to solo performances improvising along a common line.

More than most texts, *Cane* reflects Derrida's hypothesis that texts participate in genres more than they belong to them. Although it is difficult to categorically state that *Cane* is a novel, seen as a participant in the novel genre *Cane* accentuates the boundaries of this genre and reveals its "fuzziness." It thus in a radical way, to the point of defamiliarization, exemplifies Bakhtin's view of the novel as "a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" in which "the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different linguistic controls" (1981, 261).

With its pronounced hybridity and its attention to African American culture and history, past as well as future, *Cane* is a central text in any discussion of an African American literary tradition, and could be seen as one of the crowning achievements of the Harlem Renaissance. Its first part, set in Georgia, is typically seen as mourning the passing of old traditions. During his stay in Georgia, Toomer observed that southern black folk culture was disappearing. This was something he lamented but also something which inspired him. In a letter to Waldo Frank he wrote: "A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art [...] America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab hold of them while there is still time" (Toomer [1923] 2006a, 115). The first part of *Cane* can be seen as an attempt to represent these elements in art: "The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song. It was the song of an end" (Toomer 1980, 123).

At the same time, the international impulse during the Harlem Renaissance was notable.²³ This was partly because the world came to Harlem, as seen for instance in the arrival of Caribbean immigrants like Eric Walrond and Claude McKay, but also because writers of the Harlem Renaissance went abroad, as did Toomer, who travelled to France in 1924 and to India in 1939 in search of spiritual inspiration. Although Toomer received praise for his turn to the black folk he "also engaged in a more substantial way than any other figure

²³ Michael A. Chaney writes that "[t]he exceptional character of the Harlem Renaissance as a watershed of self-directed 'Negro' arts and letters and the popular view of its centralization in Harlem have led to an unfortunate occlusion of its international dimensions" (2007, 41).

of the New Negro Renaissance with the ideas of the white avant-garde” (Whalan 2007, 74). His foray into the modern condition is most evident in *Cane*’s second part, set in the northern cities of Chicago and Washington DC, but modernist aesthetics permeate the whole book, reflecting the fluidity of change. Influence from early modernist writers, such as the French Symbolists, seems evident, and Toomer’s affiliation with Symbolism has been noted by for instance Robert B. Jones (1988) and Andrew Ryder (2013). Baudelaire saw modern life and art “complicated by a vivid sense of the flux and movement of life in the present” (Nicholls 2009, 5), and in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” he described modernity as “the fleeting, the transient, the contingent” ([1863] 2006, 403). Some sixty years later, Toomer in an essay stated that “[m]odern society is in a flux. The psychology of the main peoples is the psychology of a transitional period” ([1929] 1996, 169). *Cane*’s aesthetic hybridity encompasses “the modern desert” and international modernism as well as traditional culture. It desires to commemorate and retain the folk culture of the past at the same time as it attempts to replace it with modern expressions. The death of the old folk culture is thus simultaneously the birth of something new, which reflects what Tammy Clewell writes about modernism and nostalgia:

Far from being simply an idealized memory of lost homes, lost others, and lost histories, modernist nostalgia involves a tension between past and present that structures many of the most well known texts of the period. In the tension between a backward-looking and a forward-looking impulse, modernist writers have discovered the potential for a productive dialogue where the past is brought into conversation with the present. (2001, 1)

Cane’s act of reaching towards the past becomes a movement towards the future.

One of *Cane*’s discursive hallmarks, visible also in its representation of time and place and related to the tension between old and new representational forms, is the coexistence of historical specificity and more transcendent elements. There can be no doubt that it is a work deeply rooted in culture and history and it has been called a book about miscegenation and a book about racism. Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, for instance, write that “*Cane* depicts a world in which black men and women cannot escape their racial history” (1998, 139). It has also been read as an African American migration narrative, a genre described by Farah Jasmine Griffin as “one of the twentieth century’s dominant forms of African American cultural production. Through migration narratives – musical, visual, and literary – African-American artists and intellectuals attempt to come to terms with the massive dislocation of black peoples following migration” (Griffin 1995, 3). However, although history and society unquestionably play an important role in *Cane*, there are also other issues at stake, and

Toomer does not represent this rootedness in realistic and traditional ways. Rather, he anticipates Faulkner's ability to depict the characteristics of a time and a place in such a way that he distils what can be termed universal features, recognizable and relevant also for those with no affiliation with or particular interest in the specificity of the novel's setting. Bernard W. Bell has described *Cane* as no less than "the story of a metaphysical quest: a search for the truth about man, God, and America" (1987, 99). *Cane* tries to explode the limits of the local and specific and reach even beyond what can be represented in language. These are the qualities that Waldo Frank praises in his foreword to the 1923 edition of *Cane*²⁴: "The fashioning of beauty is ever foremost in his inspiration: not forcedly but simply, and because these ultimate aspects of his world are to him more special than all its specific problems" (Frank [1923] 1988, 139). As Frank concludes: "The notes of his counterpoint are particular, the themes are of intimate connection with us Americans. But the result is that abstract and absolute thing called Art" (140). William M. Ramsey points to the ambivalence of Toomer's South and argues that "*Cane* presents two Souths. One is a temporal South of disturbing historical oppression and despairing lack of progress. The other is what could be called Toomer's transcendent or 'eternal South,' existing above time and social particulars" (2003, 76). These two images cannot be separated from each other and seen as two distinct phenomena; they are two sides of the same issue, inextricably linked and intertwined.

This simultaneous coexistence of historically and socially specific references on the one hand, and a more universal sense of time and place on the other hand, is reflected in the simple, imagistic title *Cane* as well as in the short poem that functions as epigraph and as an elaboration on the title:

Oracular.
Redolent of fermenting syrup,
Purple of the dusk,
Deep-rooted cane.

Sugarcane is at once natural, organic and, as the poem indicates, rooted in the earth and the colour of dusk, but here it is also a symbol of this region's sublime and uncanny history. As Ramsey argues, in this poem cane is "concretely material" but also suggestively "hazy and less tangible" (2003, 76), almost ineffable, and in this way "the concretely physical place

²⁴ Not everyone admired this inconclusive and enigmatic quality. Du Bois, for one, deplored it: "His art carries much that is difficult or even impossible to understand. The artist, of course, has a right deliberately to make his art a puzzle to the interpreter (the whole world is a puzzle) but on the other hand I am myself unduly irritated by this sort of thing. I cannot, for the life of me, for instance see why Toomer could not have made the tragedy of Carma something that I could understand instead of vaguely guess at; 'Box Seat' muddles me to the last degree and I am not sure that I know what 'Kabnis' is about" (Du Bois [1924] 2007, 220).

intersects with and aspires to the mysteriously eternal” (77). Cane is ambivalent also in another sense. Being the base material for sugar, it represents promises of sweetness, but sugar is also an industrial product associated with capitalism and consumption, and with social exploitation and slavery; “[t]he history of consumption and the history of slavery are thus closely intertwined” (Parker 1998, 619). Nature and culture are joined, and sugar, in other words, is bitter-sweet.

The brevity of the title further contributes to its open and indefinite meaning. A more specific title would have been *sugar cane*. *Cane*, in contrast, can have multiple meanings, for instance it is an instrument for punishment, and is also phonetically identical to Cain, a fact that has been frequently noted and that is partly inspired by Toomer’s own misspelling of his title in a piece of autobiographical writing (Toomer 1980, 127). In conclusion, the title *Cane* is concrete, yet complexly symbolic and confoundingly open.

Cane’s generic hybridity, its coterminous attention to past and future, old and modern, and its simultaneous concern with specific times and places as well as with a more timeless and placeless atmosphere run through all of its three parts. *Cane* shows the capacities of the novel for hybridization, not only in its relation to literary modes, like narrative, poetry and drama, but also in relation to its most important sub-genres: textual manifestations of African American musical genres grounded in a specifically African American experience and often associated with folk culture; the Gothic, a genre with its roots primarily in written European culture and preoccupied with the past; and modernist forms, especially Symbolist poetry – the early modernism that challenged aesthetic conventions. The co-existence of these genres and forms accentuates the text’s cultural hybridity and aesthetic double-consciousness.

2. *Cane*’s Part One: An Uncanny Blues, or, Remembrances of Things Soon Past

The blues is one of the most important discursive components in the first part of *Cane*, also in defining the presence of the first-person narrative voice. One of the puzzling elements of the texts in this part is the identity of the nameless narrator and his location in relation to the community. In some of the texts there is an elusively present first-person narrator whose degree of involvement with the characters of the stories varies. In “Becky” he is merely an observer and a witness; in “Carma” he gazes at Carma and possibly achieves contact with her: “I leave the men around the stove to follow her with my eyes down the red dust road [...] Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it” ([1923] 1988, 12); while in “Fern” he actively seeks the eponymous female and holds her in his arms, which causes her to have a fit, and she eventually faints in the narrator’s arms. In the other sketches there is no first-person

narrator but the texts still give the impression of being local lore passed on, especially “Karintha” and “Esther,” which depict the lives of these women from childhood to maturity. In the last text, “Blood-Burning Moon,” the focus is more on one specific incident than on a whole life span. Nevertheless, the oral-poetic narrative tone is similar in the five narrative texts, and so are some of the narrative devices that recur in several of them, like the use of refrains in “Karintha,” “Becky” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” and the repetition and parallelism within the texts. The poetic tone and the use of refrains in the sketches also provide a bridge to the poems that intersperse them, and the narrative voice in the sketches in *Cane*’s first part is akin to the lyrical voice of the poems in this part. It sounds like a lyrical chronicler of local lore, a bard, and the case could be made that the different texts in the first part of *Cane* are told by the same voice.

Metaphorically, the narrator could be seen as a blues singer. Eileen Southern writes that “[g]enerally but not always, the blues reflects the personal response of its inventor to a particular occurrence or situation” ([1971] 1997, 334), and this is an apt description of the situations in *Cane*’s first section. The narrator functions as an experiencing centre; at least in many of the texts it is possible to see the stories as the narrator’s own personal experiences with people and situations. He is a medium through which our impressions of the southern black folk are filtered. Each text consequently presents different characters and different, albeit similar, destinies as the narrator moves within environments and from one environment to another. This elusive and unidentifiable narrator is reminiscent of Houston Baker Jr.’s description of the blues performer as “an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole” (1984, 5): “‘If anybody ask you who sang this song / Tell ‘em X done been here and gone’” (5). The stories in the first part of *Cane* could thus be seen as expressive blues stories performed by a narrator who travels within and between southern environments and between the North and the South along the roads and railroads. The stories represent encounters between individuals, but also between cultures, between the genders and between the past, the present and the future.

Cane’s episodic structure with its beginnings and departures, where random encounters constitute the stories, is not all too different from the episodic composition of the picaresque genre. Bakhtin’s term “chronotope” attempts to investigate time-space relationships and his description of the chronotope of the road is highly relevant for Toomer’s book:

The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road (“the high road”), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all

social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point [...] On the road the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of *social distances*. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. (243–244)

The road and the railroad were important factors in the lives of the earliest travelling blues singers, and also became mythic motifs in blues lyrics. The blues performer was associated with the road and the railroad as he travelled around performing his blues on the basis of his encounters with people and places, and the blues singer has often been cast as a wanderer (Garon [1975] 1996, 89). Bakhtin's description above also echoes Baker's description of the blues as matrix:

To suggest a trope for the blues as a forceful matrix in cultural understanding is to summon an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song. The railway juncture is marked by transience. Its inhabitants are always travellers – a multifarious assembly in transit. (Baker 1984, 7)

In Baker's theory this trope is characteristically marked by a transitional condition. The railroad junction and the crossroads are points of transition; places where people and cultures meet and interact. In the picaresque novel as well as in the blues, the road as a metaphor is itself a reminder of departures and arrivals, of origins and destinations, but not of closure and a final destination. Similarly, there are clear parallels between Bakhtin's description of the picaro as a narrative figure and the travelling country blues singer as literary presence: "Such is the positioning of the *rogue* and the *adventurer*, who do not participate internally in everyday life, who do not occupy in it any definite fixed place, yet who at the same time pass through that life and are forced to study its workings, all its secret cogs and wheels" (Bakhtin 1981, 124).²⁵ Both the travelling blues singer and the picaro occupied an economically and socially disadvantaged situation, and led shiftless and restless lives.

However, the narrator in the first part of *Cane* also differs from both the blues singer and the picaresque protagonist. While the picaro and the blues performer typically are poor and dependent on their schemes to get by in life, it is difficult to place the narrator in *Cane* on the social ladder. Unlike the picaro, who is typically at the centre of the action, he himself does not appear to suffer any consequences from the events in the sketches. Also, while the singers of blues typically expressed their own feelings and their own pain, Toomer's narrator is more detached and tries to present the pain of others, of characters like Karintha, Esther and

²⁵ In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" Bakhtin observes that "[t]he road is what determined the plots of the Spanish picaresque novel of the sixteenth century" (1981, 244).

Carma, yet his relationship to these characters remains unclear. At times he confronts them, speaks to them even, but mostly he seems to observe them from a distance in an uncommitted way, yet captivated. In other words, there is a sense of distance and evasiveness not typically found in the blues. Although the sketches in *Cane*'s part one do not reflect the crowded streets of the modern city, it could be argued that this distance between the narrator and his objects of narration combined with the narrator's elusiveness is a modernist feature and an element that points forward to some of the urban scenes in *Cane*'s second part. This co-presence of distance, or detachedness, and closeness resembles the duality observed by an early modernist like Charles Baudelaire to be at the centre of the modern experience. As writes Peter Nicholls: "the conditions of modernity seemed to foster a certain duplicity in the writer, allowing him 'to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world.' The crowded thoroughfares of the city now provided a setting for a private drama in which the artist as stroller (or *flâneur*) could shift at will between postures of aloofness and surrender" (2009, 17). The narrator or narrating persona in the first part of *Cane* represents a combination of old and new, of African American and European American culture, as he carries within him traces of the travelling blues singer as well as of the picaro at the same time as he is a modernist presence pointing towards the more detached and impersonal inter-subjectivity of the modern city.

Toomer's anonymous narrator could be seen as an observer, a voyeur; as someone who tries to understand and describe the people he sees, but who partly fails. A literary progenitor in this context is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," a text with clear Gothic as well as modernist traits.²⁶ Like Toomer's narrator, Poe's anonymous narrator is a voyeur, observing and attempting to classify and explain people, but he falls short when he meets the man who is simply the man of the crowd. He follows him through the city streets and in the story's dénouement even confronts him in what becomes an anti-climactic moment: "He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation" ([1840] 1986, 187–88). The nameless narrator concludes that the old man "lässt sich nicht lesen" (188), like the women in *Cane* cannot be read by the narrator, and like the narrator himself cannot be conclusively pinned down by the readers. The expressions of pain and longing, the road, the notion of a journey, the narrator as a semi-outsider, half-detached from the various environments he depicts – these features inspire the description of the first part of *Cane* as a modernist blues picaresque.

²⁶ In "The Painter of Modern Life" Baudelaire interprets Poe's man of the crowd as a modern artist figure ([1863] 2006, 397).

Passing encounters, then, are at the very heart of *Cane*, and the road and the railroad are important presences that point back to African American culture's pre-American roots as well as its development into the modern western experience. In part one the road is represented by country roads and by the Dixie Pike that has "grown from a goat path in Africa" ([1923] 1988, 12). This reference to Africa lengthens the journey undertaken in *Cane* and reminds us that some of the roots of this southern black culture are not found in America but in Africa. The music of the first part thus signifies on its African origins, and the notion of a cultural journey preceding black southern culture is highlighted through the presence of this African goat path. In the second part of *Cane* the country roads give way to the paved streets of Washington and Chicago, thus symbolically to an urban modernity removed from, but partly rooted in, rural culture. The repeated references to roads and the railroad tie the different parts of *Cane* together and contribute to a sense of unity and coherence. They thus prepare us for the change of scene in part two.

It is not just the figure of the blues singer as narrator and the image of the road that provide textual coherence in the first part; antiphonal call and response mechanisms characteristic of African American musical genres²⁷ tie the different texts together through repetition of theme and imagery. The connections provided by such mechanisms are subtle and require the reader's active participation in order to be crystallized, which, it could be argued, also reflects modernist art. In the first text, Karintha's soul is described as a growing thing prematurely ripened and harvested. This finds resonance in the next two poems, "Reapers" and "November Cotton Flower." In "Karintha" the eponymous character is even described as "innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" ([1923] 1988, 1). The two poems, with their focus on death and unexpected flowering also point forward to "Becky." Becky, too, has been "reaped," twice; first by the man who gave her children and then by the community that threw her out. Her whiteness matches the whiteness of cotton but otherwise her relationship to that poem, and to "Karintha," is one of contrast. Whereas Karintha's beauty is praised and her transgressions condoned, Becky is presented as deflowered and is made to suffer for her transgressive behaviour. The next poem, "Face," a portrait of pain and sorrow, intimating decay, could be seen as a reflection of Becky's fate, while "Cotton Song," a work song, anticipates the sketch "Carma," where the protagonist is a working woman,

²⁷ Although call and response is often seen as one of the most characteristic features of African American music, Alyn Shipton comments that such structures are also found elsewhere, such as in European work songs and sea shanties, as early as the 1490s: "This suggests that the call and response technique is as closely linked to class – to the working person – as it is to a particular racial or cultural tradition" (2007, 20).

“strong as a man” ([1923] 1988, 13), and where the climax of the story takes place in the cane fields. Similar patterns of call and response can be found also between the other texts in this part. They all express dissatisfaction and longing, illustrating that “the difference between the possibility of black life and the reality of black life is the blues” (McKeever [1970] 1988, 196).

“Fair Is Foul and Foul Is Fair”²⁸: Representations of Landscape and Place

The sense of place in *Cane* is strong, but its South is a problematic place fraught with ambivalences; a place where beauty and violence exist side by side. It could be argued that the South is a problematic place for Americans in general, and for African Americans in particular. For many black Americans, the South was “home,” yet a place that did not welcome them and treat them humanely; *heimlich*, yet *unheimlich*. On the one hand, as the bastion of slavery and with its long history of racist violence, it is the most obviously Gothic of all locales in the United States. It represents the Gothic other that could threaten to overturn and destroy the American Republic founded on Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equal opportunities. On the other hand, it has also frequently been portrayed in opposite terms as an American pastoral scene, ironically representing the last repository of an American innocence that the industrialized and urban North threatened to destroy. As argues Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan: “The prominence of this idea of the South, employing a landscape certainly of Arcadian dimensions, is due largely to the work of southern writers from the Reconstruction era to the present day who have nurtured in their portrayals of their region some aspect of that ancient pastoral district famed for its rural peace and simplicity” (1980, 3). She further argues that “the concept of the South as a unique region grew into an Arcadian myth through the promotion of the belief that the plantations provided the last and greatest bastion for the promotion of the pastoral ideal” (11). So, in American literature the South has curiously enough been seen as representing moral depravity and social decay as well as a natural and simple life; Gothic entrapment as well as pastoral idyll.²⁹

²⁸ From Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

²⁹ This ambiguity is seen already in De Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). His farmer James makes an excursion through the forest on his way to dine with a friend: “I resolved to go on foot, sheltered in a small path leading through a pleasant wood. I was leisurely travelling along, attentively examining some peculiar plants which I had collected when all at once I felt the air strongly agitated, though the day was perfectly calm and sultry” ([1782] 1986, 177). The cause for the agitated air is a slave in a cage, covered by birds of prey, hanging in a tree: “I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek-bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places; and his body seemed covered by a multitude of wounds” (178).

Representations of the land and nature are placed centre-stage in *Cane*, as in “Georgia Dusk” where nature is personified and seems to partake in the events of the characters:

The sky, lazily disdaining to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night’s barbecue, ([1923] 1988, 15)

It is a landscape from which the colour green, the colour of pastoral and symbol of freshness and newness, is conspicuously absent. Instead, Georgia is painted in dusky hues, obscured by fog and smoke and sometimes apocalyptically lit by the golden and red of sunsets, fires, falling pine needles and sawdust piles. There is at times something sensual, almost promiscuous, about this landscape, luring the characters, as well as the readers, as in this chorus from “Carma”:

Wind is in the cane. Come along.
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,
Scratching choruses above the guinea’s squawk,
Wind is in the cane. Come along. (12)

Its beauty and sensuousness are dark and foreboding.

Cane’s textual representation of this region does not attempt to explain it to the reader but rather to recreate some of its essence; to arouse the experience of its inherent ambiguities and problems. This is a feature that Adorno identifies in certain modernist works of art, such as in the literature of Brecht and Kafka, which “arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about” (Adorno [1962] 1992, 90). It requires an aesthetics of ambivalence that captures the horrors as well as the beauty. The first part of *Cane* undeniably has a lyrical and captivating beauty – as Robert A. Bone put it: “[n]o paraphrase can properly convey the aesthetic pleasure derived from a sensitive reading of *Cane*” ([1958] 1972, 88), a view repeated by Charles R. Larson much later: “The greatness of *Cane* resides in its haunting lyrical beauty” (1993, 33).³⁰ Nevertheless, it is a curious beauty and an ambivalent pleasure since unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and violence are never far away. As Andrew Ryder phrases it, “[h]is depiction of the natural environment composing the American South is similarly both beautiful and violent” (2013, 803). This dialogue between beauty and horror is a complex double-voiced aesthetic. On the one hand, it reflects African American music, such as the slave songs and the later blues, as well as the history and conditions surrounding this

³⁰ Both Frank and Larson talk about *Cane* in general when they praise its lyrical beauty, but this lyricism is primarily a feature of part one and is a rather ill-fitted description of its second part.

culture. Simultaneously, it can be traced to Gothic literature and its staple categories of the uncanny and the sublime. Another important literary progenitor is French Symbolism.

The dialogue between beauty and horror, or happiness and pain, embedded in African American music has its roots in slavery; in suffering and survival. The close relationship between pain and joy is observed by Frederick Douglass who describes the singing of the slaves in the following way:

The thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound; – and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. ([1845] 1986, 57)

Douglass noted that slaves sang most when they were most unhappy; their singing was associated with pain and trouble, not with happiness. This has been transferred to the blues, which is also secular music focusing on pain. The difference between, on the one hand, form and tone, and content, on the other, has been observed as a characteristic of both the slave songs and the blues. In blues this can be the ambiguity of the relationship between laughter and tears, which is a feature of for instance Langston Hughes' poem "Homesick Blues": "To keep from cryin' / I opens ma mouth an' laughs" ([1926] 2001, 72). Slaves were not allowed to openly protest or express dissatisfaction with their predicament so this expressive ambiguity could be seen as one of few available loopholes. Therefore, visitors to the South could mistake the slaves' singing for joy and contentment. Lawrence W. Levine has pointed out that various forms of double meaning are a characteristic feature of black folk songs ([1977] 2007, 242). Similarly, the blues is a genre that expresses pain or trouble, but to what extent it actually voices social protest is disputed. Paul Oliver claims that protest plays a very small part in the blues (quoted in Davies 1998, 93) while Angela Y. Davies (1998) and Lawrence W. Levine ([1977] 2007) argue the opposite. However, Levine proposes a broader understanding of the term *protest*, reminding us of the relative absence of political freedom that African Americans experienced well after emancipation:

[T]hat black song constituted a form of black protest and resistance does not mean that it necessarily led to or even called for any tangible and specific actions, but rather that it served as a mechanism by which Negroes could be relatively candid in a society that rarely accorded them that privilege, could communicate this candour to others whom they would in no other way be able to reach, and, in face of the sanctions of the white majority, could not assert their own individuality, aspirations, and sense of being. ([1977] 2007, 240)

Ted Gioia makes similar claims for the blues and sees it as offering a sense of catharsis through its legitimate expression of discontent and pain (1997, 18). The blues does not necessarily name the cause for the problems and does not suggest a solution to them but the

fact that it expresses them is in itself a potentially subversive element. Stephen C. Tracy claims that the blues “is an assertion of autonomy and a consolidation of power in the context of a world that wishes to diminish or eliminate that power” (2004, 123). The aesthetic ambivalence of black folk culture is thus deeply rooted in history and in the subjective experience of this history as well as in the lack of political and expressive freedom that its performers had to adjust to.

In his *Narrative...* Douglass states the importance of singing in the lives of the slaves. Despite misery and degradation, the South was a place where singing was often heard. In *Cane*'s South, music is omnipresent, and frequently noted in responses to the text. Some of the titles of the poems indicate that they are songs, like “Cotton Song,” “Evening Song,” and “Song of the Son.” The song and the music appear to have two main sources: the land and the women, and sometimes the two seem interchangeable. “Cotton Song” is a work song and underscores the connection to the land through references to work. It thus brings to the text a past of slavery and suffering in a realistic manner as work songs originated on plantations during slavery. In other texts it seems as if music quite literally emanates from the land itself. In “Song of the Son” a singing tree is “caroling softly souls of slavery” ([1923] 1988, 14) and nature resonates with song:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along. (14)

In “Georgia Dusk” the singing of the men is accompanied by nature’s music:

Their voices rise . . . the pine trees are guitars,
Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain . . .
Their voices rise . . . the chorus of the cane
Is caroling a vesper to the stars. (15)

In the sketch “Becky,” the pines do not sing but they whisper and shout to Jesus, as if they form a witnessing chorus to the events. The association of the music and the song with the land and with the rural women gives it an air of something authentic and original, but also makes it appear almost otherworldly.

This sonorous southern landscape reflects landscape descriptions in Gothic literature in that it comes across as ghostly; as uncanny and sublime. Its atmosphere is underlined by nature in its transitional states: dusk, smoke, haze, the setting sun and darkening skies envelop and shroud characters and events. An example is found in “Carma”: “Smoke curls up. Marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile. Curls up and spreads itself pine-high above

the branch, a single silver band along the eastern valley” (12). An eerie uncanniness is created by the singing trees and carolling cane fields. Landscape, music and human sensibility also come together in the canonical Gothic text most renowned and admired for its sublime sceneries: Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* from 1794. Radcliffe’s text is of course vastly different from *Cane*, written more than two hundred years earlier and set in southern Europe. Nevertheless, a consideration of its strategies can highlight some of *Cane*’s designs. Its forests, on which history weighs heavily, resonate with music and lute playing and appears to be haunted, although the origin of the music is explained towards the end of the novel and we realize that the place has been haunted by the living rather than the dead. The lingering effect, though, is eerie and uncanny. The heroine, Emily, is highly sensitive to the surrounding landscape, which is described as sublime rather than beautiful: “...nor was it in the soft and glowing landscape that she most delighted; she loved more the wild wood-walks, that skirted the mountain; and still more the mountain’s stupendous recesses, where the silence and grandeur of solitude impressed a secret awe upon her heart, and lifted her thoughts to the GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH” (Radcliffe [1791] 2001, 9–10). It is a landscape that offers transcendence for its beholders.

In one sense, landscape in *Cane* does not have the qualities that we normally associate with sublime landscapes of the kind that we meet in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; there are no towering mountains, no deep abysses and no vast oceans. However, the cane fields of Georgia give similar sublime associations as more dramatic landscapes would; they give an impression of vastness, of sameness, of being places where one can lose one’s sense of orientation and feel small. This reflects what Edmund Burke writes in his enquiry into the sublime: “let it be considered that hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds” ([1757] 2008, 58). In “Fern,” the narrator implies that the southern landscape is a place where one can sublimely transcend one’s place in history: “Dusk, suggesting the almost imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze about the cane. I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had vision” ([1923] 1988, 19). This is a Romantic notion of nature as almost mystical and as offering transcendence if heeded. The landscape is haunted, by the dead and by history, as the souls of slavery – the souls of slaves who have worked the land and suffered degradation, violence and death – can be heard in its music and remain part of its soil. Such an orientation towards the past, a past that haunts the present, is a common feature in the Gothic. However, as in Radcliffe, the landscape is not

only haunted by the past but also by the present since violence is still ongoing in Toomer's South. Burke's description of the sublime as associated with terror is apt in the context of *Cane*.

In *Cane* the presence of haunting and ghosts is a double-voiced phenomenon rooted in African American folk culture as well as the literary Gothic. Black American folk traditions contain significant elements of superstition and are a natural frame of reference in this context. However, the superstition found in black folk culture never enters Toomer's text like it does, for instance, Toni Morrison's work, where the reader is forced to accept the presence of ghosts and flying slaves. Rather, the singing landscape, ghosts – like apparitions and other non-realistic elements – form part of the text's literary modernism. When cane is described as "caroling a vesper to the stars" ([1923] 1988, 15) this is an impressionistic description of the associations given by the sound made by the cane. Again, Radcliffe's Gothic is a relevant reference. In her texts all potentially supernatural elements are eventually realistically accounted for while in other Gothic texts the supernatural is very real: "By providing a rational explanation for uncanny events, Radcliffe's narratives didactically mirrored the move from superstition to enlightenment and thereby claimed a greater respectability" (Shapira 2006, 455–456). In Toomer the ghostly and aural presence of nature is not rationalized, as in Radcliffe, but like Radcliffe transformed the supernatural into literary realism, Toomer transforms it into literary modernism and Symbolism.

The past that haunts the present and partly accounts for present-day violence in *Cane* is the legacy of slavery. This is illustrated in the sketch "Blood-Burning Moon," which gives an account of a threesome between Louisa, a young mulatto woman, Bob Stone, the younger son of the people she works for, and Tom Burwell, a black man. This impossible setup ends in bloodshed as Tom kills Bob and is subsequently burnt to death. Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr, who relate *Cane* and its Gothic elements to the social, political and historical scene, argue that "Blood-Burning Moon" is a specifically political and historical text, and there can be no doubt that it gives a historically accurate picture of interracial relationships and racial attitudes. We see how individual psychology and social mechanisms are still determined by the slavery past: Bob Stone's mind "became consciously a white man's" (Toomer [1923] 1998, 33) as he reflected on his position in relation to Louisa. As he sees it, he should have been able to simply take her, "as a master should," and he maintains the view that "his family still owned the niggers, practically" (33). He is incensed and humiliated by the thought that Louisa is also seeing a black man. It is a story that because of history cannot end well; it ends with the killing of both men and intertwines issues of gender, race and

power. Toomer's book is thus an illustration of the prevailing idea that race is the Gothic other that haunts American history and literature.

Not surprisingly, Toomer is not alone in focussing on unsettling and contradictory factors in representations of the South. Langston Hughes' poem "The South" (1922) clearly captures the ambivalence of the South as seen from an African American point of view, and states openly what *Cane* suggests:

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
 Beast-strong,
 Idiot-brained.
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones.
 Cotton and the moon,
 Warmth, earth, warmth,
 The sky, the sun, the stars,
 The magnolia-scented South.
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
 Passionate, cruel,
 Honey-lipped, syphilitic—
 That is the South.
And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face.
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me.
[...]

[[1922] 2001, 26–27)

Dichotomies permeate the poem. Its descriptions of landscape are both beautiful and sinister, with references to cotton, the moon and burnt black bodies. Hughes presents the South metaphorically as a woman, magnolia-scented and beautiful, yet cruel and syphilitic; as Madonna and whore. As a place it could be seen as representing the doubling that Freud mentions as a characteristic of the uncanny; it is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich* – it is home, yet a hostile place; known, yet alien, producing a sense of recognition but also of otherness. The black persona would love the South despite its flaws, but is rejected.

The latent misogyny of Hughes' poem is not reflected in *Cane*, but the ambivalence between the beautiful and the grotesque, between peacefulness and violence, is shared by both texts. There is a strong elegiac tone in *Cane*'s first part, expressed clearly in "Song of the Son," but even in the face of an encroaching modernity that threatens to replace southern folk culture, the past cannot be unambiguously embraced. This is pointed out by Jennifer D.

Williams who states that Toomer “mourns a vanishing ‘folk spirit’ without romanticizing it and attends to the potentially destructive elements of modernity without insisting upon a return to a simpler past” (2008, 88). The past of the South is neither simple nor pure. Nostalgia becomes a complicated notion in this context. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *nostos*, which means homecoming, and *algos*, which means pain or ache. In other words, it originally expresses a painful longing for a specific place. Later, in the eighteenth century, it received a temporal significance and came to be associated with an emotional longing for a lost time (Clewell 2013, 9). *Cane*’s temporal and spatial aspects are important. The South as a defined region is the object of a troubled longing fraught with pain and disappointment. It is moreover the South’s past that is tentatively elegized, and the further back into this past one moves, the darker the picture becomes and the more the pastoral resembles a dystopia.

Not surprisingly, *Cane* has also been read as a pastoral. Bernard W. Bell, for one, states that “[o]n the surface, *Cane* is a pastoral work contrasting the values of uninhibited, unlettered black folk with those of the educated, puritanically inhibited black bourgeoisie” (1987, 98) and Donald M. Shaffer, Jr. sees it as “expressing an elegiac pastoral vision” (2012, 114). However, pastoral readings of *Cane* are deeply problematic, not only because of the impingement of industrialization and urban culture (Bell 1987, 98), but also because of the almost ubiquitous violence of the South. This violence stands in the way of pastoral readings of this region, being one of its founding elements, and “[t]hus irony informs every aspect of Toomer’s version of pastoral” (MacKethan 1980, 106).

This ambivalent southern aesthetics of violence is expressed even clearer in a later text, the song “Strange Fruit,” one of the most powerful and grotesque popular songs ever, made famous and recorded for the first time by Billie Holiday in 1939.³¹ Hughes’ poem expresses a desire to love and mourn the South, to regard it with romantic and nostalgic eyes, and “Strange Fruit” is a reminder of why a black southern pastoral is impossible, except as irony; the image of the mutilated black body in the southern landscape undermines the notion of a pastoral. It is a grotesque and Gothic image, made only the more horrible by the

³¹ The lyrics are written by the Jewish teacher and civil rights activist Abel Meeropol, often writing under the name Lewis Allan, and it was inspired by a photograph showing a hanging. The lyrics of “Strange Fruit” resemble closely a poem by the French poet Théodore de Banville, “Le verger de Roi Louis,” from 1866 (also put to music, by Georges Brassens in 1960), depicting the orchard of King Louis XI as a place where the trees are full of hanged bodies, ready for the birds. De Banville represents a link to Symbolism as he was a friend of Charles Baudelaire and one of the first to discover the poetic talent of Arthur Rimbaud.

potentially pastoral setting; trees, roots, fruit, and sweet smells invite associations of idyll, fertility and regeneration that are negated by images of damaged flesh:

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh! (Meeropol [1939] 2001, 3)

The grotesque irony of it is that the blood from the black body “nourishes the fertile earth which in life it tilled” (Griffin 1995, 16). There is thus a close, yet grotesque, organic relationship between the black bodies and the land. The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth become the features of the South, and the smell of burning flesh co-exists with the scent of magnolia.

This aesthetic ambivalence, juxtaposing horror and beauty, and unsentimentally representing human bodies as mere matter, is also a modernist feature found in French Symbolist poetry. Andrew Ryder argues that “[w]hile both style and content changed drastically in the appropriation of European forms, the work of Jean Toomer constitutes a revisiting of the themes of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, reaffirming their relevance in the Americas for a new population undergoing the first shock of urban alienation” (2013, 802). Charles Baudelaire in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” presents beauty as a bipartite phenomenon:

...beauty is always and inevitably compounded of two elements, although the impression it conveys is one; for the difficulty we may experience in distinguishing the variable elements that go to make beauty’s unity of impression does not in any way invalidate the need of variety in its composition. Beauty is made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable, though to determine how much of it there is is extremely difficult, and, on the other of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call, successively or at one and the same time, contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion. ([1863] 2006, 392)

Ryder refers to this aesthetic ambivalence as a “constant transformation between beauty and ugliness” (2013, 805). Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Hymn to Beauty” (“Hymne à la Beauté”) captures this ambiguity in an almost programmatic way³²:

O Beauty! Do you visit from the sky
Or the abyss? infernal and divine,
Your gaze bestows both kindness and crimes,
So it is said you act on us like wine ([1857] 2008a, 45)

(Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l’abîme,
Ô Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,

³² So does the title of his collection of poetry, *Les fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), which from a conventional viewpoint sounds like an oxymoron.

Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,
Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin) (44)

The poem expresses an affirmation of complexities and a simultaneous rejection of simplicity and sentimentality; beauty cannot be clearly separated from evil and darkness.³³ The interrelatedness of opposites, including those of beauty and ugliness, of good and evil, is a central idea also in Toomer's *Cane*. Not only has Baudelaire been described as one of Toomer's literary mentors (Robert B. Jones 1988, ix), he also represents a connection to American Gothic literature through his affinity with Edgar Allan Poe.³⁴ The Symbolist preoccupation with darkness, decay and decadence could be seen as a direct descendant of the Gothic. Central concerns of the Gothic, such as destabilizing forces, ambivalence and transgression, which ultimately represent a threat to the self, are also salient features in modernism. Smith and Wallace state that "[i]n France in particular, the roots of modernism can be found in the Gothic's images of perversion and disorder" (2001, 3).

Cane's part one is punctuated by violence and representations of molested bodies, represented explicitly and unsentimentally and – though at times poetically – without pathos. "Face" is the portrait of an old woman, and it is also a portrait of the pain and suffering inscribed on her body. The imagery is organic and thus strangely anticipates the final image of the poem, which is a projection of bodily decomposition:

And her channeled muscles
are cluster grapes of sorrow
purple in the evening sun
nearly ripe for worms. ([1923] 1988, 10)

Both "Face" and "Portrait in Georgia" – poems that anticipate Billy Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and bring to near-perfection the coexistence of horror and violence and sweetness and beauty – the Petrarchan portraits of women coalesce aesthetically with intimations of violence and mutilated bodies. "Portrait in Georgia" refers to both lynching and burning:

Hair – braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes – fagots,
Lips – old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath – the last sweet scent of cane,

³³ Baudelaire's preoccupation with demonic forces hardly seems modern; it seems like "the very antithesis of Baudelaire's modernity" (Culler 1998, 86). The same preoccupations we find deeply embedded also in American literature, from the Puritans through authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Poe. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) we learn that "[t]he founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" ([1850] 1991, 40).

³⁴ Baudelaire was a great admirer of Poe and translated many of his texts into French.

And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame. (29)

The last lines juxtapose the woman's body with the remains of burnt black flesh and read like an apparition, almost an epiphany, not unlike the effect created by a haiku. It adjusts our perception of the poem and we realize that it is the portrait of a white, or at least near white, woman, described metaphorically in words that simultaneously portray the result of violence against a black body. Two intertwined bodies emerge from the poem, one white and one black, one living and one dead. It anticipates "Strange Fruit"'s gallant South with bulging eyes and a twisted mouth.

These are stunning, remarkable poems, in many ways highly representative of *Cane* – beautiful and horrible, simple yet complex, as well as generically hybrid – bringing to mind as diverse forms as the Petrarchan portrait, the Gothic, and Symbolism. As poetic representations of women and death, the poems evoke Poe and a poem like "Annabel Lee," although mostly through contrast. In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe insisted on the death of a young beautiful woman as the most poetic of subjects and her beauty as something eternal and transcendent that would remain intact even in death ([1846] 2008). This romanticising of female suffering is contested by the image of the destruction of the female body, through violence or through natural decomposition, suggested by Toomer's poems. "Portrait in Georgia" and "Face" are grotesque where Poe's poem is merely mildly chilling, and the weight of history in *Cane*'s poems is a contrast to the purely aesthetic concerns of Poe, for whom the past was a nebulous "many and many a year ago / In a kingdom by the sea" ([1849] 2004, 38). At the time when *Cane* was published, lynching was still a real and recurring phenomenon in the South; it was not yet a thing of the past.³⁵ The poems are also contrasts to conventional representations of lynching and death in that they focus on female bodies.

The violent destruction of bodies is most naturalistically and unsentimentally represented in "Blood-Burning Moon": "Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled" ([1923] 1988, 36). The last part of Bob Stone's death scene borders on carnivalesque humour: "Blue flash, a steel blade slashed

³⁵ "According to figures kept by the Tuskegee Institute – conservative figures – 3,883 people were lynched between 1889 and 1940; ninety percent of them were murdered in the South, and four-fifths of them were black" (Margolick 2001, 19).

across Bob Stone's throat. He had a sweetish sick feeling. Blood began to flow. Then he felt a sharp twitch of pain. He let his knife drop. He slapped one hand against his neck. He pressed the other on top of his head as if to hold it down. He groaned." (35). Their bodies, and especially that of Tom Burwell, are described as mere matter; dispensable and treated irreverently, not treated as human bodies at all, but as flesh ready for the crows to pluck, as in "Strange Fruit." Also in *Karintha*, there are suggestions of burning flesh as it is implied that *Karintha* leaves her baby in a sawdust pile to burn.

In a literary context, anti-romantic and anti-sentimental literary representations of the human body are also found in French Symbolism. Baudelaire shocked his audience with his poem "A Carcass" ("Une Charogne"), which opens like a love poem:

Remember, my love, the object we saw
That beautiful morning in June:
By a bend in the path a carcass reclined
On a bed sown with pebbles and stones; ([1857] 2008b 59)

(Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme
Ce beau matin d'été si doux:
Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux,) (58)

The first two lines create expectations of idyll and romance that the two last lines contradict. As we read on, the poem's grotesque naturalism expands and replaces the romantic opening; the romantic female object, the addressee, yields to the image of a decomposing female body, a carcass "[s]weating out poisonous fumes" (58). The description of her body is void of sentimentality and reduces the woman to mere matter. *Cane* shows that such graphic aesthetic reduction of humans represents a criticism of the way society denies them human value. In *Cane* violation of bodies represents a violation of humanity with historical roots in violence in the South, such as lynching. Subsequent to the lynching itself, body parts could be cut off as memorabilia by the audience, underscoring the dehumanization of the black subject. The modernist, non-sentimental depiction of this violence in *Cane* befits the gravity of its rootedness in history. Destroyed bodies are horribly and organically a part of *Cane*'s southern landscape.

The setting in the first part of *Cane* is rural while Baudelaire wrote almost exclusively about urban settings and was known as the poet of the city. His disciple Arthur Rimbaud, however, transposed this aesthetic ideology onto rural and potentially pastoral scenes, using pastoral imagery: "this imagery frequently defies mere nostalgia with a profound ambivalence expressed by a shift into an anti-pastoral, as Rimbaud's Edenic imagery frequently slips into

the apocalyptic” (Ryder 2013, 802). An example that illustrates the affinities between Toomer and Rimbaud would be the latter’s “Asleep in the Valley” (“Le dormeur du val”):

No scent makes his nostrils quiver.
He sleeps in the sun, one hand on his still
Chest. On his right side, two red holes. ([1870] 2009, 59)

(Les parfums ne font pas frissonner sa narine;
Il dort dans le soleil, la main sur sa poitrine
Tranquille. Il a deux trous rouges au côté droit.) (58)

It is only in the last line of this last stanza of the poem that we realize that the young man lying in the grass in the sun is shot dead, the two red spots in his left side the only clear indicators of death. The effect of this ending is similar to that of Toomer’s “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia”; nature and death merge in the poem. Ryder, reading “Blood-Burning Moon,” comments that there are similarities between Toomer’s and Rimbaud’s presentations of the rural past as a place both beautiful and violent (2013, 803). The beauty of nature and nature’s potential as peaceful setting are negated by violent death in both Rimbaud and Toomer.

Unseasonal Flowering: Representations of Women

Although the narrator in the first part of *Cane* is most likely male, most of the texts in this part feature women – all, in their way, troubled presences. Karintha, the eponymous woman in *Cane*’s first text, is described as “innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (Toomer [1923] 1988, 3), a description which anticipates the poem “November Cotton Flower,” a key text in *Cane*’s first part and a depiction of unseasonal flowering. When Toomer’s poem is read alongside the story “Karintha,” the unseasonal flower is a young mulatto girl, whose soul was “a growing thing ripened too soon” (4). “November Cotton Flower” is thematically reminiscent of the well-known hymn “Lo how a rose e’er blooming.”³⁶ According to legend, the origin of the hymn was a monk in Trier who was out walking in the woods on Christmas Eve and found a rose in bloom – “It came, a floweret bright / amid the cold of winter / When half spent was the night.” Originally, the rose was interpreted as the Virgin Mary but it later came to be seen as a reference to Christ (Brink and Polman 1998, 461). The hymn has a prophetic theme and the unseasonal flower is interpreted as a portent. In Toomer’s poem’s the references to winter and cold are the same as in the hymn but the landscape is unmistakably southern, made barren by boll weevil and drought. This barrenness bears a flowering: “Brown

³⁶ Original title “Es ist ein Ros entsprungen.”

eyes that loved without a trace of fear / Beauty so sudden for that time of year” ([1923] 1988, 6). The poem could be read as an epigraph to several of the texts in *Cane*’s first part. As writes Vera M. Kutzinski: “Their [the women’s] glamorous beauty is as unseasonal and unnatural as the November cotton flower that suddenly blooms in a drought-devastated wasteland” (1990, 169). However, it is not so much their beauty as their comportment in matters relating to sex and race that is unseasonal as it challenges society’s unwritten laws.³⁷

In the hymn the unseasonal appearance is seen as something valuable, while in *Cane* the women’s unseasonal or transgressive behaviour makes them outcasts in their communities and is seen as something that needs to be bridled. *Cane* as text, though, shines a light on these women and their otherness. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” Alice Walker mentions several of the ways in which southern women have been interpreted; as “saints,” as “sexual objects,” and as “the mule of the world,”³⁸ while Walker herself sees them as artists ([1974] 1984a, 233). She sees them as ahead of their time, “moving to music not yet written” (232). The women in *Cane*’s part one defy characterization or categorization and, like the rest of *Cane*, are complex narrative constructions resisting narrative closure. They remain enigmatic presences in the text – for the people in their community, for the narrator and for the readers.

These women, like the landscape, are associated with song and music. They are singers of folksongs and sometimes their singing seems a part of nature, as if it springs directly from the land itself, so that the women become a sonorous part of the landscape. In “Blood-Burning Moon” there appears to be an organic relationship between the song of the women and nature. Nature, with its dusk and dark, foreshadows evil, “[t]he full moon in the great door was an omen” (Toomer [1923] 1998, 30), while the women’s singing is an antidote to it; their singing seems designed to drive evil away: “Negro women improvised songs against its spell” (30). This may be seen as a description of folk superstition. The account of Louisa’s singing is uncanny and her singing appears to be in dialogue with the natural world surrounding her, each responding to the other:

But for some reason, they jumbled when her eyes gazed vacantly at the rising moon. And from the jumble came the stir that was strangely within her. Her lips trembled. The slow rhythm of her song grew agitant and restless. Rusty black and tan spotted hounds, lying in the dark corners of porches or prowling around back yards, put their noses in the air and caught its tremor. They began plaintively to yelp and howl. Chickens woke up and cackled. Intermittently, all over the countryside dogs barked

³⁷ This is also underscored by their names, which are not typical southern names.

³⁸ This phrase alludes to a statement from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which describes black women as “de mule uh de world” ([1937] 1987, 29).

and roosters crowed as if heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening. (30–31)

Louisa's singing seems to be related to the sounds of animals. Many of the female characters are presented as having an almost otherworldly relationship to the nature that surrounds them, and there is something primal and instinctual about the women's singing that is slightly unsettling. It appears to be something that merely erupts rather than being deliberately and artfully created. Their singing is mere sound rather than words, as when Karintha sings: "her voice, high-pitched, shrill, would put one's ears to itching" (3). Sometimes it is described as movement and is associated with the body, as in "Carma": "From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest dancing" (12). Fern's singing is associated with "a Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice" (19); in fact, Fern's *looks* are associated with the song of a Jewish cantor: "[A]t first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing" (17). In one sense the reference to the Jewish cantor stands out in comparison to the description of the other women but here, too, the description is meant to evoke an emotion, which in this case is suffering. None of these women sings to an audience and the description of their song as mere sound enhances the impression that their singing represents something primal and authentic. The women and their song seem to represent the southern folk culture now facing its demise in the hands of time, which, in other words, would be a romanticising and idealization of these rural women.

However, the presentation of the women is ambiguous. On the one hand, they are represented partly by song and sound, while on the other hand, they are conspicuously silenced since they do not speak³⁹ and their song is mostly without words. It could be argued that such strategies represent an objectification of them, both by the male narrator and by the men in their communities, who all seek something from them that they cannot give. Thomas Fahy relates the men's treatment of women to issues of culture and identity:

This association between women and an idealized folk culture, however, inverts the traditional, liberating role of music in African American literature. In effect, a type of slavery gets reconstituted as black men use these songs and the bodies of women to maintain an *African* American identity – ultimately alienating them further from their search for cultural and emotional wholeness. (2002, 47)

A similar point is made by Jennifer D. Williams, who claims that "[a]s black women in the book animate the parting soul of slavery, men's desire to have sex with these women denotes

³⁹ The only exception is Esther, who eventually addresses Barlo, who is the object of her dreams and desires. However, he rejects her, so her speaking is abortive.

a longing for union with the past” (2008, 89). If the women represent nature, authenticity and folk culture it could perhaps be deduced from this that men represent society and modernity and that they seek the women in quest for wholeness. However, the male characters, barely outlined in the texts, do not appear like culturally questing figures, at least not in the first section of *Cane*. Rather, they seem driven by desire, another primal instinct, belonging more to nature than culture. The only character who could be said to conflate sexual desire with a longing for the past is Bob Stone, who reminisces nostalgically about slavery as a time when he as master, without permission and outside competition, could have possessed Louisa. The fact that Louisa is free to choose Tom Burwell before him, the fact that she may physically and emotionally prefer him, is a threat to his white masculinity as well as to white cultural hegemony. Also, it should not be forgotten that “sexual acts in ‘Karintha,’ and in the other five sketches in part one, are punctuated with violence and are most often nonreproductive” (Williams 2008, 92). They offer no satisfaction for those involved, but are reminders of absence and lack of fulfilment.

Du Bois’s description in *The Souls of Black Folk* of what he calls “the sorrow songs,” one of the precursors of the blues, seems written to describe the sketches and poems in *Cane*: “They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” ([1903] 1999, 253). The stories in the first section of *Cane* could well be described as songs of unvoiced longing as some of the women express their frustrations and sorrows in song but are never portrayed as speaking subjects. The description of the women’s song as mere sound and as something primal is also found in the context of female blues singers. Stirling Brown said about Ma Rainey’s performance that “[s]he wouldn’t have to sing any words; she would moan and the audience would moan with her” (quoted in Levine [1977] 2007, 232).⁴⁰ However, objectification of women also features in commercial versions of African American music, like the blues. Writing about the social and historical context for the recording of blues for commercial purposes Katherine Boutry states that

[b]ecause the best-selling works during the 1920s were often records by African American *female* singers, the blues became a locus of myths about Black womanhood, anxiety and admiration commingling in an appreciation of music’s (and performers’) dark, sexual powers. For historically speaking, recording the blues made Black women socially visible, and physically invisible, for the first time. (2000, 92)

⁴⁰ Faulkner appears to use the same motif in his short story “That Evening Sun” (1931) when he describes Nancy’s singing, which is an expression of fear, as “not singing and not unsinging.”

Boutry relates this commercial recording of blues to the presentation of the female singers in *Cane*: “Writing during the twenties, Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer reflected this objectification of the Black, female body through musical metaphors, privileging the listener/viewer’s aural and visual experience” (96). The psychology of the women, though, their thoughts and emotions, remain absent from the texts.

African American music, especially the blues, offers a possible interpretive matrix for the sketches of the women in section one. All of the sketches and some of the poems are accounts of individual pain and suffering grounded in a world of race and racism. The eponymous female characters are lonely and isolated, and themes like loneliness and male-female relationships are all characteristic of blues lyrics. Some of the women live outside the community, like Becky and Fern, but even those who take active part in the community seem to be psychologically alienated. Often their isolation is due to racial issues, which is most obvious in “Esther,” “Becky” and “Blood-Burning Moon.” Esther’s loneliness is related to her being near white and to her social position as one of the community’s most wealthy non-whites, and she is rejected by the black vagrant preacher, Barlo. Becky, who is white, is cast out for having children with a black man, and Louisa’s story ends in violence because she is caught between a black and a white man.

Another aspect of the texts is related to women’s sexuality, a ubiquitous theme in the blues but rarely presented in conventional ways. In fact, “[t]he representations of love and sexuality in women’s blues often blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love” (Davies 1998, 11). Karintha is portrayed as sexually aware since a little girl; Becky has defied racial and social norms sexually by being with a black man; Fern has been had by many men without being satisfied; Carma had other men while her man was away working for a contractor, and Louisa has a relationship to the white man Bob Stone, as well as the black man Tom Burwell. Common denominators in these sketches are the absence of fulfilment and/or the presence of violence, and they seem to underscore Angela Davies’ contention about the women’s blues as refutations of idealized romantic love. However, what is missing in *Cane*’s female portraits is the defiant and sometimes almost aggressive attitude of the blues women.

The othering of and entrapment of women are central concerns also of the Gothic. Jerrold E. Hogle writes that the oppression and othering of the female has been a principal Gothic subject, to the point where the female is reduced to an object of exchange between men or a tool of childbearing (2002, 19). Gothic literature, from its classical first period and an author like Horace Walpole, to later derivatives, like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847),

abounds with images of women fleeing from evil male pursuers and images of women trapped in turrets and secret chambers. Such images could also be overturned. Ann Radcliffe, writing for a growing female audience in the 1790s, “had great encouragement to develop the primal Gothic scene of a woman confined and turn it into a journey of women coming into some power and property by their own and other feminine agency, albeit within a still-antiquated and male-dominated world full of terrors for every female” (Hogle, 10).

The most obvious gothization of the theme of loneliness and isolation in *Cane* is found in “Becky,” which gives the tragic account of Becky, “the white woman who had two negro sons” (Toomer [1923] 1998, 7), and who is thus literally reduced to a tool of childbearing. As argues Lamothe, here Toomer “draws on two prevalent Gothic tropes: the destruction of the house and the entrapped woman” (Lamothe 2004, 67). In this sketch the supernatural of the Gothic merges with the supernatural of folk culture. The sketch “Becky” shows the mechanisms at work in a community that strives towards cultural and racial purity. Becky’s act of sexual and racial transgression makes her abject. After having her first son she is exiled to “the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” (Toomer [1923] 1988, 7). To protect themselves from the threats of hybridity both the black and the white community cooperate in Becky’s excommunication, and in order to atone for their sense of guilt arising from their inhumane treatment of her, they bring her food and build the one room cabin which will be her home. This confinement is not entirely successful, however, as she some years later gives birth to another black boy. Her children, the products of her social and racial transgression, become violent and asocial, shooting two men before leaving town. Becky herself remains unseen. This invisibility is ironic, and one might argue, from a realistic viewpoint, impossible. Becky lives on an eye-shaped piece of land “pushed up where a blue-sheened God with listless eyes could look at it” (7).⁴¹ In spite of these multiple references to eyes and to watching, the narrator claims that no one ever saw her. Years pass without anyone catching as much as a glimpse of Becky, and in the end people watch the smoke coming from her chimney, not knowing whether she is still alive or a ghost.

In spite of Becky’s invisibility she is a focal point, metaphorically speaking, in town; the text alludes to the talk and interest of the community, but no one attempts to seek her out. In the final scene the narrator and a vagrant preacher named Barlo watch with horror as Becky’s cabin tumbles down. Her tumbling cabin echoes the ending of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” but whereas Poe’s story tells of the fall of a traditionally Gothic mansion

⁴¹ The passing train.

with ominous cracks Becky's one-room hut with an ominously leaning chimney evokes the slave cabin. The social mechanisms that kill her, first by imposing on her a social death, then by letting her be buried, possibly alive, under her chimney, have their roots in slavery and its racial ideology. The spectre of slavery thus haunts the sketch, and moral chaos is imminent. The narrator and Barlo look at the mound of bricks that was once her cabin but make no attempts at discovering if she is buried under it, alive or dead; instead they flee, like Poe's narrator fled, and like Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator in "Becky" is left with an unspeakable horror and a story to tell the community. Even if Becky is now dead, the community should not feel safe from her. As states Eric Savoy, partly quoting Nicolas Abraham, "[t]he departed who are most likely to haunt us ... are those who were 'shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave' and thus have been thrown away (abjected) by their culture and their descendents" (2002, 174). Being buried alive is a common trope in Gothic stories. Had Becky been found and buried properly she could have been posthumously reintroduced into humanity. As it is she remains a social, discursive and even epistemological impasse. "Becky" ends with the narrator passing the story on to the people in the community, which makes the reader wonder if this sketch is not simply a local tall tale; a Gothic ghost tale intended to function as a cautionary tale. Alternatively, "the destruction of the house forces the community to see the very thing it attempts to push aside, the devastating and dehumanizing effects of the denial of the reality of racial amalgamation" (Lamothe 2004, 67).

Becky has upset the distinctions between inside and outside, between black and white, that the community rests on; she is abject, something they are drawn to but turn away from in horror because it threatens them. Hogle suggests that "[t]he Gothic often shows its readers that the anomalous foundations they seek to abject have become culturally associated with the otherness of femininity" (2002, 10). Becky's body, like the bodies of the other women in this part of *Cane*, is not openly in focus,⁴² yet is at the centre of events. It is her sexual transgression that appears to cause chaos, almost making us forget that the real source of chaos is found elsewhere. In a study of the female grotesque, Yael Shapira identifies what she sees as a longstanding narrative formula that "'reads' the biological flux of the female body as symbolic of a dangerous disorder and exploits its repugnant effect to legitimize the containment or punishment of the transgressive woman" (2010, 52). *Cane* both repeats and negates such a narrative pattern: all of the female characters in part one interact bodily with

⁴² Becky, in the one glimpse we get of her, is described as a wasted woman: "Her eyes were sunken, her neck stringy, her breasts fallen" ([1923] 1988, 7).

the world in ways perceived as inappropriate and thus unleash forces that lead to chaos and unhappiness, which can remind us of cautionary tales. Yet the women are presented as victims more than perpetrators and their misfortunes evoke our sympathies.

The women in the first part of *Cane* could be perceived as trapped, objectified, and alienated by their social and historical context. All of the women seem to embody a longing and desire for something their surroundings do not fathom and therefore are unable to respond to. In fact, the presentation of these women's desires is one of the most ambiguous and enigmatic elements in *Cane*. This is due to the modernist aesthetics of *Cane* that frame both the blues and the Gothic. In his introduction to *The Flowers of Evil* Jonathan Culler writes about the women in Baudelaire's lesbian poems that they are "embodiments of what in fact is the general character of passion in *The Flowers of Evil*: provoked by something intangible and intensified by the very impossibility of fulfilment" (Culler 1993, xv). This is also an accurate description of the women in *Cane*, only it is difficult to determine the exact source of unhappiness in Toomer's book. The women, who appear to be closely associated with the land and with tradition, seem isolated and seem to strive for transcendence from their historical and material condition.

For the narrator, *Cane*'s women, with their strange and unspeakable desires, appear strange and enigmatic. These women are the centre of attention in the texts, but only indirectly; the narrator through his narration performs an othering of them by reducing them to objects of desire and/or desiring objects, which is how they are seen by the men in their communities. As objects, they are seen and described by others, but the gaze and the voice belong to males. Thus it could be argued that they escape, or resist, textual representation; they remain ciphers in the text. In *The Symbolist Manifesto* (French: *Le Symbolisme*), published in 1886, Jean Moréas proclaimed intuition, suggestiveness and mystery to be the principles of the Symbolist movement: "Opposed to 'teaching, declamation, false sensibility, objective description,' symbolic poetry seeks to clothe the Idea in a perceptible form which, nevertheless, would not be an end in itself; rather, while serving to express the idea it would remain subject to it" (quoted in Nicholls 2009, 25). This explains the women's relative absence as characters in the texts in *Cane*'s part one. They are represented indirectly as impressions or ideas, reflecting Stéphane Mallarmé's edict to depict "not the object but the effect that it produces" (quoted in Butler 1994, 27).

An impressionistic style of writing aims to render the subject's impression of an object or a scene rather than give an objective and neutral presentation of them. In this context, Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences" (French: "Correspondances") came to be seen as an

almost programmatic text (Nicholls 2009, 26).⁴³ It describes nature as a temple that cannot be described in itself, but experienced sensorially by the subject in a rush of overlapping sensory impressions. Odours are described in a synesthetic manner, using visual and auditory terms, “Mellow as oboes, green as meadow grass” ([1857]) 2008c, 9), and the natural world appears to be part of the subject’s own mind and perception. It is a style which breaks down the distinction between the experiencing subject and he experienced object, and this is one of the characteristic features of *Cane*’s aesthetics. It is very noticeable in the sketches of women in section one. The reason why the women escape clear presentation is that they are represented, not as characters by an omniscient narrator, but as they are experienced by their surroundings, primarily by the first person narrator. “Karintha” opens with a song, which functions like a refrain or a chorus, celebrating her racially hybrid beauty:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
 O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
 Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
 ...When the sun goes down. (Toomer [1923] 1998, 3)

Her hybrid beauty, the colour of her skin, is compared to a transient state in nature as it resembles the colour of the horizon in the east when the sun goes down. The song appears to express the view of the community, its male segment in particular, as this sketch, like the other sketches, reflects the dichotomy between men and women. Karintha is known for her spell-binding beauty, but her beauty is not described in concrete terms. Rather it is represented indirectly; we see the traces of her in the reactions of the men who desire her. The representation of her is highly impressionistic and we sense her presence rather than see her. Sense impressions blend with each other. Movement is seen as colour: “her sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color” (3), and as sound: “Karintha’s running was a whirl. It had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road” (3). Karintha is present as traces in the dust, as sounds and as movements but not as an actual person. When she sings it is in a shrill voice, and the shrillness of her voice is the first reference to her more disagreeable sides. Her elf-like enigmatic presence and her light movements, as well as her beauty, which is compared to natural phenomena, are in contrast to parts of her behaviour. As a child, “[s]he stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children” (3), and as a grown woman there are clear indications that she is a prostitute as men bring her their money.

⁴³ This phenomenon is expressed even clearer in one of Rimbaud’s most famous poems, the sonnet “Vowels” (“Voyelles”), where he assigns colours to vowels: “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue; vowels” ([1871] 2009, 135).

However, “[e]ven the preacher, who caught her at mischief, told himself that she was as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower” (3). She, on her side, has only contempt for those who will do anything to win her favours. She also has a child that she leaves out in the woods to die and to burn in a saw-mill, which was noticeable for weeks in the heavy smoke that rose from the saw mill, an event worthy of any Gothic text. Why Karintha, who is married, does this, remains Karintha’s secret. For Houston Baker the “essential theme of ‘Karintha’ is the debasement of innocence” (1988, 20), yet the problem is perhaps rather a misplaced insistence on her innocence and consequently an inability to see Karintha’s complexity. She is beautiful, yet not sweetly innocent. If she is a November cotton flower she is also a *fleur du mal*.

The subjective impressionistic representation of the women is even clearer in “Fern,” where the narrator’s repeated attempts to describe Fern’s face break down into poetry, as when he describes her eyes: “Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia’s South” (Toomer [1923] 1998, 17). Her face is represented as associations of movement, of landscape and of sounds. The nature of her singing is equally difficult to determine: “And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child’s voice, uncertain, or an old man’s. Dusk hid her. I could hear only her song” (19). This description of her song is peculiar and highly associative. “Fern” is clearly an object for the gaze of passers-by. Unlike Becky, she is always visible:

Anyone, of course, could see her, could see her eyes. If you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day, you’d be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch post just where her head came which for some reason or other she never took the trouble to pull out. (17)

She can be seen from the train window sitting on her porch as the train crosses the Dixie Pike close to her house. Despite her physical visibility, Fern, like Karintha, remains unseen to us, remains a mystery, and the enigma surrounding her is mostly due to her desire for “nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see. [...] Fern’s eyes desired nothing that you could give her” (16). Men brought her their bodies. In contrast to Karintha, Fern “became a virgin” (16), something which underlines her general withdrawal as well as her status as outcast since, according to the narrator, “a virgin in a small southern town is by no means the usual thing” (16–17). “Nothing ever came to Fern” (19), the narrator says and again accentuates her passivity. Whereas Karintha is described as movement, as an active and vibrant presence, Fern is described as passive, almost inert. The narrator’s discourse is unable

to clearly represent them but is nevertheless impacted by them. There is thus a dialogic relationship between the women, as objects of representation, and the narrator, who attempts to render them and their fates in words, and also between the women and the community that tries to respond to them but nevertheless fails to do so adequately.

The narrative effect of the silencing of the women is not exclusively negative. In “Becky,” for instance, her only power is ironically caused by the limitations imposed on her by the community and the narrator; as a result she has become ghostly and she haunts the community like she haunts the text. Robert Arbour argues that the women in the first part of *Cane* are “sites of liminality that resist binaristic and unitary thought about race, region, and gender in favor of an indeterminacy that must be read or interpreted subjectively”⁴⁴ (2013, 308). This liminality, which is also a transgressive element leading to interpretative indeterminacy, is central in Toomer’s text. The racially hybrid women with their sexually transgressive behaviour and unspeakable desires challenge and destabilize existing categories and preconceptions. However, Arbour goes on to argue that this indeterminacy leads to a “metaphorical recovery of an African American folk identity” (308), which, it could be argued, again leads to a binaristic interpretation.

Much of the pain and disappointment of the women in section one of *Cane* can be traced to their socio-historical context; a time and a place still labouring under the legacy of slavery. However, the texts in this section are not merely poetic and narrative representations of historical violence. They are just as importantly encounters with the other and with alterity. The poems “Portrait in Georgia” and “Face,” for instance, despite being in one sense portraits are not portraits *of* anyone. The tracing of a person’s facial features is an intimate gesture that implies immanence, but in these poems, like in the sketches of the women in this part of *Cane*, the women that are objects of representation remain absences – they are ciphers, or even aporias, in the text. In the verbal construction of a face and the tracing of its features we see the trace of the other, an other that remains other. These poems are thus encounters with what lies beyond language. These rural southern women do not only represent the rural American South with its historical legacy but also modern human beings, and their solitude and abortive longing could be seen as symptomatic of the modern condition. Their listlessness, a word frequently mentioned in relation with Fern, evokes the modern condition of melancholy, even *ennui*. Nicholls suggests that *ennui* can be defined as “a kind of primal melancholy, a combination of apathy and boredom which, in rendering the subject

⁴⁴ The last part of this quote is a bit redundant as any interpretation or reading necessarily is subjective.

claustrophobically inactive, also brings painful hypersensitivity and nervousness” (2009, 7), brought on because “time is experienced as endless repetition (7). Karintha and Fern receive a long sequence of admirers, but none can give them what they want. Also for the other women there appears to be no improvement on the horizon. The lives of these southern women, as well as the communities they form a part of, are complex and complicated. The women are not simple representatives of southern rural culture but equally as much represent the conflicted modern individual, drawn between past and present and tradition and modernity, not entirely at home anywhere.

Cane's first part could be described as a negated pastoral, an anti-pastoral, and as a troubled elegy in which the garden is beautiful yet not peaceful but rather treacherous and a repository of violence. The troubled ambivalence associated with the southern landscape and its inhabitants is aesthetically expressed in African American music, the Gothic as well as early modernist poetry.

3. *Cane*'s Part Two: Jazz and the City; a Metropolitan Gothic

Most of the concerns from the first part of *Cane* continue into its second part: Issues of race, gender and confrontations with otherness and alterity remain at the front. However, there are also significant differences, reflecting the changes taking place in society around the turn of the century. The Great Migration led to dramatic changes in the lives of African Americans, and these changes caused a development of aesthetic expressions and representational forms. One of the forms that emerged was jazz, which spread from its New Orleans roots, and while the blues is central in part one, jazz could be said to characterize the style in *Cane*'s second part where the cane fields and dirt roads of rural Georgia give way to the houses and city streets of Washington DC and Chicago. In the early twenties it was particularly Chicago that became the new jazz city.⁴⁵ It was a cosmopolitan place where the many African American migrants were joined by European immigrants. The musical cross-fertilization that took place in this environment resembled what had happened earlier in New Orleans (Shipton 2007, 85). Jazz developed from a “fusion of blues, ragtime, brass-band music, and syncopated dance music” (Southern 1997, 365). In *Cane* it is present as motif, as style and as theme, and the jazz stage forms the setting for some of the most important sequences in the texts.

⁴⁵ The growth of organized crime caused by the Prohibition was instrumental in the growth of jazz in Chicago: “The coincidental arrival of an audience for jazz, with circumstances where crime bosses sought actively to promote the music as a means to sell illegal liquor, attracted the finest musicians in the United States to the city” (Shipton 2007, 85).

The jazz of part two communicates the same tension between the specific and the universal as the blues did in part one. On the one hand, one could argue that the texts in the second part of *Cane* are about the history of African Americans in American cities after the Great Migration. The texts depict African Americans' meeting and experience with urban culture, and the setting of the texts are actual historical places – some of them concrete locations, like Howard Theatre and Soldier's Home in DC. Jazz, which blossomed in this urban scene, is thus a mode of expression that connects the text to its historical and cultural setting. On the other hand, it could be argued that jazz conveys the modern condition in a more general sense and thus transcends cultural and historical specificities. Some of the texts express an alienation and fragmentation not explicitly related to the African American experience.

The northern urban scene of the 1920s was alive with cabarets and theatre stages, and Eileen Southern writes that “the black theatre served as a secular temple for black communities” ([1971] 1997, 296). These theatres, like the Howard in DC, were concert halls as much as theatre stages, and jazz played an important part in this seething world of performance and spectacle. In *Cane*'s part two, jazz is omnipresent and closely linked to the cabaret scene as well as to street life. It thus underlines early jazz' connection to vaudevilles and cabarets as well as its everyday folk music element:

Life of nigger alleys, of pool rooms and restaurants and near-beer saloons soaks into the walls of Howard Theater and sets them throbbing jazz songs. Black-skinned, they dance and shout above the tick and trill of white-walled buildings. At night, they open doors to people who come in to stamp their feet and shout. At night, road-shows volley songs into the mass-heart of black people. Songs soak the walls and seep out to the nigger life of alleys and near-beer salons, of the Poodle Dog and Black Bear cabarets. (52)

Performance is a vital part of *Cane*'s part two, and its performances are closely related to the jazz scene and to jazz sessions. Two of its longest and most central texts, “Theater” and “Box-Seat,” in different but related ways have performances at their centre. So does “Bona and Paul,” although its characters do not actually perform on a stage but on the dance floor. In all three texts jazz surrounds the climactic moments in the texts: in “Theater” Dorris dances to jazz music; in “Box Seat” jazz is an overture to the dwarfs' boxing fight and part of the vaudeville show at Howard's Theater; and in “Bona and Paul” the eponymous characters dance to jazz in the night club.

The element of performance represents both a continuation of and a break with part one where performance as a deliberate, professional activity taking place on stage with spectators does not exist. However, part two enhances the understated or latent elements of

performance in part one. The narrator as blues singer could be described as performer but only in metaphorical or narrative terms as he never performs as a blues artist within the stories of the texts. There is also an inferred element of performance in the singing of the women, although their singing is not a public performance but rather private expressions of emotions not intended for an audience. It could further be argued that the presentation of the women as focal points in the community reflects performance and spectatorship. For instance, the representation of Fern is, as already mentioned, characterized by references to watching and visibility, and in “Becky” her eye-shaped piece of ground is like a stage watched by the community. Becky’s performance, however, is an act of disappearance. The scene in “Esther” where Esther humbles herself in front of Barlo and the other bar guests is close to a public spectacle but it is not in actual terms a performance. Finally, part one ends horribly and spectacularly with the burning of Tom Burwell, which is watched by the mob and is an extreme instance of not seeing the human as human, of not seeing the humanity of the other.

In part two it is possible to discern two layers of performance. The most obvious performative elements are the actual performances on the jazz stage. These performances contain episodes of transcendence that represent epiphanic moments in the texts. The other layer of performance is seen in the presentation of the social scene surrounding the cabaret scene. As is common in modernist texts, society with its laws and conventions is portrayed as false and inhibiting, as an obstacle to sensuality and authenticity and a stage that necessitates the wearing of masks. Both these layers are visible in the two texts that deal explicitly with the theatrical world, i.e. “Theater” and “Box-Seat.”

“Theater” presents a typical 1920s cabaret scene. Dorris, who is described as lemon coloured and with bushy black hair, dances:

Dorris dances. She forgets her tricks. She dances.
Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs.
And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings. (55)

Through her performance she transcends the cabaret scene and tries to communicate with John, the manager’s son. Her performance, although commercial and taking place in a cabaret show, is deeply personal and through it she attempts to overcome the social conventions that limit her as a cabaret girl and present her true self to him. Her performance represents transcendence and is a poetic element in the text. John is not impervious to her glorious performance. It transports him away from the theatre and gives him associations of the southern cane field. However, nothing conclusive comes of it. When she looks into John’s face and seeks for her dance in it, “she finds it a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream”

(56). John sees only his own dream and Dorris remains an other to John. This partly reflects the situation in part one where the male narrator attempts to portray women but succeeds mostly in presenting his own, and others', desires for them. In "Theater" John's voyeurism is formalized through his position as spectator and his gaze is neither neutral nor artistically disinterested; Doris is clearly the object he desires. He is, however, aware of the social distance between them and of the obstacle that this distance represents. We therefore sense another layer of performance in the social scene surrounding the cabaret scene. Participation in the conventions and mechanisms of social life entails performance, and this performance constitutes the falseness that Doris unsuccessfully tries to transcend through her jazz-inspired dance. John, who senses her magic, chooses to resist her sensuality and instead opts for continued distance between them.

In "Box Seat" the performative aspect of everyday life is even clearer. On the surface the main female character, Muriel, is a calm and well-adjusted player on the social scene. This outward calm is a sharp contrast to her inner turmoil:

Muriel: Never see Dan again. He makes me feel queer. Starts things he doesnt finish. Upsets me. I am not upset. I am perfectly calm. I am going to enjoy the show. Good show. I've had some show! This damn tame thing. O Dan. Wont see Dan again. Not alone. Have Mrs Pribby come in. She *was* in. Keep Dan out. If I love him, can I keep him out? Well then, I dont love him. Now he's out. Who is that coming in? Blind as a bat. Ding-bat. Looks like Dan. He mustnt see me. Silly. He cant reach me. He wont dare come in here. He'd put his head down like a goring bull and charge me. He'd trample them. He'd gore. He'd rape! Berny! He wont dare come in here.

"Berny, who was that who just came in? I haven't my glasses." (Toomer [1923] 1988, 64-65)

We sense that Muriel's behaviour is a performance put on to blend in with the surroundings. This is also symbolically reflected in her physical appearance. Muriel is wearing a vibrant orange dress that does not match the colours in the theatre, so she hides her dress by not taking completely off her coat: "Its color would clash with the crimson box-draperies, its color would contradict the sweet rose smile her face is bathed in, should she take her coat off"

(64). There can be no doubt that colour is imbued with meaning in *Cane*. In part one, the southern landscape was coloured in purple, red and golden hues, and often shrouded in dusk, as were its characters. In the second part colour is more often than not associated with indoor spaces and light, either artificial indoor lights or outdoor light shining through windows. This symbolic attention to colour and light reflects modernist art. Colour becomes particularly prominent in the second part since its characters are themselves aware of colours. Orange is a warm and bright colour, a hybrid colour, and here it appears to denote passion and something

authentic. Darwin T. Turner's footnotes to "Theater" tell us that "[d]aylight shining through a theatre window tints his face orange when he [John] surrenders to his sensuality" (Toomer 1988, 52), and orange seems to have similar connotations in "Box-Seat." Muriel hides her unruly sensuality. Crimson is the colour of staged indoor life; in "Theater" the house is described as decorated in "gilt and brass and crimson" (53).

Nevertheless, when Dan looks at Muriel "[h]er animalism, still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos, stirs him. Passion tilts upward, bringing with it the elements of an old desire. Muriel's lips become the flesh-notes of a futile, plaintive longing" (62). The modern urban condition is thus compared to a zoo, another allusion to spectacle and gaze, and stifles and contains Muriel's sensuality. Although Muriel herself does not sing, there is a clear parallel to the women of part one in the description of her lips as "the flesh-notes of a futile, plaintive longing" (62). Muriel, too, is trapped and contained by society surrounding her but, in contrast to "Theater," it is Dan, the man, who wants to break free. He chides Muriel for her attempt to lead a pure and clean life within the confines of the socially acceptable, and reminds her that heterogeneity and contradictions are inherent aspects of life: "Happy, Muriel? No, not happy. Your aim is wrong. There is no such thing as happiness. Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death" (62). His message is reminiscent of the blues aesthetics and modernism of part one, and our reading of *Cane's* first section prepares us for and makes us sensitive to this modernist blues moment in part two.

The other type of performance in "Box Seat" is the actual theatre performance that Muriel and Dan watch. The performance has the nature of a grotesque ritual, a boxing fight between two dwarfs: "Dwarfs, dressed like prize-fighters, foreheads bulging like boxing gloves, are led upon the stage. They are going to fight for the heavyweight championship. Gruesome" (Toomer [1923] 1988, 66). The potentially heroic and magnificent in the boxing fight is subverted by the performers' "dwarfishness"; the audience does not admire the fighters for their strength and valor but rather laughs at them for their grotesque and subversive otherness.⁴⁶ There is a sharp contrast between the respectability of the audience and the abject status of the fighters. The house cheers them on as they gore each other, and the grotesque comedy is brought to completion when the champion, beaten and bloody, is asked to sing a "sentimental love song" (68).

⁴⁶ A similar scene occurs in the opening of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where young black boys are made to fight each other as entertainment for white male spectators.

After he is done he kisses “a fresh white rose” (68) leaving a blood stain on it and finally offers it to Muriel. The white rose, a symbol of love and innocence, stained by the dwarf’s blood from the fight, is a symbolic representation of the ambiguous heterogeneity that Muriel struggles to distance herself from. The dwarfs’ fight is a display of alterity; for the audience it is a confrontation with the ultimate other. Alterity is staged at a safe distance from the audience; it takes place on stage and the dwarfs with their grotesque appearance and lurid behaviour appear to have little in common with the audience. They are objectified through their performance as freaks in a freak show. The point when the dwarf eventually reveals his humanity by showing his hate and anger, which has no place in the performance, is an epiphanic and uncanny moment in the text because it shows the other as self, it shows the unhomey as homely: “Hate pops from his eyes and crackles like a brittle heat about the box. The thick hide of his face is drawn in tortured wrinkles. Above his eyes, the bulging, tight-skinned brow. Dan looks at it. It grows calm and massive. It grows profound. It is a thing of wisdom and tenderness, of suffering and beauty” (69). Dan experiences the coexistence of beauty and the grotesque, of pain and beauty, and this is the climactic moment in the text when it reaches out beyond the concrete towards the sublime. The eyes of the dwarf as he tries to give the rose to Muriel plead his humanity:

Words form in the eyes of the dwarf:

Do not shrink. Do not be afraid of me.

Jesus

See how my eyes look at you.

the son of God

I too was made in His image.

was once –

I give you the rose.

Muriel, tight in her revulsion, sees black, and daintily reaches for the offering. As her hand touches it, Dan springs up in his seat and shouts:

“JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER!” (69)

The revelatory nature of the scene is strengthened through the juxtaposition of the dwarf with Jesus. The image of the blood-stained rose also gains depth from this comparison; the white rose with its thorns and its blood evokes the crown of thorns and suffering.⁴⁷ It becomes pivotal that Muriel accepts the dwarf’s gift as this gesture gains significance outside itself; it is not just a part of the performance but is an acceptance of him as a person; of his humanity. At least for Dan, who is perceptive enough to sense it, the performance becomes a transcendent, existential moment. He is changed by it; he becomes detached and moves away.

⁴⁷ It also brings back to mind the unseasonal beauty and innocence of the November cotton flower in part one.

Earlier Dan has been rebellious and revolutionary in his attitude to society. He wanted to “grab the girders of this building [the theater] and pull them down” (68).⁴⁸ Now he appears to feel aloof and separate from it all and walks away – he is in a sense released.

“Bona and Paul” is another story that deals with self–other relations. Its characters are separated by issues of gender and race. The main character Paul is a black man come North to complete his education. He passes for white but everyone speculates about his racial and ethnic identity and suspects that he is African American. He feels his difference from them, also when they enter Crimson Gardens, a nightclub catering to a white audience with its exotic jazz performances. Paul becomes aware of his otherness in a new way as he enters the night club and senses that people wonder about his race: “A strange thing happened to Paul. Suddenly he knew that he was apart from the people around him. Apart from the pain which they had unconsciously caused. Suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference” (Toomer [1923] 1988, 76). This is not a negative experience for him. On the contrary, it gives him an explanatory insight that evokes Du Bois’ double-consciousness as a dual perspective; he sees other people’s view of him: “Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness. There was a fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real” (76–77).

In this story too there is a central and climactic dance scene towards the end. It is a passionate scene where the text consciously slips into melodrama. After their verbal sparring on the dance floor Bona “presses away” while “Paul, conscious of the convention in it, pulls her to him” (79). Their performance is theatrical and close to parody: “Her body close. Her head still strains away. He nearly crushes her. She tries to pinch him. Then sees people staring, and lets her arms fall. Their eyes meet. Both, contemptuous. The dance takes blood from their minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. Passionate blood leaps back into their eyes. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor” (79). This scene is both a parallel to and an inversion of the scene at the opening of the story when Bona squeezes Paul as they place basketball in the school gymnasium, a situation she controls.⁴⁹ Their dance performance, which results in a passion unbridled by social conventions and racial barriers, prepares the ground for Paul’s epiphanic vision at the end. The black doorman

⁴⁸ A line that resembles Carl Sandburg’s “Prayers of Steel”: “Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper together” ([1918] 1970, 109).

⁴⁹ In the gymnasium they are drilling, and, symbolically, only one man is out of step with the rest and this is Paul.

is familiar with the scenario, a black or mulatto man leaving the club with a white girl, but as Paul looks into the black doorman's knowing expression "[a] strange thing happens. He sees the Gardens purple, as if he were way off. And a spot in the purple. The spot comes furiously towards him. Face of the black man. It leers. It smiles sweetly like a child's" (79). He tries to convince the black man that what he has experienced is something out of the ordinary, something profound that arises above the familiar "white girl meets black boy scenario," or the event of passing. His experience is an encounter with an other and an existential experience of ambiguity and heterogeneity, and he tries to tell this to the black doorman: "That I came into the Gardens, into life in the Gardens with one whom I did not know. That I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know. That I thought of her" (80). Again, colour is important. Earlier in the text Paul wondered if Crimson Gardens would look purple instead of crimson if he "went out into the night and looked at it" (77) and this suspicion is now confirmed. Purple is a deeper and more hybrid colour than crimson. Imagistically, the faces of white people are petals of roses and the faces of black people are petals of dusk. Crimson Gardens, a night club, becomes in Paul's mind a real garden where people are the petals of flowers. Paul, who has opened up to the many-faceted heterogeneity of humanity is "going out and gather petals" (80). Having earlier felt race as an obstacle and having been sceptical of crossing the boundary between white and non-white he is now ready to embrace hybridity and heterogeneity. However, as he returns to where he left Bona, his white petal, he discovers that she has left.

The performances in these stories, where the performers through spontaneity and improvisation transcend the dullness, predictability and mannerisms of respectable society, are like jazz performances. In *Black Talk* Ben Sidran describes how "the music of New Orleans [the beginning of jazz] was created by both the performer and the audience in a constant interaction, an exchange of faith" ([1971] 1995, 48). The nexus performer – audience, or performance – experience, is crucial in the texts studied in this section as their climactic moments arise precisely from the dialogic relationship between the two. It is clearest in "Box-Seat" where Dan in the end shouts his response to the performance on stage.

Whereas the blues is a solitary expression of pain and primarily vocal music, early jazz was polyphonic and vibrant. Jazz was dance music. It became the label for the decade called by Fitzgerald the Jazz Age. The period of the 1920s "was peculiar in that, for the first time, the music of the black culture – and 'vulgar' culture in general – became part of mainstream American expression" (Sidran [1971] 1995, 53). In this context jazz and its

culture signified for many hedonism and abandon at a time when American culture came to be perceived as cold and materialistic. In *Cane*, too, jazz could be seen as an antidote to the dehumanizing and alienating modern condition, and this set-up is visible in the first two texts in the second part, “Seventh Street and “Rhobert.” “Seventh Street” is a jazz text, in terms of language, atmosphere and content. Its language is direct and explicit and has a syncopated rhythm. The street is portrayed as vibrant and reckless and seething with life. The focus is on movement and dynamism:

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood. . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it!. . the sun. (41)

The next text, “Rhobert,” is a sharp contrast. The text gives an image of suffocation and confinement. Robert, who “wears a house, like a monstrous diver’s helmet on his head” (42), is sinking, drowning in mud. Rhobert is described in physical terms as a person being crushed by the world around him, a “banty-bowed, shaky, ricket-legged man straining the raw insides of his throat against smooth air” (42). The dehumanizing presentation of Rhobert is reminiscent of grotesque characters in Gothic tales, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, where a human being is attempted constructed from fragments and body parts. The fear for humanity and the human condition expressed by Shelley’s text is to some extent present in *Cane* too; that is, not the fear that science should replace humans but the prospect that the modern condition, as seen for instance in urban settings, could lead to fragmentation, alienation and a form of dehumanization. Rhobert is a family man with a wife and children, but he is nevertheless portrayed as destructively lonely. This loneliness is a theme in most of the texts in *Cane*, perhaps most explicitly expressed in the poem “Prayer,” where the subject is alienated and closed even to itself: “My body is opaque to the soul / Driven by the spirit long have I sought to temper it unto the spirit’s longing / But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul” (70).

The restrictiveness of the claustrophobic house is an effective contrast to Seventh Street’s movement and all through part two there is a dialogue between sensuality and freedom on the one hand, and life-denying enclosing forces on the other. They are both part of the same culture and together they form the heterogeneous nature of *Cane*’s city. At the same time they are in opposition to each other. This is at its clearest in “Box Seat” where there at first appears to be a flirtatious relationship between the houses and the street, the houses being feminine and the streets masculine:

Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street. Upon the gleaming limbs and asphalt torso of a dreaming nigger. Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger. Open your liver lips to the lean, white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses, and teach them to dream. (59)

As Dan enters Mrs. Pribby's house it "contracts about him. It is a sharp-edged, massed, metallic house. Bolted. About Mrs. Pribby. Bolted to the endless rows of metal houses. Mrs Pribby's house. The rows of houses belong to other Mrs. Pribbys. No wonder he couldn't sing to them" (60). It traps him. The jazzy street is described in terms of blood and bodies, in human terms, while the house is described oppressively in imagery derived from technology and industry.

Modern life and a sensual life are not always kept apart. In the poem "Her Lips Are Copper Wire," which in some ways bears resemblance to "Face" and "Portrait in Georgia," the two melt together. This poem also has a noticeable Gothic and uncanny atmosphere and reminds us that the Gothic is not only a phenomenon of dark woods and towering castles; it can reveal itself in urban settings as well. The introduction of city to the Gothic could be seen as a result of industrialization:

As the nineteenth century progressed, the damaging effects of industrialism became increasingly clear and had much to do with the emergence of a new site of Gothic horror: the city. In Victorian Gothic (q.v.), the castles and abbeys of the eighteenth century give way to labyrinthine streets, sinister rookeries, opium dens, and the filth and stench of the squalid slums [...] The savage and the primitive are shown to exist in the heart of the modern, civilized metropolis. (Punter and Byron 2004, 21–22)

Dickens's foggy streets are of course a far cry from the hustle of Chicago and DC. However, the dark and sinister atmosphere of *Cane*'s southern setting is transferred to the urban second part which, despite its moments of joyous vibrancy, has retained elements of darkness and anxiety; the savage and the primitive are latently omnipresent. In "Her Lips Were Copper Wire" the urban scene is hinted at in an imagistic manner – through images and glimpses. The streets are foggy with swaying lampposts and "bootleg lick drinkers" (57). The latter term suggests a gritty realism reminiscent of Baudelaire's urban poems. The streets are also described as "dewy corridors of billboards" (57), an image that signals hollowness and emptiness but also something alluring. These lines are presented parenthetically as an intimate comment to the reader about the sound of the woman's voice: "(her words play softly up and down / dewy corridors of billboards)" (57). The poem communicates an ambiguous sensuality often found in the Gothic, as well as a modernist fascination with urbanity. It fuses modernity and sensuality in its central metaphor of electricity. "Lips," and other words in the poem, like "whisper," "moist," "softly," and "dewy," belong to an organic sensual world, while "copper

wire” and accompanying words like “power-house,” “main wires,” and “insulate” belong to the world of industry and technology, and the word “bill-board” refers to modern consumerism. The final image, where he asks her to remove the tape, which would be the insulation around the copper wires, and press her “lips to mine till they are incandescent” (57) is also the image of wire against wire creating electricity and thus an evocation of both light and pain. Its image of electricity evokes Baudelaire’s description of the subject’s immersion in the urban scene: “Thus the lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity” ([1863] 2006, 400). “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” is a strongly atmospheric poem that through its juxtaposition of pain and pleasure, sensuality and technology, contributes to an uncanny mood in part two. The poem’s bringing together of opposites also underlines the importance of ambivalence and heterogeneity and it thus supports thematically most of the other texts in part two. This uncanny love poem, with its suggested final electric image, reflects the epiphanic moment in “Box-Seat.”

The poem “Storm Ending” achieves a similar effect. Like in part one, synesthetic imagery is used and its forceful opening sentence – “Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads” (51) – mixes the auditory and the visual in a striking manner. The thunder is described as “Great, hollow, bell-like flowers / Rumbling in the wind” (51). The sound of the thunder rumbling contributes to an atmosphere of darkness and foreboding which is a contrast to the visual beauty of the flowers. In the continuation of the poem the mixing of different sensory worlds continues as the flowers, images of sound, take on qualities of flesh: “Full-lipped flowers / Bitten by the sun / Bleeding rain / Dripping rain like golden honey” (51). Again there is a juxtaposition of pleasure and pain as blood, resulting from a bite, is associated with honey. This sensuous atmosphere of danger and darkness suffusing the air has Gothic undertones. Both “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” and “Storm Ending” through their forceful mixing of sensorial impressions and fusion of contrasts contribute to the advocacy of heterogeneity in *Cane*.

Jazz and its culture is a symbol of freedom; a life force, and it resonates in the language and style of part two. Language is rougher, has a more abrupt and often syncopated rhythm and its narration is less evasive and elusive – more direct, explicit and energetic, compared to that of part one. An exception, however, is “Avey,” which bears strong resemblance to the female portraits in part one. The setting is urban but its language does not have the syncopated rhythm of the other narrative texts in part two and its narrative style differs from the other texts’ near-dramatic form since it has a clear first-person point of view. The focus is on male–female relationships and these are as porous and enigmatic as those in

part one. However, the narrator's presence is more prominent and direct in "Avey" than in for instance "Fern."⁵⁰ He is not merely the narrator; he is also clearly a character in the text and we are given concrete information about him. What is more, he is a singer. Avey, on the other hand, is silent, and in the eyes of the narrator she is associated with nature. The narrator says that she "was as silent as those great trees whose tops we looked down upon. She has always been like that. At least, to me" (46). In this sketch the male narrator is the one who breaks out in song, not the woman: "I sang, with a strange quiver in my voice, a promise-song" (48). Avey, however, is not receptive to the narrator's promise song as she has fallen asleep; his performance thus falls on stony ground. The women in *Cane*'s first part remained vague textual presences as the narrator failed to understand them and represent them. In "Avey" the narrator comments on the nature of the eponymous woman, explains it to her even:

I described her own nature and temperament. Told how they needed a larger life for their expression. How incapable Washington was of understanding that need. How it could not meet it. I pointed out that in lieu of proper channels, her emotions had overflowed into paths that dissipated them. I talked, beautifully I thought, about an art that would be born, an art that would open the way for women the likes of her. (48)

This is in fact an interpretation of her plight that also casts light on the women in part one as well as again brings to mind Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." He implies that the rich spirituality of the likes of Avey has no channel where it can be released but that once, in the future, such a channel, such an art form, will be born – ideas similar to the views on black women that Walker expresses in her essay. The irony of it is that whereas the narrator's description seems suitable in the context of the women in the first part of *Cane* it is not so evident that it is relevant in the context of Avey. We may entertain the suspicion that she really is simply lazy and indolent, as the narrator implies earlier in the text, and there seems to be an air of decadence about her.

Like a jazz piece, and like the blues, all of these stories have inconclusive and open endings. Despite their epiphanic moments they fade out, offering no resolutions. In "Theater," Dorris flees to her wardrobe as she admits to the failure of her performance. In "Box-Seat," Dan Moore turns his back on the pending confrontation in the alley and simply walks away. In "Bona and Paul," Bona has disappeared as Paul turns to join her. In "Avey," the prospective romance between Avey and the narrator ends with her sleeping through the night on a bench in the park while the narrator watches over her. These open and inconclusive endings underline the texts' poetic quality. The ending, which in all texts could have been the

⁵⁰ The relationship between "Avey" and "Fern" is particularly pertinent as the latter text is the only example in part one of a text where the narrator actually contacts and meets the woman.

union of the male and the female character, is not important. Whether Dan meets Muriel again, or Paul catches up with Bona, is not the issue. The release of the texts resides in those transcendent moments when the characters rise above the concrete physical world. The silences of *Cane*, like its open endings, are in many ways its strength and signature. Part two in some instances comes close to being too explicit to possess the same qualities as part one, but its inconclusive endings along with its symbolic epiphanic moments save it from becoming too predictable and didactic. Also in this section the silences give a sense of depth to the text.

Jazz clearly informs *Cane*'s narrative strategies in part two. In part one there is only one narrator within each text; sometimes this is clearly a first-person narrator, other times it is ostensibly a third-person narrator. In three of the longest texts in part two, "Theatre," "Box-Seat" and "Bona and Paul," character dialogue, which is virtually absent from part one, figures prominently, and the thoughts of the characters are presented as stream-of-consciousness sequences that at times take over the narrative. The relative independence of the characters as actors, or enunciators, within the narrative evokes the polyphony of instruments in a jazz performance where each instrument performs with considerable independence within the larger whole of the performance. It also brings to mind Bakhtin's description of polyphony as a situation where different and independent consciousnesses sound in the text. In *Cane* the third-person narrator and the most central characters perform within the discourse with their own separate but still interactive voices. This reflects the jazz performance: "The polyphonic texture of the music was the result of 'collective improvisation,' with each melody player improvising his or her part in such a way that the parts combined into a balanced, integrated whole" (Southern [1971] 1997, 369).⁵¹

Another way in which polyphony enters the discourse in part two is found in the internal strife visible in each character's consciousness. In these sections too there is a tension between the characters and society around them, and the rules and conventions of society represent restrictions on the characters' movements. The sequences presenting the characters' flow of thought are internally dialogized and often anticipate another's response. An example of this is found in "Theater" where John is assessing and trying to anticipate the reactions of others, and of Dorris, to a relationship between himself and her: "John: Stage-door Johnny;

⁵¹The idea of improvisation in relation to literature is in one sense problematic since literature is not the result of improvisation but rather of careful composition.

chorus girl. No, that would be all right. Dictie, educated, stuck-up; show-girl. Yep. Her suspicion would be stronger than her passion. It wouldnt work. Keep her loveliness. Let her go.” (53). Terms like “stage-door Johnny,” “dictie,” and “chorus girl” are already laden with connotations of race and class, and John, the manager’s brother, thin lipped and described by one of the dancers as “dictie,” concludes that he would not be suitable in the role as “stage-door Johnny.” There is a whole history of race and class against such a liaison and John in his thoughts reveals an awareness of the gap that separates them. A similar sequence is found in “Bona and Paul” where Bona, a southern white girl, thinks about Paul: “He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger. Bona! But dont all the dorm girls say so? And dont you, when you are sane, say so? Thats why I love – Oh, nonsense. You have never loved a man who didnt first love you” (72). The poetic imagery in the opening of this inner monologue is similar to that of the poems and the texts in the first part and is an indication of Bona’s southernness. The reductiveness of the term “nigger” is a contrast to the poetic imagery. It reveals that she knows intuitively that Paul is a black man. She chastises herself for thinking this, knowing it would be a devaluing of him, then justifying her thoughts by referring to what the other girls think. She also implies that the reason she loves him may be that she thinks he is black, although she instantly rejects the idea.

In “Box-Seat,” Dan Moore, a “poor man out of work,” is obsessed with how he thinks other people perceive him at the same time as he entertains ideas of personal grandeur and sees himself as a saviour:

The thought comes to him that some one passing by might see him, and not understand. Might think that he is trying to sneak, to break in.

Dan: Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces. I’ll show em. Break into an engine-house, steal a thousand horse-power fire truck. Smash in with the truck. I’ll show em. Grab an ax and brain em. Cut em up. Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo. And then the cops come. “No, I aint a baboon. I aint Jack the Ripper. I’m a poor man out of work. Take your hands off me, you bull-necked bears. Look into my eyes. I am Dan Moore. I was born in a canefield. The hands of Jesus touched me. I am come to a sick world to heal it. Only the other day, a dope fiend brushed against me – Dont laugh, you mighty, juicy, meat-hook men. Give me your fingers and I will peel them as if they were ripe bananas. (59-60)

The sequence, which starts as free indirect discourse and continues as stream-of-consciousness, shows how Dan, who, although in opposition to society around him mostly behaves like a gentle intellectual man, takes on the language of gangsters and mobs as he imagines how he, an unemployed black man, is perceived by the more established and respectable segments of society. This paranoid internal discourse of Dan Moore could be said to reflect Du Bois’ concept double-consciousness, “this sense of always looking at one’s self

through the eyes of others” (Du Bois [1903] 1994, 11), as well as Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse where the words of the other always sound with the words of the self. Discussing dialogue in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* Bakhtin argues that the underground man demonstrates “his own inability to be at peace with his own definition of self” (Bakhtin 1984b, 229). This is also an accurate depiction of Dan’s verbal calamity. The words of the other are present in his discourse and Dan battles against them, trying to negate their attitudes and relevance while simultaneously using them himself. The effect of Dan Moore’s verbal fight against his surroundings and himself is comical in a subdued manner. Neither the attempt to present himself as violent nor as saviour is convincing and seems on the contrary to form ironic contrasts to his character as it unfolds. He has an artistic sensibility and is particularly sensitive to his surroundings but he is hardly a wise or particularly brave character. In many ways he anticipates Kabnis of *Cane*’s last part, who in spite of his existential *angst*, involuntarily is a comic figure.

4. *Cane*’s Part 3: “*Je est un autre*” – The Picture of Ralph Kabnis

“Kabnis” confirms repetition and difference as the central structural principle of *Cane*; in some ways it breaks with the texts preceding it while in other ways it continues and develops previously introduced elements. “Kabnis” consists of only one text and this sets it structurally apart from the two previous parts. Also, the dramatic mode is dominant in “Kabnis.” However, stylistic as well as thematic concerns from the two previous sections continue into this part, and both music and the Gothic are present, the latter more salient than it was in part two. The prominence of drama could be seen as a further development of latent dramatic potential in part one and of more obvious dramatic elements in part two. In the latter, drama and performance played a central role as theme and setting, and also had begun to enter form through the use of stream-of-consciousness sequences presented like lines in a drama. The dramatic form of “Kabnis” thus represents something new at the same time as it is a logical development in the book.

A central idea and aesthetic principle introduced in the first part was the coexistence of the beautiful and sensual and the horrible and painful, a central idea also in part three. This ambivalent aesthetics, found in as diverse sources as the blues, the Gothic, and French Symbolism, informed the whole discourse of part one with its poetic and sensual form and sometimes violent content. In part two this ambivalence was a truth to be fathomed by the characters, something which Dan Moore in “Box Seat” had realized. This ambivalence is at least partly grounded in southern racial history. In Fred Halsey’s home, the portrait of his near

white great-grandmother is also a portrait of pain: “That there is a Negro strain, no one would doubt. But it is difficult to say in precisely what feature it lies. On close inspection, her mouth is seen to be wistfully twisted. The expression of her face seems to shift before one’s gaze – now ugly, repulsive; now sad, and somehow beautiful in its pain” ([1923] 1988, 87). This ambivalence is what Kabnis senses but struggles to accept as he, like Muriel in “Box Seat,” is clinging to conventionality and a predicable world of pure categories. Kabnis, a northerner whose family comes from Georgia, embodies the northern, modern urban environment as well as the environment of the South. His immediate and emotional response to the South and its culture is in conflict with his intellectual opinion of it:

God Almighty, dear God, dear Jesus, do not torture me with beauty. Take it away. Give me an ugly world. Ha, ugly. Stinking like unwashed niggers. Dear Jesus, do not chain me to myself and set these hills and valleys, heaving with folk-songs, so close to me that I cannot reach them. There is a radiant beauty in the night that touches and. . . tortures me. Ugh. Hell. Get up, you damn fool. Look around. Whats beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. Whats beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you? God, he doesnt exist, but nevertheless He is ugly. (85)

Given its history of racism and violence it would have been easier if the South had been an ugly and abhorrent place. However, Kabnis senses that it holds a seductive beauty in spite of the horror that it embodies but this is an ambivalence he cannot accept. Although he feels the beauty of the night, he is afraid of the dark and longs for the day to arrive. This is Kabnis’s profound meeting with otherness, with ambivalence, but he cannot, or will not, accept it. His night time experiences do not alleviate his fear of the South or reconcile him to it.

The description of Kabnis after his encounters with the night resembles the description of Rhobert, the alienated and already spiritually dead man in part two: “Kabnis has stiffened. He is conscious now of the night wind, and of how it chills him. He rises. He totters as a man would who for the first time uses artificial limbs. As a completely artificial man would” (85). Whereas the blues singer in “Song of the Son” longs to be united with the southern soil and southern culture and acknowledges an affinity with the South, Kabnis denies his affinity with the lower-class black southern community when he denounces the old man Father John by saying “an besides, he aint my past. My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods” (108). The difficult complexity makes Kabnis long for the northern cities: “Washington sleeps. Its still, peaceful streets, how desirable they are. Its people whom he had always halfway despised. New York? Impossible. It was a fiction. He had dreamed it. An impotent nostalgia grips him” (86). To Kabnis this situation is confounding and debilitating.

Lewis observes that Kabnis’ inability to deal with both his own identity and life in the South stems from his inability to relate to transitional states and opposing categories, these

categories being the binaries that the whole text plays with and interweaves. To Kabnis they are bastardizing forces: “Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you” ([1923] 1988, 108–109). The coexistence of irreconcilable opposites is at the very heart of *Cane*, is its central aesthetic principle, and Kabnis, by some seen as the emerging artist, cannot relate to impure states.

The ambivalence that troubles Kabnis is expressed in the blues and also in the Gothic. The southern landscape as this is experienced by Kabnis is a Gothic and uncanny landscape. Its Gothic nature is caused by two main factors: its undeniable dark historical baggage and Kabnis’ relative ignorance of the South. The historical past of the South, with lynching and violence, is always right beneath the surface, and for Kabnis these elements are magnified and come to life because he is haunted by his paranoid fear of a place and a culture he does not really know from his own experience. Although a part of him, it represents the unknown. In “Fern” the narrator says that “[a]s you know, men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman” ([1923] 1988, 16). In “Fern” woman was idolized, in “Kabnis” the South seen through Kabnis’s eyes is a feared landscape animated with horror. Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny as a phenomenon that relates to intellectual uncertainty is again of relevance. The South is a place where Kabnis loses his direction, where he loses himself. However, Kabnis is haunted more by his own fear than by actual dangers, and in his paranoid anxiety he appears like a comic figure. In the following sequence he is portrayed in defamiliarizing terms; his physical appearance is seen from a distance and this distance is further accentuated through the use of “it” as reference to Kabnis, something which underlines his position as outsider:

A splotchy figure drives forward along the cane- and corn-stalk hemmed-in road. A scarecrow replica of Kabnis, awkwardly animate. Fantastically plastered with red Georgia mud. It skirts the big house whose windows shine like mellow lanterns in the dusk. Its shoulder jogs against a sweet-gum tree. The figure caroms off against the cabin door, and lunges in. It slams the door as if to prevent some one entering after it. (93)

Well inside the house he starts hitting about him with a poker convinced that someone is hiding and waiting for him in the closet, the victim of fear and insecurity.

The rather striking comic and pathetic potential of the character Ralph Kabnis is evident also in other parts of the text. In the opening scene he is portrayed in a rather ignoble situation chasing a hen: “Why in Christ’s hell cant you leave me alone? Damn it, I wish your cackle would choke you. Choke every mother’s son of them in this God-forsaken hole. Go away. By God I’ll wring you neck for you if you dont. Hell of a mess I’ve got in: even the

poultry is hostile” (84). This ludicrous scene gains significance if we compare it to stories of lynching later in “Kabnis”: “The killing of the hen seems like a parody of lynching, performed with the same casualness – in the South the life of a ‘nigger’ does not count more than that of a hen – with the same determination and destructive violence, the same self-righteousness and insanity” (Fabre 2001, 115). Sometimes profound and formative moments occur in what appears to be so prosaic and mundane situations that they become comical, as when Ralph Kabnis is suddenly struck by the beauty of the night: “Kabnis is about to shake his fists heavenward. He looks up, and the night’s beauty strikes him dumb. He falls to his knees. Sharp stones cut through his thin pajamas. The shock sends a shiver over him. He quivers. Tears mist his eyes. He writhes” (85). The image of Kabnis falling to the ground in his thin pyjamas, hurting his knees, is both tragic and comical. The ambivalence of laughter and tears often mentioned in relation to the blues is reflected in such near-tragic, near-comic situations, and they bring to mind Ellison’s description of the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” ([1945] 1972, 78-79). The tormented Kabnis, tortured by existential crises, is vastly different from the distanced spectator-narrator in part one who, even when he is close to the events, appears unaffected by them.

Kabnis’s Gothic southern experiences give resonance to the blues theme of loneliness and alienation: “This loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane. Miles from nowhere. A speck on a Georgia hillside. Jesus, can you imagine it – an atom of dust in agony on a hillside?” ([1923] 1988, 85).⁵² For Kabnis it is the open southern countryside that creates the sense of alienation, not the containment of the northern cities, because it makes him feel small, insignificant and exposed. Whereas the urban streets in section two were full of life, “Sempter’s streets are vacant and still” (105). Kabnis, who is used to the city, finds this silence haunting: “Still as a grave. Jesus, how still everything is. Does the world know how still it is? People make noise. They are afraid of silence. Of what lives, and God, of what dies in silence. There must be many dead things moving in silence. They come here to touch me. I swear I feel their fingers” (86). Although the canefield is one of the elements that ground the text in a specific regional and cultural space, it is also a potentially sublime landscape and a setting that transcends the specific. It is open, non-directional and gives a sense of limitlessness and vastness. Kabnis feels that “[t]hings are so

⁵² This line resonates with a line from Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

immediate in Georgia” (86), and appears to sense some of the same strangeness as the narrator of “Fern,” who half expects to have a vision. However, whereas the narrator in “Fern” appears relaxed about the prospect of a vision, Kabnis is deeply unsettled and even threatened by it.

The reason why Kabnis is so unsettled by his southern experiences is in part because they destabilize his sense of self. The uncanniness that frightens and challenges him blurs the limits of his own self. As writes Justin Edwards: “The uncanny, for Freud, has to do with our sense of strangeness when the unfamiliar appears at the center of the familiar [...] The uncanny, then, may prompt questions about the boundaries and limits of the self, as well as the very logic of identity” (2003, xxv). Kabnis clearly struggles with himself and his own identity in this southern setting. Talking to himself in bed he says: “Whoever you are, my warm glowing sweetheart, do not think that the face that rests beside you is the real Kabnis. Ralph Kabnis is a dream” (83). Identity and its limits are issues in the two first sections of *Cane* as well. In part one the possibility, or impossibility, of representing the other is at the front, and in part two the communication between self and other is portrayed in representations of performances. In “Kabnis” the question of one’s own development in relation to one’s surroundings is shown through the existential crisis that Kabnis undergoes. It is not only his experience of the South that is uncanny; it is also his experience of himself. He sees himself as other and the limits of his self are thus uncertain.

This sense of a porous, conflictual double identity evokes both Gothic doubling and Du Boisian double-consciousness, as well as modernist poetry. The Gothic double is often associated with something negative and destructive. Even Du Bois’s concept double-consciousness involves struggle and conflict between perspectives, “two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois [1903] 1994, 11). Kabnis, the northerner with southern blood, is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the South; although he would like to maintain a safe emotional distance, he is a part of the South, and it is a part of him. His inability to harmonize his divided self represents a threat to his wholeness and clarity of vision. *Cane*, however, appears to infer that a heterogeneous and even conflictual identity should not be seen as a threat.

This problematization of the subject–object divide is an issue found in modernist poetry, and perhaps in particular in French Symbolist writers like Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Kabnis’ confusion evokes Rimbaud’s notion of a split and composite self. In a letter to his teacher Georges Izambard, Rimbaud famously wrote “Je est un autre” ([1871] 1987, 346) (I is an other.) In the same letter he also stated that “C’est faux de dire: Je pense: on devrait dire:

On me pense” (346) (“It’s wrong to say *I think*: One should say *I am thought*” [1871a] 2003, 28). The subject is also object, standing outside itself, looking into itself as well as looking out from itself, and having thus broken the subject–object divide. Rimbaud’s lines bring to mind Du Bois’s double-consciousness with its subject–object dynamics but should not be seen as an impediment for a deeper understanding of the self and of the surrounding world. On the contrary, Rimbaud’s view of himself as other is part of his insistence on a blurring of epistemological and perceptual boundaries in order to reach a higher dimension of understanding; “Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement des tous les sens” (346). (“It has to do with making your way toward the unknown by a derangement of *all the senses*” [1871a] 2003, 28). It is necessary to lose oneself in order to understand oneself and the surrounding world. Peter Nicholls comments that

Rimbaud’s poetics thus entails a systematic assault on the French ideal of clarity in the name of multiplicity and indeterminacy. The very notion of a rational discourse is thereby called into question, since poetic language is seen to originate not from a stable centre but from the point at which the boundaries of the self begin to fray, where subject and object flow into each other. (2009, 30)

Kabnis has reached this state where the sensory impressions he receives from the world around him do not correspond to his preconceptions of himself and the South. The boundaries of his self have begun to fray. To Rimbaud such disorganization of the senses was important for him as a poet while Kabnis is deeply troubled by it. Kabnis has by several critics been read as an artist figure. Houston Baker Jr., for instance, makes great claims for Kabnis contending that he “is the fully emergent artist – a singer of a displaced ‘soil-soaked beauty’ and an agent of liberation for his people” (1988, 44). More specifically, in a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer suggested that Kabnis was himself; “And Kabnis is *Me*” (Toomer [1923] 2006a, 116). However, whether it is plausible to read *Cane* as a portrait of an artist, or *the* artist, Toomer, as a young man, depends on whether it could be argued that he has a meta-perspective on his own situation or whether he remains in denial – confused and unsettled. *Cane* as a whole suggests that southern history and race relations in the US cannot be rendered in a realistic representational mode; what is required is an aesthetic form that acknowledges the fraying of the boundaries of genres, an immersion in grounded chaos. Kabnis experiences this chaos; in order to become an artist he needs to accept it.

One noticeable change between “Kabnis” and the other two parts is the position of women. In the other parts of the book interhuman relations are depicted through male-female relationships but in “Kabnis” such relationships play no significant role and the erotic tension between men and women disappears. Lewis reflects over Carrie’s situation: “His mind flashes

images of her life in the southern town. He sees the nascent woman, her flesh already stiffening to cartilage, drying to bone. Her spirit-bloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading” ([1923] 1988, 103). The curious passage conflates the image of Carrie as nascent woman and as old, even dead – a drying heap of bones. This imagery of decaying bodies stylistically refers back to “Face” and “Portrait in Georgia” in part one. The description of her life to some extent also reflects the lives of the women in part one; women who live futile lives and whose desires and potential remain unreleased. Lewis asks Halsey, her brother, “What are you going to do for her?” (103), a question that echoes the unspecified desire of the narrator of “Fern”: “Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing” (19). The unnamed thing, however, remains both unnamed and undone.

In “Kabnis” the female characters are not prominent or interesting as characters but women are important in other ways. In part one their mysterious presence and identity fill many of the texts, which the titles indicate, whereas in part two their interaction with the male characters was essential to the plot in the narratives. Until “Kabnis,” however, women have not been associated, at least not positively, with regeneration. Karintha had a child that she killed. Esther’s dreams of having Barlo’s child were abortive and Becky’s offspring were the violent results of miscegenation. In “Kabnis” women, especially black women, are associated precisely with fecundity and regeneration, and the close affinity between women and nature that was visible in part one is even clearer:

Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South. Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane- and cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night’s womb-song sets them singing. Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing. (105)

Carrie’s development is described as “nascent maternity” (115) and Stella would “like to take Kabnis to some distant pine grove and nurse and mother him” (112). This prominence of femininity and the female body as the source of regeneration and growth is a contrast to Lewis’ premonitions of Carrie’s barren life and a contradiction of the futile life of the women in section one. Women’s bodies are open to the world.

Hybridity returns in *Cane*’s final scene, in what has been called its nativity scene. The image of rebirth is complete in the last paragraph of “Kabnis” when the death song of black southern culture becomes a birth song: “Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree-tops of the forest. Shadows of pines are dreams the sun shakes from its eyes. The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” (117). The southern landscape, which until this point

has been enveloped in dusk and smoke, with a strong Gothic air, is bathed in morning sunlight. However, this birth scene is not conclusive but rather as enigmatic and open-ended as everything else in *Cane*. The characters who witness this sunrise are the blind and deaf old man Father John, who appears to be down in the basement waiting to die, and the young woman Carrie. Life and death meet here as Carrie “slips to her knees before him. Her lips murmur, ‘Jesus, come’” (117). Indeed, death and morning seem to come at her beckoning. Old and young, past and future, male and female coexist in this revelatory scene. Kabnis, the centre of consciousness, fighting problems of his own identity and whom we expect to have a revelation, has returned upstairs to work in Halsey’s workshop as usual – angry and bitter and not at all receptive to the break of a new morning. Despite the many references by critics to Kabnis as an emergent artist and despite Toomer himself claiming that “Kabnis is *Me*,” it is hard to see the teacher turned workshop handyman as an emergent artist in the end. The final question is what is being born when this birth scene, which is also a death scene, turns the death song into a birth song. Genevieve Fabre describes the last paragraph as “both sunrise and birth song” and states that it “contains echoes of some of the most lyrical passages in *Cane*. Yet both combine effectively images of tomb and womb, of death and rebirth, imprisonment and escape, dream and reality, less to emphasize their opposition than perhaps to suggest a transitional age and a new composition that might aptly be called ‘dusk of dawn’” (Fabre 2001, 119). Whatever we choose to call it, what is being born is precisely the hybrid composition of Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. It is remarkable how Toomer’s text never allows for consummation and finalization, not for its characters and not for its readers. Even in this potentially releasing finale the text turns inwards towards itself and offers itself and its many contrasts and contradictions as answer. The hybridity of *Cane*, its heterogeneity and textual otherness, is triumphant.

Chapter Three

Everyday Blues: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as Epistolary Neo-Slave Narrative

My feet have been so cracked by the frost that the pen with which I am writing
might be laid in the gashes.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,
an American Slave, Written by Himself*

Were not these characters written by her hand? and were not these words conceived
in her mind, and many of them spoken by her lips?

Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

1. A Popular, Yet Problematic Novel

In *Cane* the black, mulatto and white women of Georgia were mostly seen from a distance; silent, apart from their singing, and their feelings unknown. Walker writes that “[i]n the still heat of post-Reconstruction South, this is how they seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as ‘the mule of the world’” ([1974] 1984a, 232). Michael Awkward questions the appropriateness of regarding Toomer’s *Cane* as a fruitful reference in the context of Walker’s fiction since she views his text as a male misrepresentation of black women and their predicament (1989, 135–136). I will not speculate on Walker’s intended literary affinity with Toomer, but her texts could be said to fill in the silences of black southern women and to represent, mostly in terms of everyday realism, what remain largely enigmatic presences in Toomer’s texts. The main thematic concerns of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* are to give an account of oppression and dehumanization, and, just as importantly, of liberation and self-realization. We follow the life of the novel’s protagonist, Celie, through suffering and degradation at the hands of the men in her life into subsequent emancipation in the company of women. Its story hinges on two main axes: gender and race, as do many of Walker’s texts, and her characters struggle under the weight of both sexism and racism. For most of her career, Walker has focused on the lives and tribulations of black southern women, of people who often go unnoticed in society as well as in literature; black women who struggle and endure in their everyday lives and do not commit extraordinary deeds. Her literature demonstrates how black women are doubly oppressed and victimized by

black sexism as well as by white culture. However, showing the abilities of these women to free themselves from oppression through the discovery of “the springs of creativity in them” (Walker [1974] 1984, 233) is an important objective in Walker’s third novel. They discover within themselves and in their own culture the means with which to free themselves.

Whereas Jean Toomer’s *Cane* has grown in stature over the last decades and gone from a place in virtual obscurity to becoming a central text in the African American tradition, Alice Walker’s authorship has followed the opposite trajectory. Walker was in the vanguard of the wave of female authors who began their career in the 1970s, authors who represented a feminist turn in African American literature. Her first two novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian* (1976), clearly concerned themselves with the lives of black women, and in a discussion of her first novel she declared, “I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (quoted in Hogue 1985, 46). Walker coined the term *womanism* as “a radicalisation of (white) feminist analysis and aspiration” (Lauret 2000, 21), in order to highlight that the situation for black women differed from that of white women and that white feminist approaches consequently were not always applicable in the context of African American women’s literature. Walker’s reputation reached its apex with *The Color Purple* in 1982. Her reputation has been in decline since and her next two novels, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), failed to live up to expectations and to some extent received critical battering. *The Color Purple*, however, remains an important and interesting novel in the African American tradition.

The Color Purple has been a popular but also controversial novel that has generated much criticism. It has won several awards: the Pulitzer Prize (1983) and the National Book Award (1983), and it has appealed to a wide reading audience. According to bell hooks, herself not a great admirer of Walker’s novel, “it is read across race, class, gender and cultural boundaries” (1990, 454). Charles Johnson describes it as “the most commercially successful novel in the entire history of Afro-American letters” (1988, 105), and even calls it “a cultural event” (106). However, for various reasons, political as well as aesthetic, the novel has also been seen as problematic. This especially concerns its representation of black masculinity. Like other black women writers, Walker was “accused of acting in complicity with ‘the man’ (i.e., white male systems of domination) when creating images of black men” (hooks [1990]

2015, 70) because her black male characters were violent and abusive.⁵³ It could further be argued that its forced happy ending minimalizes the damaging impact of its violent sexism, something which again reduces the novel's critical potential; that it is difficult to determine the exact time and place of its setting, which makes it almost ahistorical; and that it contains a troubling number of improbable incidents that are inconsistent with a realistic mode of representation.

The Color Purple is not an artistically flawless novel, but some of the objections to it are due to its being expected to be something it is not. In particular the question of its realism, or rather, its lacking realism, is problematic. The novel throws light on serious social problems like racial and sexual violence, and this creates expectations of a realistic mode of fiction. Also, it does not depart sufficiently from realism to merit another label. It is not fantasy or speculative fiction; everything that happens in it could have happened in real life. However, as is pointed out by Maria Lauret, “[i]f we try to read *The Color Purple* in the terms of what we usually understand by realism, then we simply are not given enough information in the text to make the story – in that old-fashioned phrase – remotely ‘convincing.’ Such vaguenesses, coincidences and inconsistencies derive from the style and form of *The Color Purple*, rather than simply its plot” (2000, 94). Molly Hite states that “[i]ndeed, the violations of realist conventions are so flagrant that they might well call into question whether *The Color Purple* ‘is clearly intended to be a realistic novel,’ especially as there are indications that at least some of those aspects of the novel discounted by reviewers as flaws may constitute its links to modes of writing other than Anglo-American twentieth-century realism” (1990, 1109). And, finally, Linda Abbandonato places the novel's transgressions of norms in a feminist context: “Her purposeful transgression of generic boundaries has also been perceived as a lack of artistic control, although it is entirely consistent with current feminist practice” (1991, 1109). Walker's novel then, in a similar manner as *Cane*, poses a challenge to categorization.

The generic polyphony that Hite alludes to and Abbandonato praises is one of the most intriguing features of Walker's novel. *The Color Purple* does not belong clearly within any one genre but engages with many at the same time: in form it is most obviously an epistolary novel, the only African American epistolary novel ever written,⁵⁴ but its project, the account

⁵³ This is even clearer in the film than in the novel. For instance, one of the earliest scenes in the film, showing Celie's father as he reaches out and takes her baby right after it is born, appears like a scene from a horror film. The transformation of Mister is also understated in the film (hooks [1990] 2015, 69).

⁵⁴ I know of no other example, and Gates states that it is the only African American epistolary novel to date (Gates 1988, 244).

of an individual's development from slavery to freedom, mirrors the trajectory of the slave narrative. It contains one of African American literature's most important female blues characters, Shug Avery, which inspires the reading of it as a womanist blues novel. It could also be said to reflect central thematic elements from the Gothic novel and to use an expressive form not normally associated with literature – the quilt and quilting, as a central metaphor. The polyphony of genres in Walker's novel may appear problematic because the various genres at least, at first sight, appear to rub against each other and thus sound like a cacophony. As Todorov phrases it, "[i]t is because genres exist as an institution that they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors" (1990, 18). When a reader comes to a text with a specific horizon of expectations it can present a problem for the appreciation of the text if the text is at odds with these expectations. In a text like *The Color Purple*, which uses genres "unfaithfully" and where genres mix and partly transform each other, expectations are likely to be challenged. For instance, the Gothic novel and the epistolary novel bring with them elements of sentimentalism and melodrama, elements not always consistent with literary realism. Indeed, the early novels of Richardson are said to have initiated the sentimental tradition in American as well as in English literature. The slave narrative, too, despite its concerns with realism and verisimilitude, shared "contradictory characteristics with the sentimental novel (florid astrides, strident polemics, the melodramatic imagination)" (Davies and Gates ([1985] 1990, xv). Its mixing of genres thus makes *The Color Purple* a curious blend of gritty realism, sentimentalism and melodrama. However, analysing the relationship between its genres it becomes clear that they all contribute to the story, strengthening its main points as well as expanding its scope. The use and reuse of genres open up for intertextual relationships between Walker's text and texts associated with other times and places. These genres, and the texts associated with them, represent the literary and cultural memory of *The Color Purple*, or, put differently, they constitute the literary traditions into which Walker's novel inscribes itself; traditions she both continues and revises.

The way Walker's novel relates to these genres reflects Bakhtin's words on the word in a dialogic context as it harmonizes with some elements in its environment and strikes a dissonance with others. The dialogic co-presence of its initially disparate genres and expressive forms carries the narrative of Walker's novel, thematically as well as structurally. Significantly, they all play along the axes of gender and race: the slave narrative is a black and primarily male genre; the epistolary novel and the Gothic are originally white genres, and especially the former is associated with women; the blues is a quintessentially black

expression and quilting is associated with women's culture. This discursive and aesthetic versatility problematizes and unsettles, even deconstructs, the opposition between male and female, black and white, but also between written and oral discourses. In other words, many of the dichotomies central to *Cane* are found at work also in *The Color Purple*.

2. Character and Plot: Her Bondage and Her Freedom

“Ain't I a woman?": Marriage, Virtue and Motherhood

The political connection between race and gender has a long history in the United States where the feminist movement in many ways sprang from women's participation in the abolitionist movement. This connection is memorably represented by Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered at a woman's convention in Ohio in 1851. In her speech, Truth used her previous condition of servitude and her hardships as a free black woman to argue for the rights of women in society. In her short yet succinct speech she drew attention to women in general and African American women in particular, to race as well as gender, as does Walker in her novel.

Marriage, virtue and motherhood, literary themes often described as feminine, are central themes in *The Color Purple*, as they are in the classic texts of epistolary and Gothic novels where marriage as a union founded on mutual love represents the fulfilment of the heroine's happiness, and virtue and motherhood are desired and cherished conditions. In Leslie Fiedler's words, "[t]he subject par excellence of the novel is love or, more precisely – in its beginnings at least – seduction and marriage" ([1966] 1997, 25). Through its mixing of genres Walker's novel presents these themes in a revisionary way. This places *The Color Purple* in the literary company of several African American women authors who have attempted to negotiate western literary discourses and African American realities. Ann duCille in her book *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993), a study of African American novels from Frances Harper to Zora Neale Hurston, investigates what happens to the love and marriage plot in novels when their characters are black. DuCille argues that "while the marriage plot has been coded as white, female, and European, its relationship to the African American novel has always been highly political. Making unconventional use of conventional literary forms, early black writers appropriated for their own emancipatory purposes both the genre of the novel and the structure of the marriage plot" (1993, 3). Madhu Dubey also problematizes African American female authors' use of established genres: "[i]n order to enter the sphere of literary culture,

mid-nineteenth century black women felt obliged to write within two influential genres, the slave narratives sponsored by the abolitionist movement and the sentimental novels popular among white women. Yet these genres, which centered on male slaves or white ladies, were not exactly amenable to the literary intentions of early black women writers” (2009, 150–51). *The Color Purple*, too, uses already established genres and makes unconventional use of conventional forms in order to present the complexity of Celie’s life and tribulations as an African American woman.

Elements of character and plot, that is, Celie and her plight and development, represent the most obvious parallel between *The Color Purple* and a slave narrative since the essential objectives of most slave narratives lie at the heart of Walker’s novel. Discussing Spielberg’s film as much as Walker’s novel, Calvin C. Hernton flatly asserts that “[t]he subject matter of ‘The Color Purple’ is the substance out of which all slave narratives are made – Oppression and the Process of Liberation” (1987, 3). This duality is made very clear in the most celebrated of all slave narratives, Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative...*, where the author declares, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” ([1845] 1986, 107). Inferred by this statement are the two main objectives of the slave narrative genre: to show the destructive workings of slavery as a system capable of turning a man, in Douglass’s case, into a slave, and at the same time demonstrate the human potential of the enslaved. Becoming a slave involved objectification, dehumanization and depersonalisation; becoming a free individual entailed reclaiming subjectivity and humanity. So a slave narrative is the story of how an individual first becomes an other, and, simultaneously, the story of how this other gradually becomes a subject. In the words of Martha K. Cobb, “[i]n the telling of the story, the narrator is the defined hero who goes through a series of tribulations before he achieves his shining goal, freedom, the central theme in works of this genre” (1982, 36). This is also the basic thematic paradigm in Walker’s novel, which shows how a woman can be oppressed and dehumanized, almost to the point of obliteration, and then proceeds to show how this same woman is capable of transformation, becoming in the end a self-confident and self-reliant individual with a firm sense of her own identity. So, while the slave narrative records through exemplification American slavery’s oppression of black slaves, Walker’s novel shows patriarchy’s oppression of black women: although, *de jure*, Celie is a free individual born more than fifty years after the abolition of slavery, her condition is, *de facto*, one of servitude, and her enslavers are black men.

Through its use of the slave narrative *The Color Purple* likens marriage to slavery.⁵⁵ In the early parts of the novel Celie is treated like chattel; she is not valued for who she *is*, she is measured and valued by the work she can perform and the roles she can fill. Her likes and dislikes are of no consequence to people around her, not even to herself. Celie has no right to pursue her own happiness and no right to develop her individual potential as a human being. She has been oppressed to the extent that she does not have much awareness of her own self. The scene that most obviously illustrates her status as chattel is when her father first shows her to her prospective husband, Mister _____. In this scene her father asks her to turn around, mutely, as if on display at an auction, while he defines her by listing her qualities: “She ugly [...] But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it” ([1982, 1993], 9–10). Celie is passed on from father to husband, like a slave would pass from one master to another. She has no say in matters herself and is treated like a domestic and sexual object, a commodity. As writes Michael Awkward, “when Albert asks Pa for permission to marry Nettie, Pa effectively transforms the suitor’s chivalrous antebellum act into a slave auction-like treatment of his older daughter” (1989, 140).

This market-place scene illustrates the novel’s dialogic double-voicedness; it evokes not only slavery but also in a more general sense the place and condition for women in the western world in a historical perspective. For a long time marriage was the only viable alternative in life for women in western societies, and a woman’s desirability in marriage depended not only on her personal qualities but also on what she could bring with her into matrimony in the form of wealth and property. A good dowry would make her more eligible. In *The Color Purple*, Mister _____ “closes the deal” when he hears that Celie comes with a cow. Being a woman, Celie’s only real option in life is to get married but through the allusion to the slave auction, marriage is compared to slavery and to a business transaction. She is the one being chosen or discarded; he is the one making the choice. Mister _____ is considerably older than Celie, a widower with many children to raise, and he needs a woman about the house. He is not a bad match since he owns his own house and property, and the implication is that she should consider herself lucky that a man of Mister _____’s standing would want to marry her. Unlike for a slave at a slave auction, beauty is normally a desired feature in a wife. Celie is not pretty and does not correspond to the idealized object of romantic love. And, besides, in spite of her young age, she is already “ruined.” Her lack of beauty and freshness

⁵⁵ In slave narratives marriage and romantic love mostly exist as lacunae, as conspicuous absences, since slaves had no right to marry and no right to form permanent emotional attachments.

clearly diminishes her value on the marriage market. Her sister Nettie, who is pretty and also quite scholarly, is the one Mister prefers, but she is not his to have; she is, almost literally speaking, not for sale at the moment. Mister's marriage to Celie is for him one of convenience, for her merely a continuation of a life in bondage. It is an arranged marriage and a business transaction.

Through the juxtaposition of slavery and marriage, Walker evokes early feminist discourse, traceable at least as far back as England in the eighteenth, or even seventeenth, century. As writes Kari J. Winter:

In the hands of feminists like Astell and Wollstonecraft, the ancient misogynist rhetoric comparing women to slaves was turned back against the claims of patriarchal ideology. During the nineteenth century, the comparison of women to slaves became pervasive in British and American women's writing and in the writings of progressive men like John Stuart Mill and Frederick Douglass. (1992, 2)

In *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) Mary Astell, one of the first English women that could be labelled feminist, wrote: "If all men are born free, how is it that all Women are born slaves?" (quoted in Keymer 2001, viii).⁵⁶ If the predicament of women in western society was likened to slavery it is perhaps not surprising that the genre of the slave narrative, a genre designed to reveal the cogs and wheels of slavery, can be compared to another genre, also concerned with the revelation of dark forces and with the deprivation of freedom and attempts at escape, namely the Gothic novel: "More than any other literary genres of the period, the female Gothic and slave narrative genres focused on the terrifying injustices at the foundation of the Western social order" (Winter 1992, 2). Both slavery and discrimination of women represented the workings of patriarchal power in society.

There are clear plot similarities between *The Color Purple* and a Gothic novel. Celie's marriage represents a domestic confinement that to some extent can be likened, not only to slavery, but to the entrapment of Gothic heroines. In Gothic novels, marriage for women is often presented as oppressive. Women need to be married off, often by fathers eager to form economically and socially acceptable alliances, to prospective husbands with similar aims. Women who for some reason cannot or will not perform the desired function are often domestically confined, either in secular settings – like castles and mansions – or in religious settings, like convents. In such novels, both fathers and (prospective) husbands are often presented as villains; unscrupulous and daemonic characters who will not shy from murder if this is deemed necessary. Women are thus presented as chess pieces in a patriarchal,

⁵⁶ Issues that justified such a comparison were for instance suffrage, property rights and the right to an education, rights denied women as well as slaves.

oppressive society bent on preserving and fortifying its economy and principles of honour. In comparison, Celie is not literally speaking locked up but her social marginalization as a poor black woman confines her to an oppressing domesticity that isolates her. We realize that being without friends and being without an outside person to talk to there is little she can do but endure the situation. Both her (step)father and her husband fit the role of Gothic villain, at least in the first half of the novel. In Walker's novel marriage and the family as institutions are not fulfilling spaces for women but rather arenas where male abuse of women can take place.

Walker's turn to the Gothic elements is a womanist appropriation of the genre. She uses features from the Gothic novel in order to disclose oppressive patriarchal structures in society. Thus she joins the company of several female authors in the Gothic vein. Male and female Gothic writers tended to take different views of female transgressions and patriarchal systems. Female Gothic writers, like Ann Radcliffe, "developed a genre that was particularly well suited to the historical situation; the main task of the Gothic heroine is to uncover and name the horrors that fill her world" (Winter 1992, 12). Similar processes of uncovering, naming and exorcising horrors can also be observed in later novels by female novelists participating in the Gothic genre, like the novels of the Brontës. Especially Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) uses the Gothic genre to present marriage as an institution that creates a space for oppression of women, and it reveals the power that a husband has over his family.

The Gothic aspects of Celie's story are visible also in the novel's use of the past. The incest that opens the story is partly a result of violence found in Celie's family history; her biological father was killed by white men who would not accept his success. When her mother remarried, the man Celie has known as Pa entered the family. Race and racial violence are thus the Gothic other lurking in the background of Celie's history – and of American history. Dark secrets of the past that impinge on and condition the present are close to a staple in the Gothic, and so are secret family relationships, revealed towards the end of the story and sometimes turning the plot around. A novel like Matthew G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) places incest and rape at the centre when Ambrosio kills his mother and rapes and kills his sister unaware of their biological relationship, and in Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) the identity of the heroine's biological father is essential for the outcome of the novel.⁵⁷ Uncertain biological relationships are also found in slave narratives where the master's sexual liaisons with and

⁵⁷ Surprising family relationships seem to be a common plot ingredient in early novels, not only in Gothic novels, but also in novels in the epistolary vein.

abuse of female slaves could lead to complicated incestuous relationships, and, even more importantly, miscegenation. Uncertain and unacknowledged fatherhood is a complicating factor in early English novels, slave narratives and in *The Color Purple*, and such obfuscated relationships are often the result of abuse of power or unjust social systems. The discovery of the identity of Celie's biological father is also important for the outcome of the story, although in a positive way, since the discovery of his identity means that her children are not the result of biological incest. So, ironically, the discovery of racially motivated violence in the past has a liberating side-effect in the present.

The use of the epistolary novel further complicates and strengthens many of the novel's themes. The dialogic juxtaposition of the epistolary novel and the slave narrative, perhaps the two most central genres in *The Color Purple*, is a surprising yet also eloquent move.⁵⁸ The two could be perceived as an odd match but in fact present an interesting liaison. Actual slavery has been abolished since the days of the slave narrative and women's situation has changed since the heyday of the epistolary novel but these genres and their contexts are nevertheless relevant to *The Color Purple*. In the words of Linda Kauffman, "*The Color Purple*'s relationship to the epistolary tradition is thus dialogic, for Walker simultaneously reaccentuates the traditional genre and transforms it by fusing it with another genre [the slave narrative]" (1992, 189). Parallels with the slave narrative, a genre primarily associated with black male slaves, situate *The Color Purple* in a discourse of race at the same time as it appropriates this discourse into a discourse of gender. Its use of the Gothic narrative and the epistolary novel, the latter in particular associated with white middle class women, situates it in a discourse of gender, at the same time as it appropriates this discourse into one of race.

Early epistolary novels present society as a dangerous place for a woman; it is a place where she runs the risk of being seduced, abused and subsequently cast out, although in these novels the threat of not marrying often looms larger than the threat of marriage.⁵⁹ In the early epistolary novels, marriage, although representing a perpetuation of patrilineal structures, was the only viable alternative for women, and a young girl's most important card as she "came out" in society was her virtue. A woman simply could not afford to have her image tainted by

⁵⁸ The epistolary novel could be described as the textual cradle of the modern English novel. Likewise, the slave narrative was the first genre of prose narratives to be written by Africans in the western world and has been called "the locus classicus of Afro-American discourse" (Baker 1984, 31).

⁵⁹ Since the illicit seduction of women often is at the heart of the plot in early epistolary texts, this genre abounds with ruined women in distress: the Portuguese nun; Heloise; Clarissa, and in *Dangerous Liaisons* no one is safe. Even in a modern novel often considered epistolary, Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), female characters like Offred are controlled and confined and also exploited sexually by a totalitarian regime.

any suggestions of inappropriate behavior or connections. Virtue was also one of the hallmarks of the literary heroine. As writes April Alliston:

Virtue is the international currency of eighteenth-century heroines, the only thing of value they are allowed to possess in their own right. But virtue is hardly a mere possession, or even an attribute of a heroine, but rather the signifier of her status and worth as heroine. It is what entitles her to claim the interest of her readers. For her publicly recognized function is to serve as a proper example, capable of passing on virtue to real people – that is, to readers. (1996, 85)

A woman's virtue is at stake in the early epistolary novels in English, like those written by women authors like Aphra Behn and Fanny Burney, and not to mention the epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson.

Richardson is a towering name in the context of the early novel in the English language and an almost inevitable reference with regard to the epistolary novel. Walker's rewriting of Richardson's epistolary novels has been pointed out by Valerie Babb (1986), Linda Abbandonato (1991) and Linda Kauffman (1992). Richardson's heroines were young maidens, innocent and chaste, and much of the plot of the novels concerned these girls' often desperate attempts to stay virtuous in the face of ardent males who sought to conquer their virtue. In *Pamela* (1740) the eponymous heroine is a humble servant girl relentlessly pursued by her master, Mr. B. Mr. B is reformed and finally settles on marriage with her, and Pamela is thus rewarded for her refusal to give away her chastity under morally improper circumstances, hence the novel's subtitle; *Or, Virtue Rewarded*. In *Clarissa* (1748) the heroine, who comes from a wealthy family, is eventually raped by her unscrupulous suitor Lovelace, and although she is a victim and not to blame for what happens she is irrevocably ruined. A happy ending is therefore unavailable to Clarissa, and she dies a tragic death while her tormentor regrets his deeds before eventually dying himself. In the words of Leslie Fiedler, "[t]he outward form of her victory is death" (Fiedler [1966] 1997, 86). Adherence to, and thus perpetuation of, society's norms through a respectable and proper marriage, or, becoming society's marginalized and tragic victim are the options available to hard tested heroines like these. "Samuel Richardson," writes Linda Abbandonato critically, "perfectly symbolizes white patriarchy" and "he tells the woman's story, authorizing her on his terms, eroticizing her suffering, representing her masochism as virtue and her dying as the emblem of womanly purity" (1991, 1107).

The Color Purple, through its affiliation with the slave narrative, represents a reversal of the plot of such epistolary works. In the first part of Richardson's novels the narrative tension arises from the threat of attempted seduction. In contrast, *The Color Purple* opens *in medias*

res after Celie has been raped by her father. She has already had her first child by him and the second is due to arrive. There has been no seduction, no pursuit, no struggle; just rape. The direct textual presentation of this act in Celie's own uncomprehending words unveils the act of incestuous rape and takes away the erotic lure that often accompanies the intimations of sexual transgression in the early novels in the English tradition:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. ([1982] 1993, 3)

Celie, in the opening of the novel, bears some superficial resemblance to the classic epistolary heroine in that she is a young girl soon of a marrying age. However, the differences are more striking. Celie is unloved, with the exception of the love of her sister, who leaves when they are still children, and she has never been taught self-respect and self-assertion. She has received no positive affirmation of her own identity. Instead, she has internalized the other's view of herself, that is, men's view of her, as ugly and stupid. The social context surrounding her yields her no true self-consciousness, to use the words of Du Bois. Nor has she had the adult world with its codes explained to her, and she has no awareness of the concept of virtue in a sexual sense. She has no awareness of her own sexuality, indeed, no awareness of sexuality as such, and is thus not conscious of the role of her own body in this context. In fact, she barely understands that she has been raped. The vernacular, graphic representation of rape above is the antithesis of the kind of language appropriate for an epistolary heroine. It seems to communicate licentiousness and vulgarity when in fact it communicates innocence, a far deeper innocence than the taught and somewhat contrived innocence of classic epistolary heroines à la Richardson and Burney. Consequently, Celie is unable to defend or protect herself; she cannot, like a proper epistolary heroine, defend her body and honour – neither with words nor with action, since she has no knowledge of either. She therefore offers no effective resistance. The violation of her body and womanhood is not the culmination of the narrative, as could be the case in epistolary and Gothic novels, but rather its inception, and narrative tension is not caused by the struggle to avoid this degradation. Another frequent ending to an epistolary novel would have been marriage, marriage as release and a safe haven, but this narrative pattern is also reversed in *The Color Purple*. Marriage follows rape in the early parts of the novel, not as the longed for end but as an unceremonial act of patriarchal abuse. Rape, the dreaded outcome of an epistolary novel, is not the end, and marriage, the hoped-for outcome in epistolary novels, is not the solution.

When read alongside Gothic novels and epistolary novels, slave narratives place virtue and motherhood in a radical light. Slave women were twice othered, which means they were in a more precarious situation than white women; they were both women and slaves. Their status as slaves seemed to nullify their womanhood as well as their status as human beings. Protection of the slave woman's body was a difficult task when the slave woman did not have status as woman. Femininity, and society's conventions for the behaviour of and towards women, as these are described by Niemtsov, were not valid for slave women:

[m]aturity for a nineteenth century woman required three victories: control of her own chastity; attainment of a successful marriage; and ability at marriage and mothering of her own children. Only those women who achieved success in these three areas – that is, women who remained virgins until their triumph as wives and mothers – were enviable women, female adults. (1982, 105)

Slave women's virtue, matrimony and motherhood were thus non-issues. Slave women's bodies were merchandise; they were the properties of their owners, also sexually. A slave woman's status as slave rather than woman made such sexual exploitation morally acceptable in southern slave culture. Discussing the canonical slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano/Gustavus Vassa and Frederick Douglass, Houston Baker, Jr. reads slavery in economic and mercantilist terms and concludes that mastery of "the rudiments of economics" (1984, 33) that conditions their life is a prerequisite for the self-earned freedom of Vassa and Douglass: "Like Vassa, Douglass has arrived at a fully commercial view of his situation" (48), knowing his money's worth, so to speak. This, however, changes when we look at narratives by slave women, conditioned by their lives:

The commercial dimensions of male narratives such as Vassa's and Douglass's do not exhaust the subtextual possibilities of Afro-American literary discourse. An analysis of an account by a nineteenth-century black woman demonstrates that gender produces striking modifications in the Afro-American discursive sub-text. This gender difference does not eradicate the primacy of such governing statements as "commercial deportation" and "the economics of slavery," but it does alter and expand their scope. (50)

The text analysed by Baker is the only solidly canonized slave narrative written by a woman: Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In the words of Kari Winter, "Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* articulates one of the most comprehensive analyses of gender and racial oppressions in all of nineteenth-century American literature. Thus it would seem reasonable for critics interested in the slave narrative genre or in nineteenth-century American women's writing in general to place Jacobs's text at the center of their work" (Winter 1992, 46). Jacobs' narrative is one of the most important intertexts of *The Color*

Purple, providing a connection between white and African American narrative traditions.⁶⁰ It represents a link between the slave narrative and novels in the sentimental tradition, like epistolary novels. What Jacob's narrative repeatedly evokes, in Baker's economic terms, is "the surplus value deriving from the fruit of the slave woman's womb" (1984, 51). In order to understand and control her own place in the economics of slavery, it is therefore necessary that she controls the harvest yielded by her body. So, whereas the women of Gothic stories and early epistolary novels reveal a struggle with the role assigned them as women within a patriarchal society, slave women struggled for their womanhood, indeed, for their very humanity. As Niemtzow phrases it: "She [Jacobs] could not be a successful woman, in white terms, any more than Douglass could be a successful man; yet, like him, she would not acknowledge her *a priori* failure. In the same way that Douglass as a slave is deprived of a manhood, defined as the ability to choose work and have a wife, Brent is deprived of true womanhood" (1982, 105).

In Jacobs's narrative, motherhood, virtue and male-female relationships as they are known from sentimental novels merge with the account of slavery and escape, and contribute to the narrative's structure. Or as Amy Levin phrases it, Jacobs' narrative is operating within two nineteenth-century discourses simultaneously, "the rhetoric of slavery on the one hand and the rhetoric of femininity on the other" (2003, 118). These two types of rhetoric impact each other. The image of the master pursuing his slave woman, almost like a Richardsonian Lovelace, makes it clear that Harriet Jacobs is more than mere chattel to him, she is more than just a casual slave woman he can possess; she is to him a desirable woman, and she puts up a struggle which is worthy a Pamela. However, in a highly unladylike fashion, Harriet Jacobs deliberately uses her body to fend off her own master who wants to set her up as his mistress. In order to protect herself and annoy her master she mothers children with another white man whom she believes to be more decent than her master. She thus uses the ideology of slavery against itself by using her body as a tool or as a commodity of which she is master. Like Jacob's narrative, *The Color Purple* participates simultaneously in a discourse of femininity and a discourse of slavery but given Celie's innocence and ignorance of herself, as well as about sexual and social matters in general, she cannot use her body and her position as a tool, like Jacobs. Only gradually and with help from other women does she develop the self-consciousness that Harriet Jacobs seems to be in possession of almost from the beginning.

⁶⁰ Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is often mentioned as a key text for reading Walker's novel, see for instance Gates (1988), but Jacob's narrative is in fact just as crucial.

Jacobs makes her virtue a returning issue in her personal narrative. For instance, she is well aware that her behaviour might be morally unacceptable for her audience, and she addresses the issue directly: “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” ([1861] 2001, 47–48). She also expresses her regrets concerning her own moral status: “My self-respect was gone! I had resolved that I would be virtuous, though I was a slave [...] And now, how humiliated I felt!” (48). Her master tries to convince her that her virtue as a slave woman lies in doing as her master bids her: “‘You can do what I require; and if you are faithful to me, you can be as virtuous as my wife,’ he replied” (63). As Harriet Jacobs makes abundantly clear, she knows what it means to be virtuous but her status as slave will not permit her to be so.

As Jacobs’ narrative shows, being a virtuous slave from the perspective of the slave owner was different from being a virtuous woman and a human being. Being a virtuous slave meant being an obedient slave. Being a virtuous woman and a human being implied being a subversive slave. This is an insight that slaves often reveal in their narratives. It is an insight that Celie arrives at rather late. In the early parts of the novel she has, as already stated, no awareness of virtue as sexual purity. She does, however, have an awareness of virtue as a moral quality, and to her virtue seems to equal obedience. She says in the very first sentence of her first letter to God that “I have always been a good girl.” It therefore makes no sense to her that her life is so ridden by degradation and misery, and she asks God to explain her life to her. It has been argued that this shows how the salvific power of good girl behaviour that Celie has been made to believe in proves ineffectual (Lewis 2012, 161). “A good girl” contributes to a perpetuation of society’s patriarchal norms. She needs to ask for whom she is being a good girl. A more complex understanding of the meaning and implication of “a good girl” is something she develops only later, when she becomes acquainted with “bad women,” and this knowledge is absolutely essential for her ability to liberate herself. It is an insight that reflects the moment in Douglass when he understood what it meant to be a slave: what would benefit himself was the opposite of his owners’ desires and needs.

Motherhood is a complicated thing in *The Color Purple*. In one sense it could be said that motherhood is a striking and significant absence in Walker’s novel. Again, Jacobs’ narrative provides both contrast and parallel. Jacobs’ text seems designed to reinstate what slavery has taken from her, i.e. her status as a virtuous and moral woman. Her escape does not much resemble the picaresque adventures of many slave narratives written by male slaves; “[m]ale slave narratives, indeed male autobiographies, are frequently stories of triumph in a

public sphere” (Niemtzow 1982, 104). Instead of being on the run or fighting her battles in the open, she is confined to domestic space for a larger part of her narrative. Partly out of concern for her children she stays hidden in the loft of her grandmother’s outhouse for seven years, out of reach of her children, who think she has escaped, but still in their proximity. She is able to observe and listen to them, and comforts herself in her misery that she is at least near them. The physical inertia enforced on her by her hiding leaves her crippled for life. This hiding represents extreme self-effacement, or a state of non-existence. Jacobs is neither free nor a slave; she is, literally speaking, outside society, and her confinement seems in a manner *writ large* to refer to both slaves’ lack of freedom and to women’s domestic confinement. Spatial confinement was, obviously, a feature of slavery, but images of confinement have also marked women’s writing in general in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and can be seen as an expression of the limited cultural options these authors had (Valerie Smith 1990, 214). The exchange of one limited space for another reflects Jacobs’ limited options as a slave woman. Her narrative establishes a picture of her as first and foremost a virtuous mother whose thoughts are constantly with her children, although circumstances force her to make choices highly unusual for a mother. As a contrast to Douglass, who bases his self-image largely on a display of intellect and who downplays the importance of, even the existence of, his family life, Harriet Jacobs proves her humanity by showing herself as a woman concerned about her virtue and her love and care for her children.

In *The Color Purple*, motherhood is not a deeply lamented absence as it is in Jacobs’ text; it is, in fact, not given particular emphasis. Unlike a woman and like a slave, Celie has no right to her own children, and her motherhood is not valued or even recognized as it is tainted by the taboo of incest. Celie has her children taken away from her before she can form a bond to them and she never seems to warm to Mister__’s children. Motherhood is problematic also for the other female characters: Shug’s children are taken care of by others without it appearing to bother her much; Sophia is, like a slave woman, removed from her own children and sentenced to take care of white people’s children, and Mary Agnes leaves her daughter with her parents because she needs to work. So, the novel’s female main characters are not taking care of their own children, and they do not prove themselves through their role as mothers. If we consider the mothers of the female characters, motherhood continues to be problematic. Celie’s own mother did not struggle to protect her own daughter, and when she discovered that Celie was pregnant she was angry with her instead of being supportive. This absence of operational and functional mothers is something not only found in slave narratives but also in many epistolary novels. April Alliston points to the

overrepresentation of absent mothers and of negatively portrayed mother figures, what she calls monstrous mothers (1996, 105). In Walker's novel women do not realize themselves through marriage or through motherhood and do not dream of doing so. *The Color Purple* revises and comes close to reversing the ideologies of its textual intergenres. Virtue, motherhood and marriage are not what define the characters. However, being deprived of virtue and the chance to take care of your children are signs of oppression and lack of freedom. The right to choose *not* to marry and the right to choose whom to love is something that comes with freedom: "For former slaves like Harriet Jacobs and for fictional former slaves like Toni Morrison's Sethe, freedom meant the right to love 'big,' entitlement to desire" (duCille 1993, 5). And Celie's desire is not found within the conventional sanction of marriage and family.

The two basic tenets of *The Color Purple*, society's oppression of (black) women and their capacity for self-liberation, as well as the topics marriage, virtue and motherhood, are also expressed and problematized through the presence of blues in the novel. The blues offers a perspective on women and sexuality that is both a repetition of and an alternative to what is found in slave narratives and epistolary and Gothic novels. In the universe of the blues, relationships between men and women play a central role, as they do in much popular music, but these relationships are much more dramatic and troubled than in most other popular musical genres: "Those aspects of lived love relationships that were not compatible with the dominant, etherealized ideology of love – such as extramarital relationships, domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships – were largely banished from the established popular musical culture. Yet these very themes pervade the blues" (Davies 1998, 3). Davies attributes this to what she sees as the realism of blues as a genre: "Fearless, unadorned realism is a distinctive feature of the blues. Their representations of sexual relationships are not constructed in accordance with the sentimentality of the American popular song tradition. Romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues" (23). Images of abused women, or women reduced to sexual objects, and violent, deceiving men are pervasive in the blues, and male blues singers' attitude to women is more often than not rather condescending. As Paul Garon puts it, "anyone who has listened to blues for even the shortest time cannot fail to note that a large number of the male singers' references to women are overtly demeaning or deprecatory" ([1975] 1996, 103). In epistolary and Gothic novels, romantic, idealized, chivalrous love exists although it is threatened by misogynist patriarchy. In the blues, love is always troubled and problematic.

The central female characters in *The Color Purple* to varying degrees reflect images of women often found in the blues, in their oppressed as well as their assertive roles. If we look briefly at Celie's character and situation, at least in the earliest parts of the novel, she appears very similar to the many abused female personas found in many blues, like for instance Bessie Smith's "Outside of That" and Ma Rainey's "Sweet Rough Man": She is married to a man who beats her, who is openly unfaithful, even brings his mistress home with him and orders Celie to care for her – a man who generally gets his way with her. The focus of the novel, as of the blues, is everyday domestic situations rather than idealized romantic events, which ties up with the blues' gritty everyday realism. It appears as if Celie in the beginning accepts that women should be submissive, although the situation makes her unhappy. However, Celie and Mister__ do not form a classical blues couple as there is neither love nor desire between them. Their marriage is a marriage of convenience for Mister and an arranged marriage for Celie; it is in other words a very "unbluesy" relationship. Celie is entirely unmoved by his skills as a lover, in fact sex with Mister__ revolts her. Consequently, Mister__'s infidelity causes no jealousy, no anger and no sadness. If anything, it causes a sense of relief as it means his attention is directed elsewhere.

Transgressive and subversive female behaviour, as found in for instance Ida Cox's "Bad Women Don't Get the Blues" becomes a relevant reference as Celie's character changes. Gradually, she comes closer to the image of the strong and independent blues woman who refuses to be downtrodden and humiliated, even to the image of the potentially violent woman with revenge on her mind, who will fight back with the oppressor's means. Her rage is sparked when she understands that Mister__ has been keeping Nettie's letters from her, and the image of Celie, razor in hand, is as if taken from a blues:

I watch him close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open [...] All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mister__ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. ([1982]1993, 102, 103)

She never acts on these impulses, however, and she never really becomes a defiant "wild woman," but she leaves her husband and gains her independence. The blues of the classical blues women often challenged the notion that the woman's place was in the home. Celie's enforced domestication, her role as daughter responsible for the needs of her stepfather and her siblings and later as wife responsible for her husband and his children, could be seen as part of the novel's social criticism. Domesticity, at least within a traditional family setting, is oppressive and offers Celie nothing that is sustainable. However, Celie does not really reject domesticity as such as much as she redefines it. In the end Celie has her own house that she

has inherited from her stepfather and where she can gather around her the people she cares for: “Oh, Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come home to” (208). It is a reminder of, and a revision of, the ending of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative where she laments that “[t]he dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own” ([1861] 2001, 156).

Sofia is in most respects a contrast to Celie, and her life follows a different trajectory than the lives of the other female characters. She starts out as an independent and dominant character, and in her relationship to Harpo she is in many ways the strongest and most masculine of the two. She is the most physically aggressive of all the female characters and will resort to violence if sufficiently provoked. Sofia reflects what has been mentioned as a recurring theme in the narratives written or told by ex-slaves and enslaved women: “the assertion of the black woman’s voice in interpersonal contexts, or in the vernacular, backtalk: verbal warfare, speaking up, speech acts of retort and retaliation against oppressors, talking back to challenge authority figures” (Moody 2009, 123), a quality sometimes referred to as sass (Moody, 123). This sassiness corresponds to the blues women’s often defiant attitude. Here Sofia is an interesting character since she is one of very few characters in the novel who interacts directly with white culture. As long as she moves within the frames of black culture she is a strong woman who will not let men dominate her, but when she tries using the same sassiness with white people and actually hits the mayor, she has crossed an inviolable line and is punished severely for her transgression. While the other women are gradually liberated, socially, financially and sexually, she ends up as a de-eroticized mammy-like figure who takes care of white people.

Shug is the female blues character *par excellence* in this novel, perhaps even in African American literature in general. As a blues singer she introduces blues in a very concrete way on the diegetic level of the text. Her character is explicitly grafted onto the history of the female blues singers of the 1920s and 30s. Her pet name, Sugar, is a song performed by Billie Holiday, and one of the songs on Shug’s repertoire is “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” which was performed by among others Bessie Smith, whom Shug also refers to as someone she knows, as an old friend. There can be no doubt that Shug and her way of life represents a contrast and an alternative to the domestic lives of Celie and the other women. Relating blues to the changes that manifested themselves in the lives of black people after slavery Angela Davies writes:

In three major respects, emancipation radically transformed their personal lives: (1) there was no longer a proscription on free individual travel; (2) education was now a realizable goal for individual men and women; (3) sexuality could be explored freely by individuals who now could enter into autonomously chosen personal relationships. The new blues consciousness was shaped by and gave expression to at least two of these three transformations: travel and sexuality. In both male and female blues, travel and sexuality are ubiquitous themes, handled both separately and together. But what finally is most striking is the way the blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom; it was this dimension that most profoundly marked and defined the secularity of the blues. (1998, 8)

Sexuality and mobility are two of the areas where Shug most clearly represents an alternative and brings about a change in the lives of the other female characters. To Celie, and her mother, sex is not associated with pleasure, but is something enforced on them. More than anything it is a curtailment of their freedom and represents a threat, the threat of pregnancy and of the strains of childbirth. Shug's relationship to sex is based on desire and pleasure and is not contained within the official sanction of marriage. Neither is it tainted by guilt or shame and she is verbally explicit about both sex and related negative feelings, like her jealousy of Albert's first wife: "I was mean, so wild, Lord. I used to go round saying, I don't care who he married to, I'm gonna fuck him. She stop talking a minute. Then she say, And I did, too. Us fuck so much in the open us give fucking a bad name" ([1982] 1993, 104). Here Shug reflects the lyrics of some of the classical blues women, which contain accounts of women's passions and sexual pleasures that would have been unacceptable in most other contexts.

There is a certain defiance about the way Walker's novel represents black female sexuality, evoking yet rejecting its implications as primitive and exotic. Shug is Celie's sexual mentor. Not only is she the first person Celie desires and enjoys being with sexually but she also teaches Celie clinically about her body as an erotic instrument. In these matters Shug represents a contrast to traditional western middle class feminine ideals, like chastity, fidelity and matrimony, ideals promoted by sentimental literature, such as the epistolary novel, Gothic literature, and even the slave narrative. Shug's bisexuality, a feature that ties her character even more firmly to the classical blues women, as well as Celie's homosexuality, are major points of deviance from society's norms and also from the conventions of genres like the slave narrative and the epistolary novel. Homosexuality, seldom presented and even banned from popular cultural and aesthetic expressions, is found in the blues. Gertrude Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" "portrays just such a 'wild woman,' who affirms her independence from the orthodox norms of womanhood by boldly flaunting her lesbianism" (Davies 1998, 39). Both Shug and Celie are open about their relationship and show no sense of shame or

remorse, not even Celie, who in the opening parts thinks of herself as “a good girl,” yet seems to be aware that she prefers women.

Shug clearly does not embody the view that the woman’s place is in the home. Whereas Celie is domestically confined and trapped within family structures, Shug is a free individual. She does not appear to be significantly hampered by the fact that her three children are brought up by her parents, and the idea of motherhood as an almost holy state is refuted by her character. However, Shug is not only the abrasive liberated blues woman content with a life of freedom; there is also a tragic note in her story, and Shug’s character has the potential of being rather sentimental and conventionally romantic. Because of her irreverent behaviour Shug is an outcast. She is rejected by her family and she is also a controversial figure in the eyes of religious people. Her mother resented her physical expressions of love: “One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say” (103). After she has her third child out of wedlock her parents turn her out. Albert is in fact the love of her life, and she would have liked to marry him if his family had found her good enough. Her unmarried state is, in other words, not something she has chosen. Spielberg’s film makes the most of these features. In the film her father is a preacher and we are shown how Shug longs for, indeed begs for, his forgiveness and acceptance, and how Shug, together with a group of women from the blues joint, marches, singing, into church, and how she, in the end achieves a reunion with her father. The effect is that it takes the edge off Shug’s character and makes her less subversive. It is an important point in the novel that Shug meets society’s ostracism with a raised head and without begging forgiveness. Shug is an individualistic character who will not be swayed to act against herself. In this sense she is more akin to the male slave narrators than she is to someone like Harriet Jacobs.

Shug challenges traditional gender roles and in some respects she could be said to convey traditional masculine features: “Appropriating the pose and aura of both the badman and the blues queen, exhibiting in its full glory the toughness of the blues, Shug assumes the role of bad(wo)man and blues(wo)man” (Wasserman 2000, 307). A similar point is made by Celie when she says that “Shug talk and acts sometimes like a man” (72). In her relationship with men, Shug, not the men, is the one who is coming and going. Mister ____, who in his relationship with Celie is oppressive and patriarchal, is submissive, even humble, in his relationship to Shug, and he stays home waiting for her to return to him when she decides to. It is rather rare in the world of blues that the woman is the one leaving and the man is left behind. It has been pointed out that travelling meant different things for men and women

since men typically were the ones leaving and women were the ones left behind. Even the train, a frequent symbol in the blues, meant different things to men and women and was a more complex symbol in women's blues. In women's blues the sound of the whistle was often a symbol of loneliness and fear of being left behind but could also express female wanderlust (Carby 1998, 475).

It is therefore not so easy to argue, as does Keith Byerman, that "[o]ne of the things that mark Walker's text as womanist is her insistence that these female capacities [love and magic] are a superior way of bringing about change" (1989, 60). The novel problematizes the very foundation of terms like feminine and masculine, male and female. Towards the end of the book, Celie, who long was under Shug's tutelage, acts as mentor for Albert. Albert observes and admires that "Shug act more manly than most men. I mean, she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia" ([1982] 1993, 228). Celie, however, corrects him by saying "What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it" (228). The question is whether the novel reverses traditional conceptions of gender and gender roles, placing women in masculine and men in feminine roles or whether it goes even further and dissolves such oppositions. The same question could be asked about its treatment of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The fact that no one responds negatively to homosexual relationships in the novel, that no one seems to find them subversive, reduces the binary opposition, and tension, between such categories. Such binary structures themselves appear to be questioned.

The deconstruction of categories and boundaries also takes place in the context of religion. Shug is Celie's mentor in religious matters. In the opening of the novel Celie has no conscious relationship to God and religion. God is to her yet another authority she relates to without questioning it. Gradually, with the help of Shug and Nettie her awareness grows and she moves away from religion as an institution towards a personal experience of spirituality that comes close to a kind of pantheism. Celie's image of God is denounced as that of a white man, as "the one that's in the white folks' white bible" ([1982] 1993, 166). Shug, as Celie's blues singer mentor, deflates the distinction between sexual and religious experiences. They are both associated with sensations of physical and emotional pleasure: "In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of you know what she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh" (167). The centrality of pleasure as a component of spirituality is hedonistic rather than puritan and has more in common with an irreverent blues spirit than with the bourgeois ideology of the classical epistolary novel and the slave narrative.

The presence of the Gothic and the epistolary novel in *The Color Purple* places the situation of Celie and the other female characters in a wider context of women's history in the western world as these genres carry with them as textual memory a number of texts thematically similar to Walker's novel. Celie's story is thus not just the story of southern American women, and the novel's intertexts not just black American texts. Nettie's letters and their account of the Olinka women further broaden the novel's scope to include third-world women. The slave narrative repeats the theme of oppression and strengthens the theme of women's oppression by men by likening Celie's plight to that of a slave. It also brings in the element of race, and while the two previously mentioned genres underline the novel's theme of oppression of women, the slave narrative brings in the theme of white cultural imperialism and oppression of black culture and people. These again meet in Walker's novel, and in the blues, where women are the victims of both patriarchal oppression of women and white culture's discrimination of black culture. The slave narrative and the blues are the two discourses that offer paths to freedom; the slave narrative through its portrayal of subversive actions and the blues narrative through its irreverent disregard for established norms. Together the different genres show the working of Bakhtinian dialogue; the points on which they converge fortify these elements in Walker's novel, while the differences they each add to each other open the novel up and expand its scope.

Husbands and bad men: The oppressor and his world

As mentioned, Walker received much criticism for sustaining white culture's image of black men as violent. However, her representation of black men is much more complex, which becomes evident from the genres employed in the text. In Gothic novels, darkness and violence are always at the heart of the narrative in some form or other – sometimes in the shape of supernatural elements, other times embodied by characters of this world. The Gothic villain can be relentlessly brutal and evil and a despot,⁶¹ but despite his literally speaking powerful personality he often represents something that transcends his own individual character: “the personal concentration of the forces of violence tends also to be an embodiment of larger forces in another sense: mammoth social institutions whose power transcends that of any individual. The church, the courts, the Inquisition, or the family are such institutions” (DeLamotte 1990, 17). This pattern is even more pronounced in the slave

⁶¹ It should be mentioned that *he* can be a *she*. The Gothic novel also presents villainous women, like Mathilda in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, who has sold her soul to the devil and, being thus already fallen, functions like an Eve, tempting the monk Ambrosio to follow her path. This is, however, not the most typical scenario.

narrative; here it is not the individual perpetrators and oppressors that are in focus as much as the social system they represent. In a slave narrative, slave owners both are and are not held directly responsible for slavery; on the one hand, they support and perpetuate the system by adhering to its laws, while, on the other hand, they are mere pieces in a system larger than themselves. In Walker's novel, the male oppressors Mister___, his father and Celie's step-father are not really developed as individuals. They are fathers, husbands, and even sons. Their individual characteristics are reduced and their domestic role or function is accentuated.

One textual element that underlines their general roles in the novel is the omission of their names from the text. Naming was also an issue in slave narratives, where slaves often were given their owners' surnames. There was power invested in the act of naming. Likewise, it could be said that there lies power in the ability to withhold names. Celie rarely mentions their birth names; men are "misters," followed by an open line that reminds us of the absence of their names.⁶² Firstly, the designation "Mister" signals masculinity, but it also signifies on the title *master*, and thereby on slavery. "Mister___" thus represents masculinity and authority, which is what men are to her. The significance of the open line denoting the absence of their personal names is less clear. The open line is a *present* absence, or a textually represented absence, and as such it must be intentional; Celie must be aware of the fact that she is omitting something. Celie is the author of most of the letters and since this is her way of representing the men in her life textually the question becomes why Celie does this. It is tempting to conclude that it is due to the power that writing invests her with; in her writing she has the power to withhold their names and thus erase a part of their personality and identity, like they have denied her a meaningful identity. This would be an intentional act, which would explain the present absence indicated by the line. A weakness with such a reading is that Celie is hardly assertive enough in the earliest sections of the novel to think in these terms and perform such a subversive act. Alternatively, Celie's omission of names could be seen as a symptom of submission. When Shug refers to Albert by his birth name Celie is surprised because she has almost forgotten it: "Albert who?" she says before she remembers that her husband's name is actually Albert. To Shug, who is his equal, he is Albert, whereas to Celie, who is his victim and servant, he is Mister___. It is only at the end of the novel, when Celie has found her identity and freedom that she refers to her husband by his Christian name. There is, however, a problem with this interpretation too; it would then have made more sense if their absent names were actual absences, the line should in other words merely have been

⁶² One exception here is the man she thinks is her father. She calls him Pa, as a child would, but Pa is also a designation that signals masculinity and superiority.

omitted. As it is, the line is most literally a conscious underlining of an absence. Regardless of these diegetic uncertainties, on the level of discourse the effect is that their individual identities are blurred and made less distinct. They are not individuals as much as they are men. Mister has lost face, in more than one sense of the phrase.

Celie is not the only victim in this novel and her situation does not appear singular. The novel shows that the domestic oppression of women by men is a pervasive social structure.⁶³ We are given the impression that Celie's stepfather, her husband and his father again, are not individual exceptions in a society where men normally treat women like equals. Most of the female characters are to some extent abused or deprived of their freedom. Celie's mother is being exploited by her husband (the man Celie thinks is her Pa); Sophia describes how she has had to fight off several male members of her family; Squeak is submissive and evidently used to male dominance; even Shug has had to make sacrifices to achieve her relative freedom. Likewise, all of the central male characters in the novel are violent abusers, with the exception of Harpo. The novel shows us that this is a behaviour passed on from father to son within a patriarchal hierarchy. This is illustrated by Old Mister's visit to Mr. ___ and Celie. Old Mr. chastises Mr. ___ for keeping a wife *and* a mistress and also for the way the farm is run. The hierarchical structure is also shown between Mister and his son Harpo. Initially Harpo is quite differently inclined than his father. He likes to cook, he likes to take care of the children, and he does perhaps not really mind being dominated – at least he falls in love with a woman who is decidedly bossy and who could also be described as slightly masculine. In the Harpo-Sofia household, Harpo prefers the indoor chores while Sofia prefers working in the fields. The gender roles in their relationship are in other words reversed.

Through the character of Harpo the novel shows early on that black men are not innately and pathologically violent and abusive but that this is a role they are expected to conform to. We see clear parallels between patriarchy and slavery; between sexism and racism, something which becomes particularly clear if we compare this situation in *The Color Purple* with an account from Douglass' *Narrative*. Douglass aims to show how slavery as an ideology has the power to transform people and how it is not only a destructive element for the enslaved but also has a morally corruptive impact on the enslavers. His mistress in Baltimore, Mrs. Auld, was a kind and decent person until she was placed in the morally unhealthy situation of being another person's owner: "Under its [slavery's] influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like

⁶³ This is a phenomenon found in more of Walker's novels, like her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970).

fierceness” (Douglass [1845] 1986, 82).⁶⁴ There are similarities between Mrs Auld and Harpo. His relationship with Sofia is fine as long as he does not feel the need to dominate her. However, Harpo admires the control his father has over Celie and he is told by his father that he should use violence in order to achieve such dominance. When he tries to execute his prerogatives as husband to chastise Sofia he is the one who ends up being beaten, by her. When he tries to gain weight to become more physically imposing he ironically ends up looking pregnant, that is, he is feminized. The novel here uses comedy to ridicule patriarchy⁶⁵ in a carnivalesque manner that inverts established roles. Patriarchy, as well as slavery, is a cultural and political construction. Men have no natural reason to oppress women and white Americans have no natural reason to dominate African Americans.

In Walker’s novel, the traditional family is an institution where patriarchy and sexism rule and where women as a consequence are oppressed. Sexism is the equivalent of racism, and relentless patriarchy the equivalent of slavery. In fact, patriarchy is one of the pillars of the family as an institution. Simultaneously, the violence and oppression that serve to maintain the hierarchical family structure are also forces that destroy families by creating profoundly immoral situations. Celie’s children are the result of patriarchal violence, of paternal incest, and since this incest is an act of transgression her children must be removed. In his narrative Douglass shows how miscegenation, another socially transgressive act, created immoral family conditions on the plantations where fathers ended up selling their own children in an attempt to get rid of the problem they represented. The breaking up of families was one of the atrocities and instances of dehumanization that the slave narrative presented as an argument against slavery. Again it is the immoral abuse of power made possible by social institutions like slavery or patriarchy that is under attack.

Alice Walker’s male characters are closely related to many of the male personas found in the blues, something that adds a folkloric element to them, but she also sharply revises such characters. In the blues there is no attempt at “a naming or analysis of the social forces responsible for black men’s propensity (and indeed the male propensity in general) to inflict violence on their female partners. The blues accomplish what they can within the confines of their form. The political analysis must be developed elsewhere” (Davies 1998, 33). This is to

⁶⁴ In Douglass’s narrative this is eloquently dramatized. In other narratives, like that of Solomon Northrup, it is explicitly stated: “It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slave’s back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years” ([1853] 2000, 206).

⁶⁵ Harpo has a well-known namesake in Harpo Marx of the Marx Brothers, which further underlines the comic potential of his character.

some extent also the case in *The Color Purple*, and possibly the reason why its presentation of black male violence in the family has been seen as so controversial. The novel does not in any explicit way attempt to analyse the background and reason for this violence. In the sections taking place in the US, the novel rarely looks beyond the black community and therefore does not explain the roots of this violent misogyny. Its explanations can be sought in a prevailing hierarchical and patriarchal ideology of masculinity passed on through generations, and by giving symbolic significance to the conflictual meetings between black and white culture. Paul Gilroy contends that “an amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the boastful centrepiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated” (1993a, 85). The few places in the book where meetings between black and white culture are depicted appear to confirm this view. Violent intrusion from white culture disrupts the idyll and success of Celie’s parents. In a story that evokes post-slavery southern society in an almost archetypal way, told like a fairy tale starting with “once upon a time,” Nettie recounts how their father and uncles were lynched by a white mob who perceived their success in business as a threat to their own businesses. Financial success and independence are not available to black southern men; they can be lords of their own barnyards but are relegated to marginal and humble positions in society as such. Mister __ would not stand a chance if he, like Sofia, would go out and challenge white society and its standards. An exaggerated masculinity is instead used to oppress black women. However, these incidents do not figure very prominently and neither Albert nor Celie’s Pa are depicted as having conflicts with white society.⁶⁶

The bad black man is not just the product of white racism but a recurring figure also within black culture, and in this context badness, a propensity for violence and unlawful behaviour, is not unequivocally seen as negative, and Walker’s novel could be read as a criticism of such heroic black masculinities. Some of these bad men found in or associated with the blues have attained almost mythical status. An example of this is Stagger Lee who has become the topic of numerous poems, novels, dissertations, and not to mention blues lyrics. Such “bad men” could be seen as subversively heroic figures representing individualism, anti-conformity and, ultimately, freedom. In other words, as semi-heroic archetypes, a kind of counter-cultural figures. Some of the same features in the 1920s came to

⁶⁶ In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, however, it is made very clear that Grange’s wayward behaviour is due to helpless anger over a life he cannot control and bitterness towards white people who prevent him from controlling it. Even Brownfield’s behaviour is explained in such terms, although he develops into a character so relentlessly and incorrigibly vile that there is no way his behaviour can be condoned; “His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled. His rage could and did blame everything, *everything* on her” ([1970] 1985, 55).

be associated with the black musician, who in turn came to be associated with the morally and socially liberated American: “This position was reinforced by the black musician’s association, especially in Chicago, with the gangsters who ruled the nightlife [...] This underworld flavour of his life became subject to social myth, and the spirit of resistance in his music became all the more relevant to whites” (Sidran 1995, 56). These musicians’ irreverence regarding musical as well as social conventions granted them subversive and heroic potential.

In the first part of Walker’s novel, which depicts the oppression of women, domestic violence seems omnipresent and men’s attitude towards women is typically demeaning and deprecatory and thus to a great extent mirrors the misogynist attitudes often found in the blues. However, Walker’s violent men are not musicians and they completely lack the heroic aura of freedom and individualism that often accompanies such characters in blues and folklore. They are domesticated and are not travelling men or free men who come and go and leave their family behind. After all, the reason Mister__ marries Celie is that he needs someone to take care of his children after his first wife died. The black male blues hero is completely absent in Walker; it is not possible to read anything even remotely heroic or counter-cultural into this novel’s presentation of black male violence and transgression. Walker is thus more radical than other authors who would seem likely comparisons, like Toni Morrison. Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), also portrays male violence and incest. However, even though Cholly is not a musician he is described as having a musician’s mentality: “Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free” ([1970] 1994, 125). By portraying violent black men in a domestic setting rather than portraying them as fortune seeking travelling men, and, by resisting an allegorical presentation of them as such, *The Color Purple* shows these men’s social dysfunction. Both men and women in Walker’s novel operate within a domestic setting dominated by patriarchal ideologies; men are the oppressors and women the oppressed – there are no traces to be found of a romanticized black male masculinity.

The different genres communicating in *The Color Purple* render the novel’s violence and oppression more complex than the impression that first meets the eye. In the written literary genres of the epistolary novel, the Gothic and the slave narrative, oppression and violence are represented by a patriarchal hegemonic culture abusing its power while seeking to sustain itself. This oppression of the weak by the strong is to some extent reflected in Walker’s novel. Celie is abused by those stronger than her, namely her father and her husband. However, although the novel does not dwell on this we sense that there is a frame

outside the story that we are reading in which her oppressors do not have the power to oppress but are perhaps themselves oppressed. This does not excuse their behaviour but makes its reasons more complex. The badman of the blues and his association with countercultural heroes enhance the violent man's oppressed state but when this character is read against genres like the slave narrative, the epistolary novel and the Gothic, his heroic stature is simultaneously diminished and his character portrayed as vile. In *The Color Purple* the badman is discredited and subsequently tamed and domesticated, especially Mister ____, who has taken up sewing at the end of the novel.

3. Language and Communication: “*You better not never tell nobody but God*”

Language as object

In various ways, the discursive strategies of Walker's novel accentuate the power embedded in language and communication. Most instances of communication, oral as well as written, are related to issues of oppression or liberation as well as to issues of gender and race. It could thus be argued that the novel's literary form and narrative strategies underscore its basic themes. In this context the genre of the epistolary novel, its formal features as well as its history, is essential. As writes Ann Bower: “Examining a genre that presents its protagonists in the midst of discourse also enables us to understand the ways language and writing encode power” (1997, 8).

The epistolary novel could be described as the textual cradle of the modern novel in the English language. In Janet Altman's words, “epistolary narrative is primarily a product of that formative era in which the novel staked out its claim to status as a major genre” (1982, 5). It initiated a modern literature focussed on character psychology but became outmoded as narrative discourse developed and grew more refined and complex.⁶⁷ However, the structure of an epistolary novel can be an intricate affair. Epistolary discourse frequently involves issues of deceit, manipulation or persuasion, with potential to oppress as well as to liberate. Most obviously, letters can be vehicles of verbal manipulation in the sense that their writer seeks to sway or deceive his or her addressee with words. For instance, in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) there is an intricate web of epistolary plotting, deceit and

⁶⁷ When Jane Austen published *Sense and Sensibility* as early as in 1811 she made letters carry an important part of the story, the novel contains 21 letters, but did not make them the narrative mode of the text. It is, however, speculated that the first version of the novel, *Elinor and Marianne*, was in the epistolary form (Bray 2003, 1). Seen in a historical perspective it could be argued that the letter was gradually “phased out.”

seduction⁶⁸ where the most cunning characters abuse their power and position as well as their way with words. However, in an epistolary novel the letter is not only of significance as message but also as object: “The interest of much epistolary fiction derives neither from the letter’s suitability as a vehicle for narrative, nor from its ability to mirror the soul; instead, the letter ‘exceeds’ its role as narrative vehicle and becomes itself the object of interest. Letters are kissed, wept upon, eaten, beaten, held to the bosom, and caressed in place of the lovers who sent them” (Beebee 1999, 50). Letters in an epistolary novel, as well as the diary in a diary novel, play a dual textual role: they are synonymous with the novel’s form and language; they *are* the novel, but they are also language as narrative objects;⁶⁹ physical pieces of communication that can be possessed, passed on, stolen or held back. As Helen Constantine sums it up in her introduction to *Dangerous Liaisons*:

A letter is a chameleon-like entity. It may in turn be an auto-portrait, a weapon against an enemy, an instrument of mediation or manipulation, an internal monologue, a personal diary, an unconscious revelation of character, a threat or an instrument of ridicule [...] They [letters] can be hidden, torn up, kissed, enclosed with other letters, copied out, returned, dictated or left unread. (Constantine 2007, xvii-xviii)

The letter is, in other words, a versatile and highly meaningful narrative building block.

In Walker’s novel the letter as object and potential as narrative building block is exploited to the full. Nevertheless, epistolary form as it appears in *The Color Purple* has received a lot of critical attention and has thrown some critics off balance. Marjorie Pryse argues that Walker merely pays lip-service to the epistolary tradition and its early, formative texts,⁷⁰ and, although acknowledging the importance of epistolarity, Michael Awkward comments that “a significant portion of Celie’s text resembles a diary novel more than it does an epistolary novel” (1989, 148). Partly because of Celie’s lack of an epistolary interlocutor the argument has been made that *The Color Purple* could be seen as a diary novel. Michael Awkward, for instance, argues that Celie “is writing not in order to illicit a response from a reader but, rather, simply to record the events of her life” (1989, 148). It cannot be denied that Celie’s letters to God resemble diary entries, because they are read by no one and written to no person, and it could even be argued that writing to no one represents an effacement of self. However, they are *not* written as diary entries; they *are* addressed to someone, although not to a person. Diaries are not written with the desire to communicate with someone; their author

⁶⁸ That is, plotting, deceit and seduction take place via the letters. In other epistolary novels the acts of writing and reading letters as such do not contribute significantly to the plot; letter writing is merely a means to report what has taken place outside the letters. This is the case in, for instance, Tobias Smollet’s *The Expeditons of Humphry Clinker* (1771) and, mostly, in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (1778).

⁶⁹ It can thus be said that the letter is an object within its own discourse.

⁷⁰ Marjorie Pryse, quoted in Linda Kauffman (1992, 188).

does not intend them to be read.⁷¹ Letters *are* written with a desire to communicate, and the absence of a recipient in an epistolary situation emphasizes the writer's loneliness and isolation. In the words of Linda Kauffman, "[t]he letter is thus a tangible measure both of the heroine's isolation and of her desperate need to communicate" (1992, 186). Writing her letters to God, Celie desires to communicate but has no person with whom she can communicate – neither orally nor in writing.

In *The Color Purple* the presence, or absence, of letters as physical objects reflects patriarchal oppression of women but also their self-emancipation. Mister ___ does not himself contribute to the epistolary exchange, he is not himself a writer, but he nevertheless conditions it by oppressing Celie and keeping her in domestic confinement. He thus perpetuates her father's order that she speak to no one, which is what causes Celie's letters to God in the first place. The only sentence in the novel that is not framed by a letter is the opening line spoken by Celie's father: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.*" The sentence hovers over the text and sets it in motion, thematically as well as formally, demanding obeisance but also representing a potential challenge. Secondly, epistolary exchange between Celie and her sister is disrupted because Nettie's letters to Celie are intercepted, stolen and hidden by Mister ___, who keeps them as spoils in his secret place under the floorboards. Mister ___'s intrusion is an exercise of patriarchal control. As a result, the natural epistolary sequence is broken, something which is reflected in the structure of the novel: the first half of the novel consists of Celie's letters to God, letters she is permitted to write but which can be read by no one; the second half consists of letters from Nettie to Celie, letters Mister ___ intercepts but which Celie still reads long after they have been received; and Celie's letters of response to Nettie, letters she is not allowed to write and that remain unread.

The Color Purple illustrates that in epistolary novels there is often little distance between form and content since the very act of writing the letters can form a central part of the plot and the novel's structure reflects the rhythm of epistolary exchange. Absent letters or letters out of sequence can be meaningful components in the novel. The normal progress of epistolary exchange is that letters follow each other alternately, but in epistolary novels this order of events is more often than not broken and complicated, thus reflecting the novel's central conflict. For instance, Mariana in *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) never receives

⁷¹ At least, this is typically the case. In the cases of well-known people, diaries are sometimes composed with a view to future publication. However, in a diary novel, it is most often the diary as a private and intimate form that is in focus.

an answer to her amorous letters to her cavalier,⁷² so that her letters become an account of the rise and fall of her unrequited passion; in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* "the unopened letter, the intercepted letter, the forged letter, the deceitful letter, letters that arrive too late ... letters to parents written while still in their house" (Altman 1982, 25–26) make the novel "a tragedy of indirect communication" (25). In *The Color Purple*, as in many canonical epistolary novels, the intercepted letters as well as the consequences of this interception in a very concrete way illustrate how communication can be controlled and manipulated, and how language can be used to control and manipulate. The letters are amenable to representations of language and power since they, literally, illustrate who owns the word and who allots the right to speak and write. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's father and Mister__ regulate communication and thus also interhuman relationships, and subversion of this regulation is necessary in order for Celie to become free.

The reason for Mister__'s interception could be two-fold. He was attracted to Nettie, made passes at her, but was rejected. In this context, her letters can represent extensions of her person; they could be seen as erotic substitutes, and the stealing of them are attempts at possessing her against her consent. In other words, Nettie's letters could represent her presence metonymically.⁷³ This metonymic presence of the letter is quite common in epistolary novels where the letter as object often takes on a symbolic significance that far exceeds its message⁷⁴ and functions almost like an extension of its author – primarily in the sense that it contains his or her thoughts but also in the sense that it can bear the physical imprint of its author in a sensorial way. In *The Rape of Clarissa* Terry Eagleton writes that "[t]he letter is that part of the body which is detachable: torn from the very depths of the subject, it can equally be torn from her physical possession, opened by meddling fingers, triumphantly blazoned across a master-text, hijacked as trophy or stashed away as spoils" (1982, 54–55). In *Clarissa* the letters are literally speaking attached to her body as she is

⁷² The authorship of this book is a curious history. It was first published anonymously in Paris in 1669 as *Les Lettres Portugaises*. It was for a while assumed that the author was the Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforada and that the letters were written to her French lover, Noël Bouton, Marquis de Chamilly, which means they were assumed to be actual letters and not works of fiction, translated into French. Later, the letters have come to be attributed to Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne Guilleragues and read as fictional (Kauffman 1986, 94). However, Myriam Cyr's *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (2006) attempts to reestablish Mariana Alcoforada as their author. The true history of the letters remains uncertain.

⁷³ Altman sees the letter as functioning on two figurative levels, metaphoric and metonymic, where metonymic means that the letter as such as a physical entity stands for the person who wrote it (1982, 19).

⁷⁴ For instance, when Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons* returns his bundled-up letters to the présidente de Tourvel, at her request, pretending to end their relationship, "it is less the content of the letter than its physical aspect (the letter as object rather than the letter as message) that serves as catalyst" (Altman 1982, 18). The actual physical and visual appearance of the letters makes her unable to consider them a termination of their relationship.

keeping them under her belt, but this can also be understood metaphorically. The letter thus, potentially, has erotic undertones and a purloined letter can be seen as an acquisition of something intimate and private.⁷⁵ Another interpretation of Mister ___'s interception of the letters is that he withholds them out of jealousy in order to put an end to the relationship between Nettie and Celie; Nettie rejects him but lavishes her affection on Celie, a person whom Mister regards as inferior to himself. By preventing them from communicating he punishes Nettie for rejecting him and could also be seen as scorning Celie contemptuously for not having the power to reject him.

The disrupted communication in Walker's novel should not be seen as the result of an unfortunate engagement with the epistolary genre, but rather as an exploitation of the genre's narrative potential. It is used to show how men silence women, but also how they attempt to prevent female bonding. The latter is a revision of a common feature of epistolary narratives. Joe Bray writes that "epistolary narrative of course depends on the separation of its correspondents, and the theme of the public world keeping lovers apart is a commonplace trope" (2003, 44). The purloined letters in Walker's novel are not love letters; it is not the love of lovers that is kept apart, it is sisterly love. Female relationships are pivotal in *The Color Purple* and Mae G. Henderson sees the epistolary genre as suitable in Walker's novel because it enhances the role of women's friendship. She quotes Janet Todd, who argues that "the fictional friendship between women grew out of the idea of the confidant – the correspondent in the epistolary novel" (Henderson 1989, 68.) However, it could also be argued that the epistolary novel is a suitable form in *The Color Purple* because the disruption of the role of the epistolary confidante is put at the service of showing patriarchal oppression; Celie lacks a correspondent. In Walker's novel, female relationships do not grow from epistolary discourse but from social interaction between Celie, Shug and the other female characters. This community of women has an empowering and liberating potential, which is illustrated in a concrete way in the retrieval of Nettie's letters. The letters are never voluntarily returned to Celie; with the help of Shug she steals them back. The withholding of the letters and stealing them back are among the novel's most important events, symbolically as well as literally.

It is not only the absence of an actual flesh and blood reader that reveals Celie's predicament but also the non-dialogic quality of her discourse. It is difficult to feel the presence of the addressee in them. According to Altman, "[w]hat distinguishes epistolary

⁷⁵The power embedded in a piece of intimate writing is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter." In this story the letter is at the centre of the plot.

narrative from these diary novels, is the desire for *exchange*. In epistolary writing the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and to contribute as such to the narrative” (1982, 89). The personal letter is a dialogic genre where the writer of letters responds to someone else’s words, and in this response also tries to predict the ensuing words of the other: “The *I* of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his ‘address,’ is always relative to that of his addressee” (Altman 1982, 119). Terry Eagleton further underscores the dialogic nature of the letter:

In the very heart of anguish or confession, the letter can never forget that it is turned outwards towards another, that its discourse is ineradicably social. Such sociality is not just contingent, a mere matter of its destination; it is the very material condition of its existence. The other to whom the letter is addressed is included within it, an absent recipient present within each phrase. As speech-for-another, the letter must reckon that recipient’s likely response into its very gesture. (1982, 52)

Celie asks God for help in her first letter but otherwise her letters to God do not reveal awareness of an interlocutor. Celie’s discourse could not be described as dialogic. However, this does not disqualify her letters as letters. Rather, the genre of the epistolary novel is employed creatively in Walker’s novel to enhance its thematic issues: Celie is unable to predict the words and response of an other in her letters to God because she is forced by circumstance to write to an other whom she does not know.

Epistolary communication could not only be seen as an example of dialogic discourse but also as a reflection of the antiphonal structure of call and response found in African American cultural expressions, such as the blues. In *The Color Purple*, however, epistolary exchange becomes a curious series of monologues, and the call and response mechanism is broken. The democratic and communal potential of these communicative forms are thus curtailed. This has been seen as a flaw, for instance by Michael Awkward who argues that “[d]espite their various merits, however, Celie’s early letters do prove problematic from an Afro-American expressive cultural standpoint. Instead of corresponding to the communal inclinations of Afro-American expressivity, these letters represent an individual’s attempts at self-help” (1989, 144). However, Celie’s early letters are only problematic if one wishes to read the novel as an unequivocal affirmation of black communal forms. More importantly, the collapse of what Awkward calls a communally inclined expressivity establishes black men’s oppression of black women as a central theme from the very opening of the novel. At the same time Celie’s early letters show how she manages to wrest something usable from this oppressive situation; namely written self-expression, which will eventually contribute to her liberation.

Silencing and its discontents

Celie's first reaction when she discovers that Mister ___ has been withholding the letters is silent rage: "Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp" ([1982] 1993, 103). This silence symbolically reflects the intention behind the silencing and the interception, but the discovery of the letters also fuels a rage in Celie that makes her able to overcome both her own silence and Mister ___'s scheming. In *The Color Purple*, silencing and the ensuing writing are double-voiced dialogic tropes that convey the novel's cultural and aesthetic double-consciousness. This is the situation that forms the starting point for the novel, and it is a situation that evokes issues pertaining to gender as well as race. Celie as a poor black southern woman is oppressed and silenced by patriarchal sexism grounded in racism. In this silencing and consequential writing, the epistolary novel and the slave narrative sound simultaneously: Celie as a silenced and oppressed African American who nevertheless brings to mind the presence of the slave narrative whereas Celie as an oppressed and publicly silenced woman as writer echoes the epistolary novel. Again, the novel's genre polyphony facilitates references to race as well as gender; to the history of African Americans as well as the situation of women in the western world in a historical perspective.

Issues pertaining to gender and voice have been prominent in modern scholarship on epistolary literature, both as concerns the context for the production of the texts and narrative structures. Women in western societies were silenced and often not allowed to or expected to speak in public contexts. They also had to struggle for their right to professional literacy; they could write, but should not make their writing public: "to be virtuous was to be modest, self-effacing, above all not talked about, and most certainly not published" (Goldsmith 1989, vii). Therefore, the personal letter and the diary, genres that could be termed domestic writing as they were most typically associated with domestic settings, were seen as suitable feminine forms. Indeed, the art of writing personal letters was typically associated with women, an association that had an impact also on epistolary literature: "Since the sixteenth century, when the familiar letter was first thought of as a literary form, male commentators have noted that the epistolary genre seemed particularly suited to the female voice" (Goldsmith 1989, vii). Similarly, Carolyn Steedman contends that it seems like an assumption of literary history that "somehow letter writing is just natural to women, that they have always been better at it than men" (1999, 121). According to Ruth Perry, one reason for this was that the personal letter was seen as "a format that required no formal education" and that did not deal with literary problems; "letter-writing had always been thought of as an accomplishment rather than an art" (Perry 1980, 17), and the same went for the diary. However, the artlessness of such

genres as personal letters and diaries could be contested. Writing about popular published diaries of the eighteenth century, among these the diaries of Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Podnieks states that what “they have in common is essentially everything that we assume diaries not to be: comprised of daily entries written up en masse, aesthetically designed, and revised – in short, contrived” (2000, 24).

The diary and the personal letter, then, could be seen as spaces of self-expression available to women even in oppressed situations. Discussing the role and function of the diaries of nineteenth-century women, Catherine Delafield says that “[t]he ‘hidden interiority’ of the ostensibly private diary could allay unease about self-representation and performance; and yet within its pages a woman could challenge patriarchy in an attempt to recover her self-worth” (2009, 18). In a curious way the diary thus works both to sustain and subvert social conventions; it both conceals and reveals: it is “a vehicle for women’s private authorship which can challenge the historical prohibition against self-representation allowing ‘the woman to remain hidden while providing her with a place to actualise her interiority’” (Delafield, 17).⁷⁶

Celie’s letters, especially her letters to God, are just such sanctioned yet uncensored and private spaces where she can re-present herself – but where she at the same time represents, and retains, her solitude and oppression. Her letters to God, and to her sister Nettie, are silent texts. In one sense, her letters to God represent the silencing imposed on her by her husband; her experiences do not become known to anyone, her voice is not heard, and patriarchy is therefore not threatened. Yet, these letters are her spaces, they are not intruded upon by Mister__ or anyone else, and provide her with room for self-reflection and development. Celie has no public arena where she can speak or write to the world and make herself seen and heard. On paper, though, her thoughts and experiences become visible, also the ones written to God, written in a sense, to nobody. On the page, this God, this nobody, becomes a somebody, and her words are visible, at least to herself. In her letters, she, too, becomes a somebody. It is, in other words, a paradoxical form of empowerment.

When looking at epistolary, actual as well as fictional, it seems clear that it was a discursive space allotted to women by established society. It gave them a “voice,” yet also thus denied them a voice. In the context of the epistolary novel, the issue of gender and voice is complicated. The rise of the novel as well as the letter was associated with women. Thomas O. Beebee writes that “[d]uring the eighteenth century, novel, letter and letter-novel became

⁷⁶ Partly quoting Linda Anderson in “At the Threshold of Self: Women and Autobiography,” published in *Women’s Writing: A Challenge to Theory*, 1986, edited by Moira Monteith (Brighton: Harvester Press.)

feminized literary forms. Women were considered doubly responsible for the novel: both as writers and as readers” (1999, 118). At the same time, as a response to the popularity of the lettered woman, by the eighteenth century the female voice had also been appropriated by male authors and had become “a popular and innovative narrative ploy” (Goldsmith 1989, vii)⁷⁷ in novels written by men. Although there exist notable early female authors of epistolary fiction,⁷⁸ the most famous authors of epistolary novels during the genre’s heyday were men. The principal narrators in their novels, however, were women. As writes Ruth Perry, “[c]onsidering that men still dominated the world of popular literature it is remarkable how many of the central characters in these novels are women” (1980, 20). It was the woman’s voice “that was wanted, heard and consumed” (Steedman 1999, 121). Or, perhaps one should say the “woman’s” voice since what met the reader in books written by men was “male ideas of what it means to write as a woman” (Goldsmith 1989, vii).

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel about women who write, mostly to women, written by a woman, and it revises and partly reverses concerns related to gender and language in the epistolary novel. Mae G. Henderson argues that “*The Color Purple* subverts the traditional Eurocentric male code which dominates the literary conventions of the epistolary novel. As a genre, the English epistolary novel, a form invented by men writing about women, embodies male control of the literary images of women” (1989, 67). This subversion of the male presentation of the female voice that Henderson refers to points outside the text, to the author of the novel; the place of the male author has been filled by a female author who lets her female heroine speak for herself in her own style. It becomes particularly evident since Walker inscribes herself onto the margin of the text as “A. W. Author and medium.” This seems to imply a more authentically female voice than those constructed by male authors. However, epistolary discourse is conventionally regarded as a feminine space; as private and informal, intended only for one specific addressee. The characters Celie and Nettie are thus articulating themselves in a discourse already coded as feminine, and from this point of view expectedly suitable for the articulation of women’s experiences. Writing in their own personal and characteristically black colloquial style they

⁷⁷ Some of the most famous canonical epistolary novels are written by men but use the device of a feminine epistolary voice. Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa* have already been mentioned. Other examples are *Les Lettres Portugaises* (1669) and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782).

⁷⁸ With her popular *Love-Letters Between a Noble Man and his Sister* (first volume published 1684) Aphra Behn is often credited for writing the first epistolary novel in the English language. Fanny Burney, author of *Evelina* (1778) and other works, is another notable example of a female epistolary novelist.

revise the meaning of femininity in this context. Walker thus both continues and revises the genre of the epistolary novel.

Another revisionist element is the absence of a male voice. With the exception of her father's order at the novel's opening, all male voices are contained by the fictional female voice; they are rendered through a feminine voice in a letter written by a woman. In many epistolary novels the heroine is involved in a verbal exchange with a male interlocutor, often one that tries to seduce her, or she is writing to a female confidante about men. Some of the most canonical examples are Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*, Richardson's *Clarissa* and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Notable examples of classic epistolary novels without male voices exist. *Letters from a Portuguese Nun* is such a one. However, in this novel the words of the heroine are constantly preoccupied with and reflecting the significant present absence of her cavalier. Celie's and Nettie's discourse is only sporadically preoccupied with men, present or absent, although Celie in particular labours under their oppression. Despite the importance of the novel's opening line, Walker's novel could be seen as a silencing of the male voice. The written voice and the act of writing belong to women; there are no male narrators and no men who write.

The aspect of race is reflected in *The Color Purple*'s relationship to the slave narrative, the other principal genre in the novel.⁷⁹ "As so often in epistolary narrative...Celie's writing springs from an injunction" (Kauffman 1992, 187), and so did the slave's writing: "The slave narrative arose as a response to and refutation of claims that blacks *could* not write" (Davies and Gates 1985, xv), and the slave's writing was more dramatically subversive than the writing of women who tried to deconstruct and revise permitted literary images of women. Literacy and slavehood were incompatible conditions as slaves were meant to be kept illiterate and ignorant about the world at large. Precisely for this reason, learning to read and write became an important objective for some slaves. Many slave narratives give an account of how the slave subject desired to become literate and how he had to approach this project in a clandestine way. The most well-known account is found in Frederick Douglass' recollection of how he metaphorically speaking stole literacy from white people by tricking white boys to unwittingly teach him to read, but also other slave narrators, like Henry Bibb, devote considerable space in their narratives to the issue of literacy. James Olney presents a "record

⁷⁹ The sounding of that slave's voice and glimpses into the slave's mind were major reasons for the audience's fascination with the slave narrative. This could be seen as parallel to the fascination with the woman's voice and the woman's mind that an epistolary novel provided access to. Both the slave and the woman are in these context an exotic other not frequently represented in public discourse.

of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write” (Olney 1985, 153) as one of twelve criteria that define the genre.⁸⁰ Celie, too, is a silenced and oppressed individual, who writes as a response to her silencing and her oppression. She, too, writes herself into presence.

The dialogic coexistence of epistolary address and slave narrative inevitably draws attention to writing both as product and process, and thereby also to the character(s) cast as writers. Celie, being a young, poor, oppressed, and virtually illiterate black girl, is not the obvious choice as the author of letters. In the words of Linda Kauffman, “[a] poor, black, barely literate epistolary heroine seems to defy novelistic realism” (1992, 186). The heroines of epistolary novels were typically literate bourgeois women with plenty of time and opportunity on their hands for writing letters. Furthermore, the epistolary novel appeared at a time when letter writing was all in vogue; the “classic period of the epistolary novel was also ... the heyday of the familiar letter” (Keymer 1992, 1). The letter and the writing of letters thus appeared natural and commonplace in these novels, as it did in the real world surrounding them. For this reason, it could be argued that epistolarity takes literacy for granted, that is, it treats it as a commonplace, whereas in the slave’s narration literacy is an extraordinary event.

In *The Color Purple*, the act of writing is drawn attention to because letters and the activity of writing letters do not appear to have a natural place in the life of its main character. The image of Celie as the woman writing a letter,⁸¹ as lettered woman, is difficult to bring to mind. It could be said that epistolary fiction dramatizes the acts of writing and reading (Tamar Katz 1989, 188), and so does the slave narrative, but the irony in Walker’s novel is that reading and writing are made conspicuous for the very reason that so little attention is drawn to these activities; it is not explained to us how Celie is able to write so well, and in the story she is not shown as sitting down to write. If we pursue a strictly realistic reading of Walker’s novel the epistolary form appears ill chosen. This is bell hooks’ assessment of the text:

Taken at face value Celie’s writing appears to be a simple matter-of-fact gesture when it is really one of the most fantastical happenings in *The Color Purple*. Oppressed, exploited as laborer in the field, as worker in the domestic household, as sexual servant, Celie finds time to write – this is truly incredible. There is no description of Celie with

⁸⁰ This differs somewhat in male and female slave narratives: “Female as well as male, slave narrators desired and strove for literacy. Nonetheless, being literate never saved women fugitives from the burdens of slavery, racism, or sexism and they knew it. Whether they found literacy at best a weak reed on which to lean – whether they were ultimately more cynical or perhaps more realistic in confronting the economic realities of the racist and sexist societies in which they lived – women narrators do not give central significance to the acquisition of literacy” (Morgan 1994, 82).

⁸¹ According to Carolyn Steedman, “[i]n the very late seventeenth century the woman writing a letter was observed in extraordinary detail by a number of painters” (1999, 116).

pen in hand, no discussion of where and when she writes. She must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction – that as dehumanized object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining. (1993, 293)

It is true that epistolary novels are self-referential in the sense that they contain frequent references to the acts of writing, reading and waiting for letters. However, it is not correct to say that *The Color Purple* tries to hide Celie's writing from the readers' view in order to conceal the weakness of its form. Although there may not be as many references to the act of writing letters as there are in many other epistolary novels, there can be no doubt that we are meant to be aware of the fact that Celie is writing letters. Also, the novel does suggest that Celie is taught to read and write by her sister Nettie, although it does not dwell on it. The following scene places the teaching of literacy in a feminine and domestic context: "She be sitting there with me shelling peas or helping the children with they spelling. Helping me with spelling and everything else she think I need to know" ([1982] 1993, 17).

The discrepancy between character and role draws attention to itself, and thus also to the identity of the writer and the act of writing as such. A lower-class person cast as writer is not extraordinary in the history of the epistolary novel.⁸² For instance, in Richardson's *Pamela* the eponymous heroine did not belong to the letter-writing bourgeoisie, but was, paradoxically, "a lower-class girl, and a servant who wrote well" (Steedman 1999, 124). However, in Walker's case the parallel to the slave narrative is clear, and our reactions to Celie as a writer of letters are likely to be similar to those slave narrators and other early black writers evoked in their audience; we are astonished, or at least puzzled, by the fact that Celie is an eloquent writer as it appears out of character for her to be so. For a poor black girl who has received little education, spoken and not written language appears to be the natural form of communication.⁸³ However, in the course of Walker's novel we get used to Celie as the author of written epistles and it bothers us increasingly less that she may not fit the canonical image of a woman writing a letter. In Bakhtinian terms, "[t]here takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness – an otherness that is only

⁸² The perceived lack of correspondence between the content or nature of the letters and the life and character of the author is also one of the reasons why it has been commonly held that the Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado, could not have written the letters. It was questioned how such letters could be written in a convent by a nun who had received little or no instruction and had little knowledge of the world (Cyr 2006, xix).

⁸³ In this context it is important to again bear in mind the ironic reason for Celie's writings; she writes down what is happening to her in letters to God because her husband has forbidden her to confide in anyone.

contingent, external, illusory” (Bakhtin 1981, 365). In Walker’s novel, the poor, black, semi-illiterate woman becomes writer.⁸⁴

Silencing and its verbal reactions reveal the power of language and communication; the power to marginalize and oppress as well as the ability to empower and liberate. In *The Color Purple* they work like double-voiced tropes that resound with the voices of the epistolary novel as well as the slave narrative; with the history of western women as well as of slaves, and, most specifically, with the history of African American women who could be seen as doubly oppressed.

Orality and written language

The relationship between oral and written language is another double-voiced dialogic feature of Walker’s novel. Celie’s written word conjoins oral and written traditions: the epistolary novel, the slave narrative, and the blues. The slave narrative, the ur-genre of African American narrative, introduces a tension between the spoken and the written that has been a feature of much African American literature ever since (Rushdy 2004, 99). Gates identifies what he calls the trope of the Talking Book as a feature characteristic of much African American literature. This trope

reveals, rather surprisingly, that the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self. (1988, 131)

This could be seen as a dialogic relationship between the spoken and the written word, where the latter also contains the sound of the former.

The ante-bellum slave narrative was a continuation of the oral confessions, or reports, delivered by (ex-)slaves at abolitionist meetings. At these meetings they were given an allotted space in which to give their oral testimony. As write Davies and Gates:

The slaves’ writings were often direct extensions of their speeches, and many ex-slave narrators confess that their printed texts are structured formal revisions of their spoken words organized and promoted by anti-slavery organizations. This, then, provides an ideal opportunity for critics to study the complex relation between oral and written forms of narrative, and especially the trope of orality itself which remains central in much contemporary black fiction. ([1985] 1990, xvi)

⁸⁴ As the author of a text written in the vernacular Celie is in good company. Huck Finn, too, sets out to write a book in an oral and socially discredited form of English.

Not all of the published slave narratives were written by the formerly enslaved subject. Some were “as told to” narratives transmitted orally from the slave to a scribe. In order to confirm the authenticity of both narrator and narrative, many assurances were made that the text on the page was essentially identical to the one told by the slave. *The Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863), for instance, opens with the claim that “her simple language has been adhered to as strictly as was consistent with perspicuity and propriety” (Old Elizabeth [1863] 1988, 3). There is, however, little about the language in such narratives that brings to mind the spoken voice, something which reflects the supremacy of written over spoken language.

In a slave narrative, literacy is associated with humanity and morality, and it could be argued that this genre thus accepts the premise that writing is superior to oral language. Not surprisingly, the nexus between the slave’s self and the written form of language was of great importance since mastery of correct, standard, written English was evidence not only of the slave’s intellectual abilities but even of his or her humanity: “The slave narrative represents the attempts of blacks to *write themselves into being*” (Davies and Gates [1985] 1990, xxiii). The narrative and the language were thus proof of the author, and in this precarious situation much was at stake for the subject who sought to carve out a place for himself in the world through linguistic representation. There was no room for experimentation with narrative and language; verisimilitude and reliability were primary concerns. In his *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1849), Bibb turns the tables when he includes a letter from one of his old masters, making it clear that it has been represented in its original condition replete with orthographical and grammatical mistakes. His former master’s inability to write correctly becomes proof of his moral depravity.

Epistolary discourse is written discourse⁸⁵ but it could be argued that an epistolary novel often contains an echo of spoken language. Altman even contends that “[a]s written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model” (1982, 135). Written dialogue is a substitute for spoken dialogue; the participants in an epistolary exchange write because they for some reason are unable to speak to one another. Spoken language is thus ironically the preferred form in an epistolary novel. Bakhtin also observes a closeness between the epistolary novel and oral communication. He sees the epistolary branch of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novel as “characterized by psychology and pathos” (1981, 396). This

⁸⁵ Although Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), which could be seen as playing with the epistolary genre, consists of recordings of the main character Offred’s voice, of representations of something audible rather than something visible.

type of novel is chiefly concerned with “the narrowly personal and family spheres of life” (396) and for this reason closer to a conversational type of language.

The dichotomous relationship between written and spoken language that can be inferred in the slave narrative comes undone in *The Color Purple* as the text intertwines oral and written language in two ways: Firstly, through its oral form of writing, and secondly, through the complementary existence of speaking and writing. The oral quality of Celie’s written language becomes a double-voiced feature in which epistolary discourse meets the slave narrative. It may seem out of character for Celie to sit down and write, but the language of her writing is credibly her own and a reflection of her character. The letter is a piece of personal writing and epistolary language offers rich opportunity for depicting personality (Altman 1982, 174). For instance, an early writer like Tobias Smollett “discovers a possibility unique to the letter – that of characterization by orthography. Win’s letters are full of spelling errors, which convey not only her dialect (as would the same language in a play) but also her illiteracy” (Altman 1982, 174–175).⁸⁶ Celie, too, is characterized through her language, and to some extent through orthography, but her writing does not so much signal deficiency in the field of writing as it is signals orality. *The Color Purple* is to my knowledge the only epistolary novel written in an oral form of language. In contrast to the slave narratives, Walker’s novel rejects standard English as the only adequate form of written English. As a contemporary author, Walker does not have to prove herself as artist through mastery of a standardised written language. Neither does Celie, since some of her letters are written to God and the other half to her sister; to someone like herself. Celie does not need to acquire the language of the other in order to assert herself, whether this is the language of white dominant culture or the language of the male. On the contrary, she displays verbal virtuosity and eloquence writing in her own black vernacular form of English. As writes Abbondonato, partly quoting Audre Lorde,⁸⁷ “[a]ware that ‘*the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house,*’ Alice Walker has fully confronted the challenge of constructing an alternative language” (1991, 1108). Celie’s language is a very good illustration of Bakhtin’s contention that “[t]he speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*. A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance” (1981, 333).

⁸⁶ Win (Winifred) is a servant character in Tobias Smollett’s picaresque epistolary novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).

⁸⁷ Partly quoting Audre Lorde in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” published in *The Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table.)

Celie's voice represents a folk voice, a feminine voice, an uneducated voice, but also, through implication of genre, the voice of writing. In this context, *The Color Purple* revises both the slave narrative and the epistolary novel, which each in its way based itself on the primacy of written language while containing allusions to speaking. While standard, written English was formative and liberating for the slave, Celie's oral vernacular language should be seen as liberating because of its independence from regulations and conventions, and thereby from the kind of discourse that throughout history has worked to define, objectify and oppress black people and women.

One should bear in mind, though, that her lack of formal education and virtual illiteracy are symptomatic of her double oppression as a black woman. Her grammatically and orthographically incorrect English is thus symptomatic of the same. As writes Lauren Berlant: "*The Color Purple* opens with Celie falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use. Her own limited understanding, her technical insecurity, and her plain sense of powerlessness are constructed in contrast to the powerful discourses that share the space with her stuttered utterances" (1993b, 214). Celie does not write like this because she has chosen to, like she does not really *write* because she has chosen to; she writes like this because this is how she *can* write. However, it is a triumph that her own black, vernacular language, arising from her black female experiences, works as an adequate mode of written expression.

Epistolary writing has been seen as an example of *écriture féminine*: "Epistolary fiction, with its fragmentation, subjectivity, abandonment of chronology, repetitiveness, associative and sometimes seemingly illogical connections, and, most of all, unconventional use of language, embodies the definition of *l'écriture féminine*" (Campbell 1995, 335). Epistolarity is a discourse not typically characterized by control but rather by passions and excessive emotions. An early formative example is *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*: "They indeed had such a phenomenal impact on both sides of the English Channel that to write 'à la Portugaise' became a veritable code for a certain style – written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress" (Kauffman 1986, 95). Modern epistolary novels are less typically love stories colored by romantic passions. Discussing the epistolary style as used by contemporary women authors, especially in post-colonial cultures, Elizabeth Campbell claims that "[t]his writing is emotional, angry, radical, and markedly different in style and form from that of the dominant culture" (1995, 335). Narratives that reflect a feminine style of writing, *écriture féminine*, could be seen as subversive because they undermine the conventions of western narrative (Campbell, 335.)

Celie's letters at least partly confirm the principles of epistolary writing as a feminine form of writing as defined by the concept of *écriture féminine*. They appear uncensored and emotionally transparent; confessional. This even to some extent goes for Nettie's letters. When she confesses her love for Samuel she does so using a lover's language: "... I love him bodily, as a *man*! I love his walk, his size, his shape, his smell, the kinkiness of his hair. I love the very texture of his palms. The pink of his inner lip. I love his big nose. I love his brows. I love his feet. And I love his dear eyes in which the vulnerability and beauty of his soul can be plainly read" ([1982] 1993, 201). However, these letters are not driven by passion or anger, although they at times express both feelings. The vernacular, non-standardized, personal version of English reflected in Celie's letters could to some extent be seen as a black *écriture féminine*, subverting white as well as masculine expressive forms. However, it could also be argued that neither Celie nor Nettie dwell sufficiently on their own emotions for their letters to be wholly coloured by them. *The Color Purple* tells a very dramatic story from personal angles, but close reading of the text reveals that its tone of voice is surprisingly controlled, especially in Nettie's letters. This element of narrative evokes the slave narrative. The slave narrative confirms rather than contests the conventions of western narrative. Slave narratives were known for their linear chronology, perspicuity, clarity of style and presentation, and, albeit containing sentimental passages, their demonstration of their author's ability to reason and argue logically rather than being carried away by emotions – all this despite the profoundly disturbing nature of their subject matter. Its subversive power was embedded in its element of control. In other words, it conveys narrative principles that form a contrast to epistolary narratives.

The vernacular orality of Celie's letters invites considerations of other vernacular oral forms, most notably the blues. The blues is one of the most important genres in Walker's novel, although more on the level of content than form. Unlike the slave narrative and the epistolary novel, the blues was an expression by and for common people and it was not written and performed with a middle-class audience in mind. Neither was it intended to open doors for the performers into established society, as the general assumption was that the blues belonged to the lower social strata.⁸⁸ This is reflected in the simplicity of its form as well as in its language; when performed by black artists its lyrics were invariably sung in black colloquial oral language. The blues represented considerable subversive power. Being in

⁸⁸ Even early blues artists were stars and known also by a white audience but their popularity rested on their subversive difference from middle-class culture.

some way associated with the blues, for instance through showing a predilection for its aesthetics, was socially stigmatizing for blacks who wanted to enter the middle class.

A comparison with the blues places Celie's letters in the vernacular tradition; like the blues, her letters are short, lyrical, vernacular expressions of personal suffering. Their seemingly uncensored nature can also be aligned with the blues' explicit treatment of subjects normally considered unsuitable for artistic representation, such as domestic violence and sexual pleasure and desire. The blues represents a vernacular aesthetics that forms an alternative to mainstream aesthetic norms, the way Celie's letters, with their speakerly qualities, represent an alternative epistolary aesthetics.

The complimentary existence of writing and speaking is another example of the interdependence of oral and written language in Walker's novel. Both forms should be seen as important in the context of Celie's development and liberation. This is reflected in Celie's two formative relationships with women; her relationship with her sister Nettie, which is epistolary and takes place on paper, and her relationship with Shug, which is an actual physical relationship. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., comparing *The Color Purple* to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, argues that

Walker represents Celie's growth of self-consciousness as an act of writing. Janie and her narrator speak themselves into being; Celie in her letters writes herself into being [...] Celie, like Janie, is an absence, an erased presence, an empty set. Celie, moreover, writes in "Janie's voice," in a level of diction and within an idiom similar to that which Janie speaks. Celie, on the other hand, never speaks; rather, she writes her speaking voice and that of everyone who speaks to her. (1988, 243)

Like a slave narrator and like an epistolary heroine, Celie writes herself into being. Perhaps because it is not her natural form of expression, writing offers Celie a distance that facilitates communication in particularly difficult situations, as in the episode where Celie discovers that Shug has taken a young boy lover: "I went and got a piece of paper that I was using for cutting patterns. I wrote her a note. It said, Shut up" ([1982] 1993, 211). Celie continues her communication with Shug on paper all through this episode although she and Shug are facing each other physically. In one of her letters Nettie writes that "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your English was" (110).⁸⁹ This could be seen in the context of epistolary discourse's ability to both reduce and create distance. In *Dangerous Liaisons* the présidente de Tourvel writes to Valmont because "[t]he letter affords her a greater distance and perspective from which to justify herself. A correspondence is less dangerous than private

⁸⁹ Which tells us that Celie resorted to writing as a natural source of expression even before Nettie left.

conversations” (Altman 1982, 16). The psychological distance offered by the written form is confirmed by the content of her letters. Some of Celie’s letters to God contain graphic sexual confessions, like the detailed descriptions of her exploration of her own body. It may come as a surprise that Celie, who until this point has been oblivious of her own body and sexuality, and who is sufficiently unfree to “feel like us be doing something wrong” ([1982] 1993, 70) after this episode, is able to give a detailed account of it in a letter to God. At this point Celie has not yet developed a view of God as an impersonal force in nature but still sees him as the old white bearded man. Writing appears to offer Celie a distance that reduces her sense of shame and therefore makes it easier to express herself. She does not stop writing her letters to God after she has found an intimate conversation partner in Shug, which signals that writing fills a function not covered by speaking.

The written epistle offers Celie a space where her humanity can unfold, which prevents her from being merely an abused object. Even in the first parts of the book, when she is objectified and oppressed by her surroundings and deprived of most liberties, she remains an agent and a subject because she is the narrator of her own story. Though she does not control her own life, she does control what she puts down on paper. A slave narrator had to adjust his writing to the expected audience, while Celie, writing to God and no real person, has no such needs to adjust her style.

Celie’s growth is also a result of interpersonal relationships and oral exchanges, and in this context her relationship to Shug is essential. Some critics, like bell hooks, see this, and not writing, as the most important formative element in Celie’s life: “[w]riting then, is not a process which enables Celie to make herself subject, it allows distance, objectification. She does not understand writing as an act of power, or self-legitimation. She is empowered not by the written word but by the spoken word – by telling her story to Shug” (1993, 293).⁹⁰ While it could be argued that Gates downplays the importance of oral communication in *The Color Purple* by not differentiating between written report of spoken language and written language not spoken, it could also be argued that bell hooks mistakenly allots no power and significance to the act of writing and written language in Walker’s novel. She sees objectification and distance as obstacles to the development of self. Speaking as well as writing; the communal forms as well as individual contemplation, contribute to Celie’s growth of consciousness and improvement of social situation.

⁹⁰ This evokes Janie’s act of telling her story to her friend Pheobe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Connections are often observed between Hurston and Walker.

In *The Color Purple* it is clear that the spoken and the written are dialogically related. The written word always contains a trace of the spoken word and vice versa. This brings out the inherent tension between oral and written language in the genres of the epistolary novel and the slave narrative in a manner that could be termed revisionist. This dialogic relationship between oral and written language works to accentuate the power embedded in language and its complex gender, race and class. Celie is operating within both spheres, the written as well as the oral.

Public versus Private Discourse

The dialogic co-presence of the slave narrative, the epistolary novel and the blues creates a tension between the public and formal, on the one hand, and the private and intimate, on the other; between what is censored and carefully constructed and what is immediate and spontaneous. This tension functions like a double-voiced feature where the strategies of the slave narrative and the epistolary novel contrast with each other, and where the blues works as a kind of third alternative. In this manner, Walker's novel underscores and problematizes the writing of self, or self-expression in a wider sense, as well as challenges the readers' expectations.

The slave narrative, as other autobiographical genres, represents a discourse that can be described as extrovert in that the representation of self is intended for the public; the subject is deliberately writing him- or herself into visibility. The strength of the slave narrative was its authenticity and accuracy; it was a lived testimony of the atrocities of slavery. Nevertheless, the "I" we meet in a slave narrative is a careful and deliberate construction – not necessarily in the sense that the story told is untrue, but in the sense that a process of selecting information and material precedes the writing. It can therefore be assumed that there is a distance between the personal and the public "I" of the narrator. In Douglass' narrative, for instance, there is virtually no mention of his wife and family.⁹¹ Charles Heglar, in his introduction to *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, writes that "Douglass all but eliminates any discussion of his wife so that he may present himself as a lone male escaping slavery and becoming the model of a black self-made man" (Heglar 2001, ix). In other slave narratives this aspect of life is more in focus, like in the narrative of Henry Bibb, but even in Bibb's story family is sacrificed as he leaves them behind to pursue his freedom and independence in the North. Instead of dwelling on such personal aspects of his

⁹¹ Douglass met his wife in 1837, but they did not get married until after he had escaped one year later.

life, Douglass, like Benjamin Franklin, constructed a narrative self that suited his cause and made him a model and a representative for his group. His personal development, attainment of freedom, and progress in the world are due to his own cunning and resourcefulness. He promotes many of the same ideals as Franklin, i.e. self-reliance, thrift and a sound morality, which is typically the case with ante-bellum slave narrators. Thus it could be said that autobiographical writing for Douglass and for other slave narrators, entailed distance and objectification.

Douglass' learning to *read* is given considerable space in his narrative, but there are no signs that the *process of writing* the narrative contributed significantly to his own sense of self. The narrator does not tell the story of his or her own life in order to come to terms with it or create order out of chaos, but rather with the intent of presenting himself like an able person. It is writing as product, not as process, that is accentuated, and the slave narrative is very much an example of anterior narration; the development from slave to man precedes his writing. There is considerable distance between the narrating self and the experiencing self. This means that all through his narrative the readers are confronted with his two selves: Douglass the slave character and Douglass the free-man narrator. The discrepancy resulting from a running juxtaposition, and eventual merger, of these two selves is an important rhetorical feature of the slave narrative.

In contrast, the epistolary genre is typically associated with the private rather than the public sphere (Bower 1997, 3) and could thus be described as an introvert genre. Familiar letters were private documents of communication typically intended for one recipient only, and in an epistolary novel each letter is intended to be read by only one character. We as actual readers look over the shoulder of the writer and thus become privy to his or her secrets and confessions. Literary letters are the diegetically private made public only at the level of discourse. Because epistolary communication was perceived as intimate and personal it was assumed that it came close to representing the unmediated consciousness of the authors of the epistles. This would make it the forerunner of stream of consciousness, or, the stream of consciousness of the eighteenth century: "Certainly the reader was meant to believe that the characters in such epistolary fictions were transcribing uncensored streams of consciousness. Thoughts are seemingly written down as they come, without any effort to control their logic or structure" (Perry 1980, 128). The private and intimate is enhanced by the short gap between experienced and narrated time. This is what Richardson in his introduction to *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1763) referred to as "writing to the moment." The impression created by letters is that they are written almost simultaneously with the

occurrence of the events⁹² and we thus follow the development of their author(s) as the correspondence proceeds. This view has later been contested. Except possibly in cases of automatic writing, writing as such necessarily entails distancing and objectification, and writing about the self thus becomes an objectification of the self. There is thus more distance between the narrating and the experiencing self than one might think. However, the writing of letters is not to the same extent as a slave narrative anterior narration.

In Walker's novel the formality and distance of the slave narrative is countered by the intimacy and immediacy of epistolarity. To some extent at least, Celie is writing to the moment; she records her oppression as she is experiencing it. In the first parts of the novel she is writing her submissiveness, and there is all through the text little distance between Celie as narrator and as character. Consequently, she cannot, like the slave narrators, tell her story with the benefit of hindsight, commenting analytically on events as she records them. Her process of liberation is recorded not only in the content of her letters but in her very language. If we compare her first and last letter we see for instance how the questioning predominant "I" of her first letter is replaced by a more assertive "we" in her last letter. Celie is no longer alone, but is part of a community. Her addressee also changes, marking the progress of her development. Her letters written to God record her most submissive phase; her letters written to Nettie reveal her growing self-awareness and determination to change her life, and her last letter written to a limitless "Dear Everything" marks the completion of her liberation. This change of addressee is a common and logical device in the epistolary novel: "The epistolary medium, more than the theatre, continues throughout to use the confidant in his most characteristic capacity – as receiver (rather than transmitter) of *confidences*. Perhaps for this reason, a change in confidants can often signal an important moment in the epistolary hero's development" (Altman 1982, 54). The moment Celie starts writing to Nettie marks a turning point in the novel. This is when her process of asserting and reclaiming herself gains momentum.

The tone is private, informal and intimate, even confessional. The fact that Celie in her first series of letters is writing to no person simplifies the discursive strategies in these letters: Celie does not write to seduce or convince anyone, or to win someone over; she writes in order to explain as truly as she can what is happening to her, hoping that her confidant, who is above common human behaviour and flaws, will explain her life to her. Celie's letters are meant to be taken at face value. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is found in the opening

⁹² It was also a feature that was mocked, most famously by Fielding in his parody *Shamela* (1741).

where she corrects herself: “~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl.” Celie’s sincerity and authenticity is intensified through the use of oral colloquial language. There can be little doubt that Celie as a character in the novel is constructed in such a way that we are meant to sympathize with her and like her: “The discourse of pathos in Celie’s letters gives the reader the impression of immediacy and sincerity; there does not seem to be any distance, guile or artifice in her writing” (Kauffman 1992, 187). She is sinned against, not sinning, and she lacks the coquettish potential for scheming that we find in many classic epistolary heroines. Celie, writing first to God and then to her sister, is not constructing an image of self meant to sway or impress anyone.

Issues pertaining to the public and the private could be seen as a point of convergence between the slave narrative and the epistolary novel although their different emphasis of these two matters separates the genres. In *The Color Purple*, where the two genres coexist, the presence of the slave narrative accentuates the privacy of Celie’s writing by way of contrast. Celie’s letters mirror various forms of oppression and abuse caused by structures in society. Yet, she never publicly voices a protest, as did the slave narrators. Her epistles, as her conversations, remain within a domestic setting.

The blues brings the public and the private together by making the most intimate and private aspects of life public in a language deeply personal and irreverent of social conventions. At the same time, the feelings expressed by the blues performer are not only private and of an individual nature, they are also of general human validity. The blues represent an artistic rendering of oppression and pain, which is an approach not chosen by Celie, but which is chosen by her mentor Shug. While Celie writes her oppression and liberation, Shug sings her pain and joy. What they have in common is that they both express their lives. With regard to the tension between the personal and the public, the slave narrative, the epistolary novel and the blues thus form a threesome.

Textual margins

As mentioned, the epistolary novel is highly unusual in the context of African American literature. There are, however, other types of letters relevant to the black tradition. Gates in his discussion of Walker’s novel mentions the letters of Ignatius Sancho, published in London in 1782, as well as letters by the poet Phillis Wheatley (Gates 1988, 244), in other words actual, not fictional, letters, and Steven C. Tracy mentions letters in blues lyrics (2004, 137), letters

typically carrying sad tidings.⁹³ Another and more interesting group of letters in the context of *The Color Purple* are the letters of introduction and authentication that were appended to early African American autobiographies and slave narratives. It was a view commonly held for a long time that Africans were incapable of significant intellectual accomplishments, and that reading and writing was not a field in which they would excel. Therefore it was necessary that the publications of these narratives contained letters written by people of distinction, which in most cases meant white males, who could certify that the alleged author of the narrative was indeed its authentic author and that the text had not been significantly altered by others. These authenticating letters were so compulsory that they have come to be seen as integral parts of the texts they were appended to.⁹⁴ In *The Color Purple*, however, the only letters are those written by Celie and Nettie and they do not draw on outside authorities to authenticate themselves; their letters are their own acts of self-authentication and, to some extent, self-creation. Through the adoption of the epistolary genre, Walker's novel thus revises and reverses the use of the letter in slave narratives by making the letter the main part of the text and letting the black protagonists be their authors.

Another way in which *The Color Purple* could be said to trope on the introductory letters of early African American autobiography is through its use of epigraphs. While Walker's novel has no introductory letters, its beginning and its ending in other ways represent porous boundaries between the text and its context, one that echoes David Lodge's description of the opening of a novel as "a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined" (1993, 5). The novel has two epigraphs and one postscript; the first epigraph appears to be a statement by the author; the second is a quote from a Stevie Wonder song; and, lastly, there is what appears to be a final closing comment from the author. These three inscriptions in a similar way as the introductory letters of the slave narrative, correspond to what Genette calls *paratexts*. Paratexts are accompanying productions that go with the work of art and that may help us classify it. Examples of such paratexts can be titles, epigraphs and illustrations. Genette himself describes the paratext in general terms as follows:

More than a boundary, or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the

⁹³ The examples mentioned by Tracy are "Death Letter Blues" by Ida Cox and "Sad Letter Blues" by Big Bill Broonzy.

⁹⁴ Robert Stepto in *From Behind the Veil* (1979) classifies slave narratives according to the way each relates to its introductory material.

inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." (1997, 1–2)

The slave narratives almost as a rule contained a set apparatus of paratexts, part of what James Olney calls the slave narrative's "species character" (Olney 1985, 151); apart from the already mentioned introductory letters they had elaborate titles that often contained the phrase "written by himself," or a similar expression, a portrait of the author, and sometimes even his signature. These remedies were deemed necessary as thresholds between the text itself and its real life world; its potential readers needed to be prepared and instructed before reading it. The paratexts of the slave's narrative are examples of the allographic epigraph, which means that it is "attributed to an author who is not the author of the work" (Genette 1997, 151). *The Color Purple* signifies on the limited authorial control of the slave narrators through its use of autographic paratexts, that is, paratexts that are "explicitly attributed to the author himself" (Genette, 152). The novel's first epigraph and postscript read respectively

To the Spirit:

Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been
Written.

I thank everybody in this book for coming.
A.W. author and medium.

These autographic paratexts are metacommentaries on the text and on the production of the text. Through them the author inscribes herself onto the threshold of her narrative and thus draws attention to the latter's status as fiction. This intrusion of the author on the pages of her work in other words functions as an element of *Verfremdung*. In this manner Walker ostensibly relinquishes authorial control of her narrative by posing as merely "medium."

This impression becomes even clearer if we look at an essay by Walker on the writing of *The Color Purple*. There are two main categories of paratexts: *peritexts* are those paratexts that are inserted into the interstices of the text, and *epitexts* are those that are located outside the book (Genette 1997, 5). Walker's essay would in this context be an autographic epitext, and in her essay she writes about her characters as if they had taken possession of her: "They also didn't like seeing buses, cars, or other people whenever they attempted to look out. 'Us don't want to be seeing none of this,' they said. 'It make us can't think.'" (1984b, 356). It could even be argued that by casting the author in the divine role of medium these

autographic paratexts locate the narrative of *The Color Purple* in a realm beyond mere fiction. This playful authorial behaviour on the text's threshold is a reversal of the tightly scripted role of the slave narrators. The autographic paratexts of *The Color Purple* complicate the relationship between literature and its referent where the allographic paratextual material of the slave narratives sought to simplify this same relationship: they communicate a view of literature and writing that is profoundly romantic and in sharp contrast to the more utilitarian concerns of the slave autobiographers.

The novel's second epigraph comes from Stevie Wonder's song "Do Like You";

Show me how to do like you.

Show me how to do it.

This allographic paratext alludes to what is part of the thematics of Walker's novel; the sharing of experiences and learning from other people by following their examples. As Tamar Katz puts it, *The Color Purple* "is a novel that intends to teach its readers, and it is also a novel about how that instruction might take place" (1989, 185). The literary forbears of this didactic style can be traced to the epistolary novel in eighteenth century England (Katz, 187): Samuel Richardson "came to write epistolary fiction with the explicit intent to teach" (Katz, 187), publishing in 1741 a volume of exemplary letters on a diversity of topics.⁹⁵ This was primarily intended as a guide for young ladies, not only in how to write eloquent letters but also in moral and social behaviour. Even *Pamela* was originally intended as an instructional text for young and virtuous women.⁹⁶

Didacticism was also a feature, although more indirectly, of slave narratives. Frederick Douglass was probably not the most representative black man of his time but he was seen as such because he was the most *presentable* (Davies and Gates [1985] 1990, xxiii). So he was the model black man, not unlike Benjamin Franklin was the model American; an example for others to learn from. One of the most important functions of slave narratives was also fundamentally didactic: it was their purpose to inform people about slavery and its inhuman and destructive workings in order to promote abolitionist sentiments. Tamar Katz points out that the attempts at formal education in *The Color Purple* seem ineffective and often misguided. The character of Nettie, for instance, is associated primarily with a formal kind of

⁹⁵ The full title is no less than *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends on the Most Important Occasions. Directing not only the Requisite Style and Forms to be Observed in Writing FAMILIAR LETTERS; But How to Think and Act Justly and Prudently in the Common Concerns of Human Life.*

⁹⁶ "The germ of Richardson's *Pamela* was a plan to write a series of letters which provided examples of the correct ways of proceeding in various delicate social situations" (Bernard 1984, 71).

instruction (Katz 1989, 186). For instance, she tries to teach Celie about history; about Columbus and “the Neater, the Peter and the Santomareater,” ([1982] 1993, 11) without much success, and in Africa she tries to teach the Olinkas about Christianity, which they are not interested in. In Douglass’ narrative formal instruction in the form of reading is, ironically, highly valued, as is seen in his account of *The Columbian Orator*. Douglass talks about how the discovery of this book changed his life. It contained a variety of texts, among them dialogues between master and slave as well as Sheridan’s speeches on Catholic emancipation. Although he was just twelve years old, he read these texts with avid interest and they taught him some basic principles: “The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights” (Douglass [1845] 1986, 84). Nettie’s letters are a parallel to *The Columbian Orator* in that they depict situations far removed from Celie’s reality that nevertheless resemble her own situation. Whether Celie gains some deeper truth from this is unclear. Probably she is more affected by the concrete information Nettie’s letters convey about her own family.

However, Nettie’s letters function as instructions in that they expand the theme of the novel. It has been argued that they are one of the novel’s weakest points, that with their formally correct but stilted prose they seem lacklustre compared to Celie’s letters, and that they appear to be largely irrelevant to the rest of the novel. Trudier Harris has stated that “Nettie and the letters from Africa were really extraneous to the real concerns of the novel” and Mel Watkins finds that “they lack the vernacular richness of Celie’s epistles” (both quoted in Awkward 1989, 155). Nettie’s letters are certainly not irrelevant to the novel as a whole. Their main thematic mission is two-fold. Michael Awkward argues that “Nettie’s letters, then, serve to reintroduce the novel’s thematic focus on the consequences of male attempts to control the female voice” (1989, 156). Firstly, they serve to expand and globalize the theme of oppression of and violence against women and of sexism as they show that also in the Olinka’s society women are oppressed by society’s conventions and ideologies; Olinka women are scarred through initiation rites and they are denied an education. Secondly, the letters enhance another theme which is less visible in the American than in the African sections of the novel: cultural violence and racism. If the parts of the novel that are set in the US are considered in isolation, racism is not a very noticeable feature of the text. However, there are three episodes where racism is at the core of events. The first of these concerns Sofia’s destiny. Sofia, the fighter who will not let men beat her, is beaten by white people, literally as well as metaphorically. She manages to escape male oppression but not the

dominance of white culture, and after she has been violently beaten and has spent time in jail she ends up as a mammy-like figure caring for a white family. The second episode is Squeak's rape by the prison warden, an episode which conjoin sexism and racism. Last but not least, it is found in Celie's and Nettie's family. As Nettie miraculously tells Celie in a fairy tale-inspired letter, their biological father is dead and the man they have been calling Pa is not their real father; it could thus be argued that racism and the legacy of slavery introduce male violence into Celie's life. In Nettie's letters cultural violence in the shape of imperialism occupies a central position, and the parallels between the sisters' letters are clear. The novel's African sections not only accentuate sexism as a theme but also racism. In a thematic context the main problem with the letters from Africa is not that they do not seem to have a place in the novel, but rather that their function is so abundantly clear and their didacticism so obvious.

Another issue is their alleged impersonal style. The strength of Celie's letters is precisely their personal outlook and tone of voice. Celie writes about herself first and foremost, and then only secondly she writes about the community of other characters surrounding her. People and events find their way into her letters because they are of importance to her personally. Nettie, in contrast, writes primarily about the environment surrounding her, then only secondly about herself. Much of the information about people and places that she includes in her letters is of no importance to her personally. The letters of Celie and Nettie belong to different narrative traditions. While the personal and relatively intimate letters of Celie are akin to the letters in classical epistolary novels, which were seen as revelations of character, the letters of Nettie are more similar to the letters found in travel narratives. They are reportage; personal accounts of far-away places and people. Therefore, Nettie as a character never comes alive; she is not their main character. We never care sufficiently about what happens to her, but neither do we care what happens to the Olinka people. Whereas Celie's letters form a brilliantly personalized exemplum, Nettie's letters are poorly concealed didacticism. Their role in the novel is to globalize the novel's two themes: men's oppression of women and racism, here presented as western culture's oppression of the Third World.

In *The Color Purple* the most obvious instances of instruction and learning do not take place through written communication but through actual interpersonal relations. Whereas letters signal an absence these interpersonal relations signal presence. In the community of women, consisting of Celie, Shug, Sophia and Mary Agnes, the different characters learn

from each other and inspire each other in their fight for independence and self-assertion. This openness of the self to the other, is the essence of the Stevie Wonder epigraph.

4. A New Old Story: An Epistolary Neo-Slave Narrative

Alice Walker is by no means alone in revisiting the slave narrative. Since the 1960s many African American authors have turned to slavery and the slave narrative in their writing, and scholars of African American literature have done the same in their work. Ashraf Rushdy defines what he calls the neo-slave narrative as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative” (1999, 3). The neo-slave narrative, Rushdy argues, has become a new novelistic sub-genre resulting from the meeting between the slave narrative and the modern novel. Due to its epistolarity, however, *The Color Purple* represents a different type of first-person voice than the slave narrative and it could not be said to assume its form, but it adopts some of the conventions of the slave narrative, and is in many ways certainly inspired and informed by these. The neo-slave narrative is a label that applies to *The Color Purple*, at least if modified slightly.

Rushdy sees the first three novels in the neo-slave narrative tradition as defining the three major forms that later works would adopt or expand: the third-person historical novel of slavery (Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966)); the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative (Ernest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)); and the novel of remembered generations (Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975)) (Rushdy 2004, 95). *The Color Purple* could not be said to fit smoothly into any of these main categories, and Rushdy never mentions it in the context of the neo-slave narrative. What he calls the novel of remembered generations is the category that comes closest to the concerns of *The Color Purple*, but it is questionable that the problems facing the characters in *The Color Purple* are attributable to slavery in a similar way that the hardships of the characters in Gayle Jones’s *Corregidora* represent “the continuing traumatic legacy of slavery on later generations” (Rushdy 2004, 95). However, history plays an important role in Walker’s novel as well, and its discursive and thematic affinities with slavery and the slave narrative are hard to ignore. The most salient difference between *The Color Purple* and the slave narrative, as well as most neo-slave narratives, is that its main focus is not the institution of American slavery. The mechanisms and logic of slavery, as these have been revealed to us in, for instance, slave narratives, are put at the service of portraying the oppression of black southern women. Calvin C. Hernton

argues that “Alice Walker utilizes the slave narrative to reveal the enslavement that black men level against black women” (1987, 6). The slave narrative as a genre was associated with a specific time and a specific place but Walker’s appropriation of the genre’s conventions accentuates its universal validity as an account of oppression and dehumanization.

In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” Alice Walker writes about the lives of her female ancestors, like her mother and grandmother. In her words, these southern black women are the muted and unrecognized subjects of art and history. They had no formal, public arena for their creativity and expressive needs but found artistic release in their private daily activities, like gardening and quilting. They were, however, not considered artists, a view that Walker tries to revise: “For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (1984a, 233). They are also the silent and agonizing women that Toomer writes about in *Cane*, and Walker wants to give a voice to these women through her writing. She acknowledges the affinities between her literature and their lives: “Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories” (1984a, 240), and she thus seeks to diminish the distinction between the world of art and the everyday concerns of her female ancestors. Rushdy expresses similar concerns in his discussion of the neo-slave narrative, but his muted subjects are African American slaves: “I have attended to the forms employed by these authors of contemporary narratives of slavery because they themselves draw attention to their struggle to find a respectful way to give voice to the historically muted subjects of slavery” (2004, 97). The women Alice Walker writes about in *The Color Purple* are not slaves but lead lives that resemble conditions of servitude. It is therefore tempting to add one category to Rushdy’s list of neo-slave narratives, i.e. *novels that draw on the conventions of the slave narrative in order to tell a story of servitude different from but still similar to slavery in the US*. Walker’s novel participates in the genre of the neo-slave narrative on the margins of its definition, thus redefining it.

The literary memory of *The Color Purple* is double-voiced and spans several genres and includes numerous intertexts. Kauffman writes that “the effect of Walker’s juxtaposition of the epistolary genre with slave narratives is to undermine traditional literary history and to reconstruct it, too” (1992, 204). Walker does not so much undermine as rewrite chapters of literary history by adding to and detracting from fairly established genres like the Gothic, the epistolary novel and the slave narrative – formally, through its use of narrative form and language, but also thematically by repetition, yet turning tables. An important part of this process of rewriting and redefining is the inclusion of vernacular traditions, like the blues,

into her text. It is, however, problematic to argue that she undermines traditional literary history. She does not use these genres ironically or in order to expose their shortcomings; rather she shows how a genre like for instance the epistolary novel, which at first sight may appear as irrelevant to her, is relevant and usable in the context of a poor, uneducated black woman like Celie. In Derridean terms Walker participates in all these genres simultaneously, thus moving boundaries.

The multigeneric composition of Walker's novel where different genres, recycled and put to new use, relate dialogically to each other reflects what Bakhtin writes about polyphony in Dostoevsky's novels: "[t]he fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but *coexistence* and *interaction*. [...] For him, to get one's bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and *to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment*" (1984b, 28). The different planes and consciousnesses of the novel "by virtue of the novel's very structure, lie side by side on a plane of coexistence [...] and of interaction (Bakhtin 1984b, 31). This description of interrelated elements distributed in relation to each other as on a plane brings to mind a quilt. *The Color Purple* resembles a literary quilt in two ways. Firstly, its many letters can be seen as narrative patches coming together to form a pattern in an epistolary quilt. These letters, all written by women, form a womanist Sister's Choice, Sister's Choice being the name of the pattern quilted by some of the characters in the novel. The different genres can also be seen metaphorically as pieces stitched together by the novel's narrative. The past is thus brought into the novel's present. Walker's novel is a truly double-voiced, hybrid novel that privileges neither its white nor its black traditions.

However, whereas the text considered in the previous chapter, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, came across as circular and consequently inconclusive and open-ended, *The Color Purple* seems to tie up all loose ends in an ending heading determinedly for a utopian resolution. As writes Wendy Hall, "[t]he novel ends with an attempt to celebrate a unity that totalizes and recuperates all loose strands created through the plot" (1993, 269). *The Color Purple* ends for the same reason that epistolary novels commonly end: There is no reason to write anymore. There is no longer a distance to be bridged by letters as Celie is reunited with her children and her sister Nettie. Nor does she need to write to God anymore as she has found a voice and a self as well as a community, and is free to communicate with whomever she likes in whatever form she prefers. In fact, the last letter almost appears somewhat contrived, written consistently in the present tense, an extreme case of "writing to the moment," as a closing

thank you note addressed to “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God.”

The ending is also in compliance with the slave narrative since it ends with freedom; Celie has developed from an abused, silenced, dehumanized young girl with little or no perspective on herself and her situation in the world into a vocal, self-assertive, independent mature woman. It is quite remarkable how all problems are solved and happiness (re)gained: The person Celie thought was her father is not her biological father after all and her children thus not the result of incest; her children and her sister return to her; she is happily divorced from her previously brutal husband, now a sensitive and reformed man; she has Shug in her life and a house of her own where she can gather all her loved ones around her. Walker’s novel takes the ending of the slave narrative one step further; no slave narrative ends with a reformed slave owner but Celie’s husband is barely recognizable from the person he is in the beginning; he, too, has been set free from the chains of discrimination and oppression. Also, the reunion of lost family members is not commonly found in a slave narrative, as the narrative was written while slavery was still making such events difficult.⁹⁷ The ending is therefore not in accordance with the blues. One of the most significant features of the blues is that it does not provide answers to the singer’s problems and presents no solution. A blues with a happy ending would be a contradiction in terms. A blues is an expression of pain, and it is merely the expressive, performative aspect of it that has the potential to ease the feeling of pain – somewhat like Celie’s letters; they are not read by any living person and do not directly contribute to solving any problems but are acts of self-expression that ameliorate the feeling of loneliness and pain. Rather, the musical echo we hear in the end is the Negro Spiritual “Free at Last”: “Free at last, free at last / I thank God I’m free at last.”

It is still necessary to consider what Celie’s freedom means in light of the different genres put in motion by the text. “Reader, I married him,” Jane Eyre triumphantly states in the last chapter of her Gothicized sentimental narrative, seemingly implying that her marriage to the semi-crippled Mister Rochester is the apotheosis and the crowning achievement of her attainment of personal and economic independence. In the classic epistolary novels as well as in many of the classic Gothic texts, and other genres that could be described as sentimental, marriage or, often, death, are the two alternatives available for the heroine. There is no place for the heroine to realize herself outside the circle of family and marriage. In contrast, most male slave narrators avoided drawing much attention to their family situation at the end of

⁹⁷ The somewhat miraculous return of her sister Nettie and her children is quite similar to such reunions found in Frances Watkins Harper’s post-bellum novel *Iola Leroy* (1892).

their narratives, and rather chose to emphasise their own progress and accomplishments as an individualistic achievement, something which places female slave narrators, like Harriet Jacobs, in an interesting position. The following comment on Harriet Jacobs reads like a comment on *The Color Purple*: “While Douglass’s narrative emphasizes his acquisition and development of written language, Jacobs depicts a network of relationships on which she depends and to which she contributes; her most important relationships devolve from bonds of love” (Morgan 1994, 84). She emphasizes family and people rather than individual accomplishments. Towards the end of her narrative Jacobs says: “Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage” ([1861] 2001, 156). Niemtzw argues that caught between the genres of the domestic novel and the slave narrative Jacobs disparages the former for the latter when she at the end of her story “apologizes for having *only* freedom” (Niemtzow 1982, 107), by lamenting that “[t]he dream of my life is yet not realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own” (Jacobs, 156). According to Niemtzw, the requirements for a contented self are thus trivialized by the fictive forms offered the female slave, that is, the domestic, or the sentimental, novel (107), but she does not mention marriage and romance. Instead of concluding that the domestic novel “swallows Linda Brent’s voice” (Niemtzow, 105) it could rather be seen as a sign of sophistication that Jacobs is not content being “only” free but also has visions for how her freedom should be; she wants to be free *and* a woman.

The ending of Jacobs’ narrative seems like a gauntlet cast down and picked up by Walker. At the end of the novel, Celie has her own house with her own porch to sit on. The patrilineal line of succession has been broken as she has inherited her father’s house. She is liberated in a modern sense of the word: she has financial independence and does not depend on anyone. She is the owner of a store and hires people to work for her, white as well as black, male as well as female. She receives her ex-husband as well as their mutual female lover into her house together with her children and her sister. Thus the novel rejects conventional endings, those of the Gothic novel, the epistolary novel and, looking at it more closely, even those of the slave narrative.

The Color Purple is often read as representing what could be called “a view from elsewhere” (Abbandonato 1991), or a construction of otherness (Kauffman 1992). In Walker’s novel, freedom means the ability to choose love and sex without marriage; religion without church, children without the nuclear family – and oral over written language. Even more radically, it means the freedom to choose same-sex love over heterosexual love. “Celie’s sexual orientation provides an alternative to the heterosexual paradigm of the conventional

marriage plot” (Abbandonato, 1108), something which helps her break free from patriarchal oppression. Lewis argues that “Walker offers black lesbian shamelessness as this ‘other way to live’” (2012, 170). Yet, lesbianism never becomes a major issue in the novel simply because it is not noticed by the characters as a subversive phenomenon. It shocks or surprises no one that Shug and Celie are having a sexual relationship.

Freedom in *The Color Purple* is achieved in a more general sense through appreciation of women’s culture and through a deconstruction of binaries and boundaries. Keith Byerman argues that “[o]ne of the things that mark Walker’s text as womanist is her insistence that these female capacities [love and magic] are a superior way of bringing about change” (1989, 60). The novel problematizes the very foundation of terms like feminine and masculine, male and female. Towards the end of the book, Celie, who was under Shug’s tutelage, acts as Albert’s mentor.

In many ways it appears like the ending does not embrace traditional American ideals. When they get together at the end of the novel on the 4th of July it is not for patriotic reasons: “White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other” ([1982] 1993, 243). Despite their attempt to find an alternative mode of living, or perhaps because of it, Celie and her close-knit community of family and friends seem like a utopian “City Upon a Hill,” only a very different version than the one envisioned by John Winthrop in 1630. Celie and her family are an exemplum for others to see; they form a kind of model community. In spite of the novel’s emphasis on pleasure there is even a note of Thoreau in the end. Thoreau went into the woods in pursuit of individual freedom and because he wanted to live life deliberately. In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience,” Michael Meyer writes:

Thoreau followed Emerson in locating God within one’s soul and in nature. Because absolute values and authority could be discovered within one’s self rather than in the pulpit, the tract, the stature book, or the marketplace, a person could be totally independent and free if this divinity was developed and given expression. (1983, 13)

This is similar to the anti-institutional religion, or spirituality, that Shug teaches Celie. They find religion, though not in church, they find love and desire, though not in marriage. The characters in *The Color Purple* are able to liberate themselves despite their dire situation because they discover their inner spirituality and creativity and somehow seem to be able to live in isolation from social institutions. In this manner the novel celebrates the human potential for development, emancipation and love, but offers no vision for how to change oppressive structures in society. In fact, it is quite curious how the group of characters

presented in Walker's novel seems cut off from society. This illustrates the profoundly double-voiced nature of Walker's novel that simultaneously challenges and perpetuates old forms.

Chapter Four

African American Folklore Enters the Gothic Family Romance: Hybrid Characters in Toni Morrison's *Love*

The house is so haunted with dead men I can't lose
The house is so haunted with dead men I can't lose
And a sneaky old feeling gives me those haunted house blues
"Haunted House Blues," J. C. Johnson

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Corinthians 13, 1-3 (ESV)

1. Morrisonian Polyphony

Toni Morrison made her literary debut at the same time as Alice Walker and, like in Walker's authorship, the lives of black women have occupied a central place in her texts. Apart from this thematic affinity, their literature is, however, aesthetically mostly dissimilar. In essays and interviews Morrison has explicitly stated her desire to signal blackness and communicate something that is recognizably African American: "There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is" (1984, 341). She has on several occasions acknowledged her indebtedness to black music: "The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity [...] I use the analogy of music because you can range all over the world and it's still black ... Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing" (quoted in Gilroy 1993b, 181–182). She has broken with the strictly realistic novel and the term fantastic realism has been used to label her fiction. Her own response to this has mostly been that it is not an adequate term in the context of her literature. Rather, she has seen the term as a disambiguation since her own reference has been the discredited knowledge embedded in black American culture: "My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew" (Morrison [1988] 1993c, 414). The insertion of vernacular elements into the modern African American novel has for Morrison been a very deliberate act expressing

her self-awareness of participating in two traditions. In particular, she mentions the oral quality of the written language; “the ability to be both print and oral literature” (1984, 341). However, more than anything else her textual universe is marked by narrative and cultural hybridity. Morrison’s texts are double-voiced constructions that show the creative interrelatedness of vernacular African American and canonical western traditions.

In terms of theme as well as form, Toni Morrison’s novel *Love* (2003) can be described as an archetypal Morrisonian novel.⁹⁸ Thematically, it places at the front what has been an underlying theme in many of her previous novels, namely love’s many different manifestations. In an interview with Jane Bakerman from 1977, Morrison lists her recurrent themes as “ ‘beauty, love ... actually, I think, all the time that I write, I’m writing about love or its absence. Although I don’t start out that way’ ” (Morrison [1977] 1994b, 40). In Morrison’s novels, love can be redemptive but also violent and destructive. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), presents rape as a father’s only expression of love for his daughter; in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) mothers kill their own children as an act of love and protection, and in *Tar Baby* (1981) a mother tortures her own baby with cigarette burns. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that “Morrison’s novels are always about love and its distortions, and also about slaughter, often *with the blood*” (1991, 83). Love, then, is never a simple and straightforward affair in Morrison’s fiction, and least of all in her eighth novel, which is a probing into interhuman relationships and into love’s many-faceted nature. It explores the unpredictable and often inscrutable manifestations of love, or something resembling love, through portrayals of friendship, sexual attraction, infatuation, obsession, fascination, and even hatred; it is a novel about love and hate and all the shades of feeling in between. In *The Bluest Eye* the narrator addresses this issue directly by saying that “[I]ove is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, ...” ([1970] 1994a, 163), thus implying love’s many guises. *Love* further complicates the matter by showing that humans, too, are many-faceted and often contradictory. All of the characters in *Love* are complex and hard to define, and it is no simple matter to ascertain whether they are wicked, violent, weak or stupid. The central setting and environment in the novel is a household of women of different generations, which

⁹⁸ Michiko Kakutani in a critical review in *The New York Times* states that “[a]ll of Ms. Morrison’s perennial themes are here: lost innocence and the hold that time past exerts over time present; the sufferings sustained by black women at the hands of black men; the fallout that social change and changing attitudes toward race can have on a small community; the possibility of redemption, if past grievances and hurts can somehow be left behind” (Kakutani, 2003).

we also see in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved*, *Paradise* (1998) and *A Mercy* (2008), and in the course of the novel their lives are shown to be closely intertwined.

Also in terms of form *Love* draws on elements characteristic of Morrison's fiction. Her novels are polyphonic, open-ended constructions that defer closure and frequently conflate the past and the present. *Love* is a profoundly dialogic novel that does not primarily follow a linear progression but rather grows in complexity. It circles around its events and characters, approaches them from different angles, and each new perspective and relation adds to its complexity by making relational patterns discernible but also interpretive closure difficult. Morrison's novels should thus not be thought of as entirely open-ended, relative, or, even, chaotic; conclusions and interpretations are not arbitrary but are problematized and poly-dimensional. The deferral of closure so often referred to as a characteristic of her fiction is carefully constructed. This dual movement towards closure and openness could be seen as the working of Bakhtinian dialogue; centripetal forces work toward closure and prevent the text from dispersing completely while centrifugal forces create openings and distance, and thus prevent closure. It is the balanced co-working of these movements that accounts for the complexity of Morrison's novels. Through the dialogic processes at work in *Love* centripetal and centrifugal forces serve to simultaneously approach and defer closure; they both hold together and open the novel up, and the centrality of this mechanism in Morrison's fiction makes her novels, and *Love* in particular, an heir to Jean Toomer's style in *Cane*. The play with ambiguities, with parallels and contrasts, repetition and difference, and the deferral of closure seen in *Cane* are also found in Morrison's eighth novel where it is particularly visible in the presentation of character.

The construction of character is very important in *Love*, as in all of Morrison's novels, which is not surprising since interpersonal relationships constitute one of its most important themes. When asked by Nellie McKay how she handles "the process of writing," Morrison responded that "I start with an idea, and then I find characters who manifest aspects of the idea – children, adults, men or women" (Morrison [1983] 1994e, 143). Character analysis and analysis of character construction can therefore serve as textual openers and as ways of explicating the text as a whole. The self in her novels has been described as "a relative concept, decentered rather than alienated, relational rather than objectifying" (Rigney 1991, 45), and in *Love* this is even more noticeable than in her previous novels. Its characters are dialogically constructed, or, dialogized, and there are several categories of dialogic mechanisms at work. Characters are dialogized through the use of multiple perspectives; through the manner in which they form parallels and oppositions to each other; through the

dialogic presentation of time, and through the dialogic relationship between different genres. The novel's dialogic mechanisms serve to achieve dynamic and relational rather than static and monologic character presentation, and thus also promote deferral of textual closure.

Dialogization of character through the use of multiple perspectives, or what I will call perspectival dialogization, is a recurrent feature of Morrison's fiction: characters and events are typically seen from several different points of view, neither of which is clearly preferred over the other.⁹⁹ What is important is not any one of these perspectives per se but the manner in which they relate to each other. Morrison's novels thus reflect Bakhtin's description of polyphony in Dostoevsky as the interaction between and interdependence of different consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1984b, 36). In *Love* the only character actually given a narrative voice is L who replaces the third-person narrator in sections of the novel and appears to address the reader directly. However, several of the other characters function as what Henry James calls *centres of consciousness* in sections of the text, which is to say that their stories, world views, and their views on the other characters dominate parts of the narrative. These often divergent views interact and confirm or contest each other, and should also be seen in relation to what we can distil as factual events; what a character actually does regardless of how his or her actions should be interpreted.

This perspectival dialogization of character is particularly important in relation to the late Bill Cosey. He may not be the main character in the novel, but there is no doubt that he is at the centre of the narrative; he is the common denominator in the lives of all the characters and is on everybody's mind. He thus forms an important part of what holds the novel together, and he is its dialogic centre, which is indicated by that the titles of the novel's chapters, which indicate the roles he has played in the lives of the various characters.¹⁰⁰ Bill Cosey's position in *Love* is not unlike the position of Valerian Street in *Tar Baby*. When confronted with the fact that *Tar Baby* begins with Valerian rather than with Jadine, who is the tar baby character, Morrison responded by saying: "But he is the center. He's not the main character, but he certainly is the center of the world [...] He is the center of the household – toppled, perhaps, but still the center of everybody's attention" (Morrison [1981] 1994d, 101). This sounds like a description of the situation in *Love*, only in *Love* this scenario is magnified.

⁹⁹ This is also noted by Elliott Butler-Evans in relation to *Song of Solomon*: "What is dialogically significant here is the manner in which individual consciousnesses present themselves as autonomous voices unmediated by either the narrator or Morrison, thereby opening the novel to numerous interpretive possibilities" (1995, 125).

¹⁰⁰ However, the meaning of the chapter titles is not as straight-forward as it may seem. For instance, the chapter titled "Father" tells us how Christine felt about losing her father. The only way to say that Bill Cosey is related to the term father in this part of the chapter would be to argue that he, as her paternal grandfather, had to fill the role of father in her life after her actual father died.

All the major and minor characters have been affected by Cosey and have their own views of who he was and why he did what he did. Even Junior, who has never met Cosey in real life, forms a relationship with him. Most of the female characters have at some point in their lives loved or admired Bill Cosey, while Sandler Gibbons, the only other significant male character in this context, was made his reluctant friend and confidant and is thus privy to information none of the women possess. In spite of the factual deeds we can ascribe to him, such as marrying Heed when she was only twelve years old, lack of kindness towards his grandchild Christine, infidelity to his wife Heed, and generosity towards the community of Silk, it is conspicuously difficult to determine Bill Cosey's character. Why Cosey married Heed is an example of one of the many questions the novel does not answer. L divulges to us that Cosey himself claimed he married Heed because he wanted children, but she also contests this statement: "*Well, that's what he told his friends and maybe himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and knew the truth. He liked her*" (Morrison 2003, 139). But L more or less admits that liking someone is not reason enough to marry. She also thinks Cosey married Heed because his "*sporting woman*" left town and "*to make old Dark groan*" (139). Sandler Gibbons adds to the picture by recollecting what Cosey confessed to him:

But he remembered Cosey's dream-bitten expression as he rambled on about his first sight of Heed: hips narrow, chest smooth as a plank, skin soft and damp, like a lip. Invisible navel above scant, newborn hair. Cosey never explained the attraction any other way, except to say he wanted to raise her and couldn't wait to watch her grow. (148)

We as readers are left to figure out largely for ourselves whether Bill Cosey was a cold-hearted tyrant, or perhaps even a paedophile, or simply a normal man ruined by possessive and crazy women, which is what Vida thinks: "For it came to that: a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built" (36). Like Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, another male victimizer, Bill Cosey is not himself given a voice in the novel. His thoughts are communicated through the thoughts of the other characters. However, despite the magnitude of Bill Cosey's presence, *Love* is primarily a story about women.

A similar perspectival dialogization is at work also in the construction of the other characters, albeit here it is less obvious. The prevalence of the narrative's dialogic structure and way of looking at the world is so strong that it becomes not only a structural element but also a theme. In the character of Romen the issue of a dialogized and ambivalent identity is internalized as he sees himself from different perspectives in different contexts: "But he knew who it was. It was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled, dangerous one. The

fake Romen, preening over a stranger's bed, was tricked by the real Romen, who was still in charge here in his own bed, forcing him to hide under a pillow and shed girl tears" (Morrison 2003, 49). Although a minor character in the novel, Romen is the character who most overtly questions and examines his own self. He experiences an internal strife between society's expectations of him and his own sense of self that brings to mind Du Bois' double-consciousness.

A second form of dialogism is achieved through the way the different characters form patterns of contrasts and parallels, and this narrative feature reveals the very careful and intricate composition of *Love*. Discussing the relationship between Nel and Sula in an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison declared: "And so I wanted to say, as much as I could say it without being overbearing, that there was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something the other one had" (Morrison [1973] 1993a, 381). In *Beloved* Paul D is thinking that he would like to put his story next to Sethe's (1988, 273), implying that their lives are to be seen as individual yet related stories. Presenting characters in relation to each other is a central principle in *Love* and something which prevents the characters from being closed, autonomous structures; each of them to some extent, finds resonance in the other characters. They cannot be explained in isolation because their identities primarily emerge as a result of relational structures. A character may share traits, dispositions, or situational contexts with other characters, and these parallels serve to define and complicate the characters. This could be seen as a working of centripetal and centrifugal principles. The parallels, or similarities, between the characters are centrifugal forces that serve to open them up to each other while the contrasts between them are centripetal forces that serve to separate and distance and thereby close them to each other. The complexity and depth of the characters and their actions and motivations grow through this dialogic interplay of contrasts and parallels.

The dialogic oscillation between the past and the present is a third dialogic cornerstone in *Love*'s narrative structure and a feature of Morrison's fiction in general. Morrison's narrative is layered in terms of time, and the text moves freely between the present and its many pasts. It portrays an African American community from a historical perspective, but in a fragmented and disrupted narrative chronology. In order to comprehend the present it is necessary to know the past as the two are intrinsically linked and mutually throw light on each other. Thus *Love* is both the story of Heed and Christine as two elderly ladies and the story of them as two little girls. Their present lives must be seen in light of their past, at the same time

as knowing their present lives places the deeds of the past in high relief. The prominence of the past and its impact on the present is felt also by the characters of the novel, like Sandler Gibbons, whose mind seems to follow the same direction as the narrative: “Now he wondered if there was brain damage he hadn’t counted on, since he was becoming more and more fixed on the past rather than the moment he stood in” (Morrison 2003, 46). This insistent narrative interdependence of the past and the present contributes to the dialogization of the characters and their motivations. No character can be understood solely on the basis of his or her present situation; a perspective that spans his or her life history is essential. It could be argued that this is a general principle that relates to most literary texts. However, in Morrison’s texts it becomes conspicuous because of the meandering narrative structures that bind the past and the present together. Morrison’s style is often compared to that of Faulkner, and this is no doubt one of their coalescing stylistic features. The reader’s comprehension of history grows gradually as we get acquainted with the different phases of the characters’ lives. *Love* is the story of individual characters, but it is also the story of a the rise and fall of a family and the story of a community.

The fourth main aspect of dialogism, and of the dialogized character, is the interplay of different genres. *Love* is marked by generic and intertextual polyphony and displays great literary virtuosity. The text creates a polyphony of different genres, drawing freely on African American as well as white western traditions: the Gothic, the picaresque, African American folktales, western fairy tales, and textualizations of African American musical genres, like jazz and the blues. By drawing on these genres the novel also evokes several specific intertexts, such as the Bible. In these strategies the novel’s cultural hybridity is clearly seen as it mixes black and white literary forms in its construction of character; each character can be read in light of African American as well as white western genres, something which further brings out the characters’ complexity. The novel’s various sub-genres intersect, and at the intersections they impact and change each other. This genre dialogization is closely related to the other dialogic mechanisms in the novel. Dialogization resulting from contrasts and parallels between characters as well as from oscillation between the past and the present are partly brought about by the crossing and mixing of genres; by the novel’s cultural and generic hybridity. All of these diverse dialogic structures are thus related to each other and cannot be seen as leading separate lives in the text.

The perspectival dialogization of character, the dialogization of character through oppositions and parallels, and the dialogic presentation of time, serve primarily as enhancements of *intratextual* dialogue, that is, they open the novel up within and to itself,

whereas the generic dialogue serves to instigate both *intra-* and *intertextual* dialogue and thus opens the text up, also to other texts and textual universes than Morrison's own. The different genres constitute the text's mnemonic route through literary history as well as its literary double-voicedness. The novel's four main characters, Christine, Heed, Junior and L, are all hybrid characters that illustrate *Love's* intercultural and intergeneric composition.

2. Characters and Genres

Heed and Christine: Two Girls "already spoken for"

Heed and Christine, not Bill Cosey, are the main characters in *Love*. Their lives are subtly intertwined; each is the other's antagonist but also the greatest love in the other's life. Like Sula and Nel in *Sula*, they seem like complementary personalities. It has even been argued that their relationship is one of primary narcissism, "marked as much by aggression as by love, by love as much as by aggression" (Mellard 2009, 710). The relationship between the two illustrates the careful and deliberate construction of the novel. Heed and Christine are dialogically constructed through conspicuously formed patterns of parallels and oppositions as well as through the interplay of the past and the present, and these structures as well as the characters' lives, become visible through a reading of the working of genres. Heed and Christine are thus good examples of how characters can be constructed dialogically through the workings of centripetal and centrifugal forces; at times the genres contribute to revealing affinities between them; at other times they make the differences between them apparent. The principal genres in this context are the Gothic, the fairy tale, and the blues narrative. The genres are themselves brought into interaction with each other through their co-existence in the portrayal of the two characters, thus enhancing the characters' cultural literary hybridity.

The Gothic is prominent in *Love* as the novel makes conscious use of several of its characteristics, making it verge on a Gothic parody. Mishiko Kakutani caustically remarks that "the story as a whole reads like a gothic soap opera," thus implying that *Love* slips into the Gothic by default because it is a poor novel. As a genre, the Gothic speaks to the emotions and often deals with strong passions. It therefore lends itself easily to appropriation by pulp literature, but it should not necessarily be seen as a sign of poor quality and lack of subtlety. No one would, for instance, call *Cane* facile and cheap, despite its clear Gothic undertone. However, *Love* is flirting with popular literature, and the sublime – a prominent feature in *Cane* – is less noticeable in Morrison's novel, which, in contrast to *Cane*, does not dwell on landscapes but focuses almost entirely on internal domestic space. This attention to

complicated human relationships in domestic settings provides the ground for melodrama. In a review of the novel in *The New York Times*, Laura Miller sums it up in the following way:

Here's what can be found in the 200 pages of "Love": murder, arson, the maiming of a little girl, fetishism, pedophilia, rape, gang rape, statutory rape, prostitution, blackmail, sadomasochism, defenestration, the corruption of various minors, masturbation and an angry mob containing a kid who throws a bucket of "animal waste" all over the owner of a nice hotel. (2003)

All of Morrison's novels sound like melodrama if summed up in this manner. However, it is the way her books use and present the (melo)dramatic incidents that must be illuminated, and in *Love* the mixing of elements from high and low genres is in itself an interesting feature that underscores how human lives contain sorrow and drama as well as comedy. Indeed, it could be argued that the novel's melodramatic propensity is quite in tune with Gothicism, as Gothic literature has never been strictly realistic.

Love uses Gothic elements by way of what Bakhtin terms *stylization*. Stylization is a form of what Bakhtin calls double-voiced discourse: it "forces another person's referential (artistically referential) intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions" (Bakhtin 1984b, 189). It "stylizes another's style in the direction of that style's own particular tasks. It merely renders those tasks conventional" (Bakhtin 1984b, 193). *Love* uses the Gothic as a device in the narrative to underline the hold of the past over the present and the entrapment of women. According to Bakhtin, since stylization implies the use of another person's discourse it, inevitably, to some extent objectifies it, but it does not become an object. In *Love* the Gothic is objectified to the extent that its use borders on parody, yet it never becomes parody as its intention, or rather its function, does not oppose or reverse that of the Gothic, and it does not use the Gothic ironically. Parody "introduces into that discourse [someone else's discourse] a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one" (Bakhtin 1984b, 193).

The sense of a dark and haunting past that impacts the present is central in the Gothic, so also in Morrison's novel. The past is omnipresent in *Love* as its characters struggle under the pressure of its secrets and oppressive events. This past is strongly felt in relation to two of the novel's central settings: the house on Monarch Street and the now derelict Cosey Hotel on the beach; the most important places in the lives of Heed and Christine. These houses represent conventional Gothic traits and reflect the central role of architecture in many Gothic texts, both as plot components and as atmospheric elements. DeLamotte contends that traditional Gothic romances often centre on

the dominant presence of a certain kind of architecture, first represented in Walpole's description of the Castle of Otranto. This kind of architecture is the repository and embodiment of mystery. Specific secrets are hidden in it, and to discover them one must confront the mystery of the architecture itself: its darkness, labyrinthine passageways, unsuspected doors, secret staircases, sliding panels, forgotten rooms. The architecture is also a repository and embodiment of the past. (1990, 15)

Such places are governed by what Bakhtin calls the chronotope of historical time. Writing about the Gothic, Bakhtin says that

[t]he castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past. The castle is the place where the lords of the feudal era lived and (and consequently also the place of historical figures of the past); the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels. (1981, 245–246)

Classical literary Gothic architecture, then, like the castle, can be read symbolically and literally as a repository of a historical and an ancestral past. It is an eloquent setting for psychological drama as well as family feuds. It conceals and confuses, and is thus an uncanny impediment to knowledge and clarity.

Love is set in modern times and contains no actual castle. However, Sandler Gibbons' description of the Cosey family's relationships as courtly – “Mr Cosey was royal; L, the woman in the chef's hat, priestly. All the rest – Heed, Vida, May, waiters, cleaners – were court personnel fighting for the prince's smile” (Morrison 2003, 37) – is only one of many elements that illustrate the relevance of Bakhtin's description of the castle and castle time to *Love*. Both One Monarch Street and the Cosey Hotel are saturated with the past – with the past of the Cosey family. The former, in which Heed and Christine live, is reminiscent of the mansion in a Victorian Gothic tale: “the house was graceful, imposing, and its peaked third-story roof did suggest a church. The steps to the porch, slanted and shiny with ice, encouraged caution, for there was no railing” (19). The descriptions of the house are invested with multiple symbolic meanings. Its icy steps are symbolic of the icy atmosphere inside the house where the two elderly women have been living for more than twenty-five years with their mutual hatred for each other as their most important *raison d'être*. The slanted and icy steps also suggest the dangers of slipping upon entering the house, of losing one's footing, which is significant in the context of the new arrival, Junior. The house and its inhabitants have to be

dealt with cautiously. Moreover, the steps and the allusions to falling foreshadow the ending of the novel.

On the whole, the Cosey house represents a conflation of the past and the present. It is a reminder of former glory, but its inhabitants refuse to acknowledge the passing of time. While Heed and Christine still think of it as number one Monarch Street, the house is no longer number one, neither in terms of address nor in terms of social importance: the world around the house has moved on. When Junior asks Sandler for the address he cannot even remember the number of the house that was once the focal point in the community: "It 1410 or 1401, probably" (Morrison 2003, 14). For the community, the Cosey House, as well as its inhabitants, is now an anachronism; a symbol of decadence and past grandeur. Morrison's novel thus establishes an intertextual relationship with one of the most well-known American southern Gothic stories, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." In Faulkner's story, Emily is a remnant of Jefferson's ambivalent past, a past of class differences, patriarchy and slavery, but also of prominent families and southern traditions. Outdone by time, she has become the responsibility of the community and her once imposing house the symbol of death and decay. The Cosey house is also the repository of strange and uncanny life stories; Bill Cosey, who many thought died a mysterious death; his son, who died tragically as a young man; his daughter-in-law May, who became crazy; his controversial child bride Heed, who inherited both the house and the resort; and his pretty granddaughter Christine, who left when barely an adult and returned as a mature woman with a life story no one knew. Morrison revises Faulkner's Gothic tale by placing African American characters at the centre of conventionally Gothic events, while in Faulkner's story the African American character Tobe is a conspicuously marginal presence.¹⁰¹

The Cosey hotel has an even stronger Gothic air since it is now closed down and has become solely the site of past events. It is an abandoned and derelict building, an example of what Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny* calls "dead houses" (Vidler 1992, 19); abandoned houses, boarded up and conspicuously empty. Vidler calls Poe's House of Usher "the paradigmatic haunted house" (18), and while the hotel could not be described, like the House of Usher, as "a crypt predestined to be buried in its turns by the 'barely perceptible fissure' that ran vertically from roof to foundations" (Vidler, 18), the past nevertheless lies buried in it, and, metaphorically at least, threatens to bring it down. The house is empty apart from the attic which contains boxes of items from the past; papers, toys and other articles that

¹⁰¹ Conspicuous because he is the only character in the story who actually knows what happened in Emily's house, but since he never speaks the complete picture of events remains concealed.

bring back times forgone. There are signs that the destruction of the hotel has begun; it is in the process of being swallowed by the sea, facing its inevitable destruction: "... Up Beach is twenty feet underwater; but the hotel part of Cosey's Resort is still standing. Sort of standing. Looks more like it's rearing backwards – away from hurricanes and a steady blow of sand. Odd what oceanfront can do to empty buildings" (Morrison 2003, 7). Water, as well as vegetation, is slowly eating at the house, producing an apocalyptic atmosphere. These houses are the frames of Christine's and Heed's life together, and they symbolize the women's former prominent social position as well as their fall from social prominence.

History, lineage, heritage and inheritance are central elements in *Love* and the main sources of conflict between Heed and Christine. Morrison's novel is in many respects a family saga, the story of a family dynasty – a story rare to come by in the African American tradition. Neither One Monarch Street nor the Cosey hotel contains family archives in the traditional sense, but the many items from the past that furnish the houses and are packed and stowed away in suitcases and boxes have a similar function. They are records of times and people no longer there. Christine prefers to live in L's old quarters because "[u]nlike the memory-and-junk-jammed rest of the house, the uncluttered quiet there was soothing" (Morrison 2003, 89). Stories about the past inhabit the houses, and much of the novel is a matter of retrieving past relations and incidents that will throw light on the present. Bill Cosey's ancestral past forms an important part of the larger story woven from the many individual stories. Cosey embarked on his career much as a protest against his father Daniel Cosey, better known as Dark, who acquired his wealth by feeding the police sensitive information about the black community. This becomes quite literally the Dark secret, a secret involving racial treason; the tainted background better kept concealed. Bill Cosey sought to neutralize this ignoble aspect of his heritage, and decided to spend his inherited money on "*things Dark cursed: good times, good clothes, good food, good music, dancing till the sun came up in a hotel made for it all*" (68). However, Dark's treason cannot be erased and Cosey is haunted by it all his life. This is the cause of his estrangement from his first wife, Julia, who "froze when she learned how blood-soaked her husband's money was" (68). Thus, race relations impinge on Bill Cosey's life, and they form one of the many ghosts hiding about the houses after his demise.

The conflict between Heed and Christine is partly a feud over hereditary rights, as an important source of their conflict is the Cosey fortune and property. It is clear that whoever should finally inherit Cosey, the family lineage will be broken since both Heed and Christine have failed to produce an heir. This creates an apocalyptic atmosphere which is similar to, yet

not as pronounced as in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." At the present level of the story, Bill Cosey, his son, May, and L are already dead. The only central agents still alive are Heed and Christine, and when they die the Cosey story will become mere legend and its nuances and truths will eventually be inaccessible.

The antagonistic and oppositional relationship between Christine, the granddaughter of the house's former owner, and Heed, his second wife, is reflected in the architecture of the house they live in. Christine lives in the basement in the servants's quarters, while Heed lives upstairs in her room on the third floor. This upstairs and downstairs scenario reminiscent of a Victorian novel accentuates the novel's class issues. Heed, who comes from the bottom of the social ladder, has replaced Christine, the youngest member of the Cosey family. Perhaps one would expect these two feuding women to live in darkness in this Gothic setting. However, contrary to such expectations neither Heed's room nor Christine's kitchen is dark but rather brightly lit, as if they are trying to keep shadows and danger at bay:

Like the kitchen below, this room was overbright, like a department store. Every lamp – six? ten? – was on, rivaling the chandelier. Mounting the unlit stairs, glancing over her shoulder, Junior had to guess what the other rooms might hold. It seemed to her that each woman lived in a spotlight separated – or connected – by the darkness between them. (Morrison 2003, 25)

The symbolic significance of this physical setting is manifold, and possibly rather obvious. The dark stairs both connect them and separate them. They allude to how the women's isolated and self-centered lives are connected through their mutual hatred for each other that now fills their lives. The darkness of the space that separates the women also symbolically represents the still unknown events of a dark past that hides some of the reason behind their reciprocal antagonism.

The house is haunted by Bill Cosey's spectral presence – metaphorically speaking but also, or so it seems, literally. There is no doubt that Junior relates to his actual ghostly presence: "Junior looked over her shoulder toward the door – still ajar – and saw the cuff of a white shirtsleeve, his hand closing the door" (Morrison 2003, 119). Although there is no portrait gallery, Bill Cosey's portrait looms large on the wall, and from this position he looks down on the characters still living in the house. Like ancestral portraits in Gothic novels, such as that of Matthew Maule in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and like the sinister ancestral portrait in Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Cosey's portrait underlines the authority and power he still exercises from beyond the grave. He is the Big Daddy who presides over the goings on in the house. In a ghostlike manner the portrait brings him to life and uncannily blurs the distinction between life and death.

The othering and oppression of women that have been central subjects for the Gothic as a genre (Hogle 2002, 10) are also prominent themes in *Love*. The family's patrilineal transfer of power and influence should have been broken with the death of Bill Cosey as there were no male heirs. However, both Heed and Christine are confined by the patriarch Bill Cosey, both before and after his death. Neither of the two women has anywhere else to go and each sees herself as the rightful heir to his fortune, as "the sweet Cosey child" to whom he bequeathed his house. Heed, who has not left One Monarch Street for years, still resides in her quarters as Mistress of the house. She is presented as a half-crazy, or at best highly eccentric, elderly woman leading the life of a recluse, a life still conditioned by past events. Her character invites comparison to similar female characters in Gothic narratives. In her confinement and continued emotional attachment to Bill Cosey she is reminiscent of Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861)¹⁰² and of Faulkner's Miss Emily. In addition to their physical confinement within their houses, they also share an uncanny preoccupation with a now dead and absent husband or lover that still plays an important part in their lives. In *Great Expectations* and "A Rose for Emily" the women in question never marry their love, but remain attached to them in relationships of antagonistic binding. It could even be argued that Heed's confinement on the third floor is reminiscent of Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Like Mr Rochester's first wife, Heed has always been an outsider in her own house, coming from a different social background than her husband. This has marked her as an other for the rest of her life. Unlike Bertha Rochester's, though, Heed's confinement is at least partly voluntary. Heed and Christine's entrapment is social withdrawal and seclusion, and they could be described as female eccentrics. This is quite common in Gothic texts. Writing about Gothic romances DeLamotte states that "most of these books are about women who just can't seem to get out of the house" (1990, 10), something which can be traced all the way back to the physical entrapment of women in classic Gothic works, like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's Gothic romances where women are confined to desolate wings of the castle, to dungeons and subterranean passages from which they quite literally cannot escape. Heed and Christine are two such women who just cannot seem to get out of the house, metaphorically speaking, since they cannot let go of the past represented by the house. These intertextual echoes place Morrison's novel in intertextual

¹⁰² There are other similarities with *Great Expectations*. As in Dickens' novel, a young and socially disadvantaged person moves into the house and becomes the old woman's protégée, and in both novels the woman has a specific plan for this young person; she wants to use him/her to achieve something. However, in *Love* it is also the young person who schemes to take advantage of her older employee.

dialogue with classic Gothic novels, in which the confinement of women by patriarchal forces are found centre stage and where deeds of the past, often the result of paternal abuse of power, must be revealed and confronted.

While locked in this stalemate situation, each waiting for the other to make a move, Heed and Christine grow old and, without any heirs of their own, they are increasingly less in need of the inheritance they each are scheming to get. They were both in different ways rejected by Bill Cosey; Christine had to yield to Heed, and Heed to his “sporting woman,” Celestial. What is worse, Cosey destroyed the relationship between the two girls, making the one the grandmother of the other, and neither of them has been able to heal the damage caused by him. Their lives are portrayed as absurd, melodramatic, barren and futile. The Gothic accentuates the parallels between their lives by showing that for each of them the real enemy is not the other but rather circumstances in the past inflicted on them by others, circumstances which they need to confront in order to free themselves.

In their present lives Heed and Christine may be adversaries, but this was not always so. As young children they were best friends, seemingly inseparable, until Bill Cosey married Heed when she was only eleven years old and made their friendship impossible. The relationship between Heed and Christine resembles that between Sula and Nel in *Sula*. Nel and Sula form a special relationship and come from socially different family backgrounds. They were twelve when they met, the same age as Heed and Christine were when their friendship was disrupted. The genre of the fairy tale is used to show similarities as well as differences between Heed and Christine, and shows the complexity of their relationship. Christine’s childhood was in many ways a blessed one; she was the only grandchild of a rich and respected man, and grew up under material circumstances not available to many black girls of her time, but before she met Heed she was lonely:

Once there was a little girl with white bows on each of her four plaits. She had a bedroom all to herself beneath the attic in a big hotel. Forget-me-nots dotted the wallpaper. Sometimes she let her brand-new friend stay over and they laughed till they hiccuped under the sheets.

Then one day the little girl’s mother came to tell her she would have to leave her bedroom and sleep in a smaller room on another floor. When she asked her mother why, she was told it was for her own protection. There were things she shouldn’t see or hear or know about.

The little girl ran away. For hours she walked a road smelling of oranges until a man with a big round hat and a badge found her and took her home. There she fought to reclaim her bedroom. Her mother relented, but turned the key in the lock to keep her in the bedroom at night. Soon after, she was sent away, far away, from things not to be seen, heard, or known about. (Morrison 2003, 95–96)

Morrison's novel here clearly uses the language of fairy tales. The opening "once there was....," the way the text views Christine from a distance and typifies her by calling her "a little girl," as well as the use of the simple, linear narrative in the past tense are all typical stylistic features of the fairy tale, and this genre is to a greater extent than what is the case with the Gothic objectified by Morrison's novel. Bakhtin writes that "[c]ertain features of language take on the specific flavour of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents characteristic of the given genre" (1981, 289), and this certainly is the case in *Love*.

In the context of Christine's life story, the fairy tale genre is used ironically signalling a reversal: the story has a happy beginning but ends miserably. Up to a point, it fits into the Cinderella tale with some differences. It is not Christine's mother who dies, but her father. This partly makes her the responsibility of her paternal grandfather, who remarries after the death of his beloved wife. He marries Heed, who then becomes the evil stepmother, and Heed's presence, if not her personality, ruins Christine's life and makes her unhappy. Christine's enchanted childhood ends abruptly, and she is eventually evicted from her ancestral home.

Heed's life is also narrated through fairy tale formulas, and the opening of the following passage resembles "Little Red Riding Hood," the tale about the little girl who strayed from the assigned path:

Once a little girl wandered too far – down to big water and along its edge where waves skidded and mud turned into clean sand. Ocean spray dampened the man's undershirt she wore. There on a red blanket another little girl with white ribbons in her hair sat eating ice cream. The water was very blue. Beyond, a crowd of people laughed. "Hi, want some?" asked the girl, holding out a spoon.

They ate ice-cream with peaches in it until a smiling woman came and said, "Go away now. This is private." (Morrison 2003, 78)

The fairy tale genre, appropriate in the context of childhood, unites them as it presents both of them as girls about to face changes in their lives. Also in the context of Heed the genre is used ironically. Heed's life story fits different parts of the Cinderella tale than Christine's does. Much like Cinderella, she lives under poor conditions when she finds her prince, Bill Cosey, who, in spite of being a couple of generations her senior, is still a very eligible man and in many respects fits the role as prince; his successful resort is his kingdom, and he is handsome and impressive. The genre of the fairy tale is overtly mentioned earlier in the novel in relation to Bill Cosey's hotel: "... the fabulous, successful resort controlled by one of their own. A fairy tale that lived on even after the hotel was dependent for its life on the people it once excluded" (42). However, love is absent from their marriage and Heed never manages to fill

the role as lady of the manor. While Cinderella is admired when she dresses like a princess and immediately looks the part, Heed is ridiculed and laughed at when she dresses like a lady. Even her wedding dress is symbolically too big for her, and the other women hide it so it cannot be fitted – just like they do not want her to fill her role successfully. The comfort and position her marriage to Bill Cosey promises turn out to be but a mirage. Despite her position, she has spent her life fighting for acceptance and slaving for people who hate her. In fact, her life after her marriage to Bill Cosey bears resemblance to Cinderella's before her transformation into a princess. She is forced to wait on, even feed, May, who hates her, much like Cinderella was forced to serve her evil stepmother and stepsisters. So, Heed is neither Cinderella turned princess, nor the ugly duckling who grows into a beautiful swan.

The fairy tale is a genre that does not allow for much ambiguity. Good and bad are clearly separated and deceit is always revealed and never pays off in the long run. *Love's* deconstructive treatment of the fairy tale results in reversals and complications. For example, one element promised by the fairy tale is complete and eternal happiness, but in the story of Heed's and Christine's lives the absence of "they lived happily ever after" is striking. Love is a central component in the lives of Heed and Christine. Ironically, however, it is the main source of their unhappiness since they have both been deprived of their love for each other. According to L, when Bill Cosey chose Heed he "*chose a girl already spoken for [...] The way I see it, she belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her*" (Morrison 2003, 105). In Christine's version of the fairy tale, Heed is both evil stepmother and "prince," her one true love. This mixing of roles is as impossible in a fairy tale as it is in Heed and Christine's lives. As already mentioned, their friendship became impossible when Heed became the bride of Christine's grandfather – a situation that laid the foundation for numerous conflicts, and thus their mutual love for each was gradually transformed into mutual hatred.

The relationship of *Love* to the fairy tale could be seen as containing an element of carnivalization. The relationship between Heed and Christine seen through the lens of the fairy tale contains several acts of reversals, including reversals of hierarchies. The fairy tale itself contains a reversal of hierarchies that could be described as carnivalesque. When Heed marries Bill Cosey, she changes the social order by causing the exclusion of Christine, who initially belongs there. The union between Heed and Bill Cosey is an ironic and carnivalesque reversal of the conventional final bliss of the fairy tale, and results in much fighting and conniving. The actions undertaken by Heed, Christine, and May are ludicrous and laughable in all their immaturity; May and Christine hide Heed's wedding dress; Heed sets fire to Christine's bed (a fire L kills with sugar!); and Heed and Christine at times actually fight each

other physically: “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” (Morrison 2003, 73). There is nothing dignified about their behaviour; these incidents express frustration over the situation that a combination of plotting and circumstance has placed them in. Their outrageous behaviour blurs the personal tragedies of the story by extracting comedy from them. This charade could be described as melodrama, but it also has an element of the carnivalesque. The ambivalence of their relationship – the love-hate, young girl-grown woman, upstairs-downstairs constellations – reflects the ambivalence that Bakhtin identifies in Rabelais and ascribes to carnival: “For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (Bakhtin 1984a, 24).

However, the fairy tale-like happiness is used without irony to describe Christine’s childhood and her childhood friendship with Heed, which is portrayed touchingly as a prelapsarian state, an idyll, “a time when innocence did not exist because no one had dreamed up hell” (Morrison 2003, 190). This was the time when they hiccupped carelessly from laughter under the sheets. The first event that throws a shadow over their carefree happiness – “the birth of sin” (192) – is not Bill Cosey’s marriage to Heed but his touching the young child Heed on “the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be” (191), following which he goes into Christine’s room to masturbate. Their meeting with sin and adulthood, and with a vague but deeply-felt guilt, is an experience that lies beyond words; that cannot be talked about: “It wasn’t the arousals, not altogether unpleasant, that the girls could not talk about. It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe, without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech – not even in the language they had invented for secrets” (192). This was the first germ of rot in their relationship and the incident that introduces the “first lie, of many to follow” (191). Childhood is likened to a natural state that happens regardless of effort, whereas adulthood is pretentious, as L puts it, like a game played on a stage to be watched by others:

But the world is such a showpiece, maybe that’s why folks try to outdo it, put everything they feel onstage just to prove they can think up things too: handsome scary things like fights to the death, adultery, setting sheets afire. They fail, of course. The world outdoes them every time. While they are busy showing off, digging other people’s graves, hanging themselves on a cross, running wild in the streets, cherries are quietly turning from green to red, oysters are suffering pearls, and children are catching rain in their mouths expecting the drops to be cold but they’re not... (63)

The depiction of childhood in *Love* is similar to the presentation of childhood in many children's books; the danger that threatens the kingdom of innocence is growing up, the initiation into adult life. This view of childhood is arguably romantic, but the tragedy of it is that childhood is easily and inevitably contaminated. Not even in *idagay*, their secret language, could Heed and Christine process and transcend what had happened. The seed of guilt was already sown in them and this prevented them from confiding in each other.

The interplay between the past and the present is visible in Christine's relationship to her childhood. The silver coffee spoon she used when eating ice-cream, a pun on the idiom to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth, is a symbol of her carefree and privileged life as a young girl. This silver spoon is returned to several times in the text. As a grown woman, bitter and resentful, she is trying to keep the memory of her happy childhood alive by eating with the spoon: "It was tiny, a coffee spoon, but Christine ate every meal she could with it just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned" (Morrison 2003, 22). The spoon joins the lives of Heed and Christine, and figures in both their fairy tale sequences in the text. Christine offers Heed the silver spoon and Heed takes it, an act which has symbolic overtones: Christine invites Heed into her privileged life, Heed accepts, but in the end she takes over and pushes Christine out. L reminisces on this incident towards the end of the novel (198). Albeit from different social backgrounds, the two were lonely little girls who formed a very special relationship. One Monarch Street and the Cosey Hotel, now Gothic anachronisms, were once idyllic, Edenic places, castles, illustrating how architecture in Gothic texts can be a symbol of "the loss of an Edenic world associated with an innocent childhood past, of which the architectural place is a nightmarish obverse" (DeLamotte 1990, 15). The reasons for the loss of a pastoral world where they could be each other's best love, a loss which is seen in their later Gothic lives, is to be found within the pastoral epoch of their childhood. It reflects the Gothic romance: "In some cases, the physical loss of the pastoral world threatens to be also a psychological and spiritual loss through the discovery that the mystery of the Gothic place may well have some sinister bearing on, or even for a time be identical with, another mystery connected with that pastoral world itself" (15). And it is this world Heed and Christine return to at the end, confronting the dark matter that disrupted the pastoral idyll of their childhood.

However, their lives lived apart from each other as adults are quite different. While their childhood and old age are dominated by their mutual love and hate for each other, their relationship to men colours their adult lives. As a young woman Christine was stunningly good looking, but in her relationship with men she was treated without respect and eventually

victimized. Her affairs often ended in melodramatic incidents, like confrontations with the police; “[c]ome to think of it, every serious affair she’d had led straight to jail” (Morrison 2003, 90), and resembles the transgressive stories presented by blues singers: her husband, whom she married when she was seventeen, she surprises in another woman’s arms; then she embarked on the search for a new husband and found three, “none her own” (162), until she found the social activist Fruit, who was eight years younger than her, “so of course he pleased himself with other women” (165), and then lastly Dr. Rio, to whom Christine was “a kept woman,” without fully knowing it. She thought she was special and was mortified at discovering how naïve she had been when she was ungraciously thrown out to give room for her replacement. In many respects, her life as an adult is a blues narrative that evokes the classical blues of artists like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, but with a hint of Ida Cox’s bad woman attitude. The environments that Christine passes through, whether they are represented by politically radical social activist groups or the higher social circles of Dr. Rio, are all sexist and patriarchal, exploiting women and relegating them to marginal, disempowered positions. However, Christine does not timidly accept her fate; like transgressive blues women she shows anger and resentment against her oppressors. Her seven routine abortions are not seen as tragic, but are unsentimental affairs and reminders of her unfruitful life.

Both Heed and Christine could, at least on the surface, be seen as bad blues women. Heed’s marriage to Bill Cosey could also be read in light of the blues. Being a man of means and old enough to be her grandfather he is in most ways her superior and she has little say in her own life. He appears like a big daddy, a refined version of a bad man of blues. Jealousy, infidelity, and rage are salient components in her life as well, and there is little to remind us of a conventional love story. However, in contrast to Christine’s life, sexuality is virtually absent from the descriptions of Heed’s life, which is highly unusual in the blues, and Heed lacks the anger and attitude of the bad blues woman. There are no depictions of Heed as a sexually attractive woman. She appears to be almost devoid of sexuality. She seems to have been transformed directly from the little girl who married the old man – and was quite happy when her newly-wed husband went out on business in the evenings of their honeymoon because she had colouring books and paper dolls to play with – to an arthritic elderly lady with nothing but revenge on her mind. With the exception of her short affair with the hotel guest who came to collect his dead brother, there is little mention of Heed as a young adult woman, and even this, her single extra-marital affair, is associated with death – because of her lover’s dead brother and her subsequent miscarriage. In the narrative present, Heed is both child and

elderly body, something which Junior senses: “The woman looked to be in her sixties at least – hair made megablack by a thick border of silver at the scalp – but she had something of a little-girl scent: butter-rum candy, grass juice, and fur” (Morrison 2003, 24). The natural development from child to elderly woman seems to be missing and as we meet her in the present of the story, she is like a girl trapped inside an elderly woman. If it is true that Cosey married Heed primarily because he hoped she would provide him with an heir, it is sadly ironic that they never managed to conceive a child together, and her life remains barren.

Cosey’s marriage to Heed when she is only eleven years old sets time off balance; an older man marrying a child is a disruption of time’s natural flow. This disruption persists. While both in their sixties, Heed and Christine wear sanitary napkins which they throw away unstained. In an article on *Nachträglichkeit*, i.e. temporal incongruity or belatedness, in *Love*, Jean Wyatt observes that “[a] lack of temporal congruity characterizes all the stages of Heed’s subsequent life and, to a lesser extent, the stages of Christine’s life as well. At the simplest level, Heed and Christine are consistently out of phase with the biological time of their bodies – for example, with the stages of their reproductive cycles” (2008, 196). This conflation of time is not just a feature of the narrative in Morrison’s novel but also directly affects the lives of the characters in a manner that is debilitating rather than constructive since it shuts them off from real time.

In terms of race and colour, Heed, rather than Christine, evokes associations of a blues woman, or a black performer, but they are both aware of and troubled by their racial appearance. Heed overhears a conversation between two hotel guests that alerts her to her physical appearance: “Good figure. Way past good; she could be in the Cotton Club. Except for her color. And she’d have to smile some of the time. Needs to do something with her hair...She’s hard to be around. Hard how? I don’t know; she’s sort of physical. (Long laughter.) Meaning? You know, jungle-y. (Choking laughter)” (Morrison 2003, 75). The implication is that Heed is too dark to be fashionable and too uncultivated, unsophisticated and primitive to match a man like Bill Cosey. Christine, in contrast, has “light skin, gray eyes, and hair threatening a lethal silkiness” (163), and the sophistication and worldliness that Heed lacks – without it doing her any good. It is suggested more than once that her gray eyes, reminiscent of Dark’s eyes and thereby also of his racial treason, are the reason why Bill Cosey distances himself from her. Christine becomes aware of her “inauthentic” looks. When she joined the activist group she “changed her clothing to ‘motherland,’ sharpened her language to activate slogans, carried a knife for defence, hid her inauthentic hair in exquisite gélés” (163). Although both Heed and Christine are pretty, neither of them can be proud of

her looks in an uncomplicated way. Their racial appearance is used by people they encounter to categorize them and place them in society. Their experience is similar to Du Bois' experience of double-consciousness as an internal conflict between self and other.

As we have seen, *Love* tells the story of the different stages of the lives of Heed and Christine through the interplay of the genres of the Gothic, the fairy tale, and the blues narrative. Through these genres their lives are compared and contrasted, and thus woven together. The most prominent of these genres is the Gothic, which could be said to include also the pastoral of childhood expressed as a fairy tale version of a longing for lost innocence. Informed by de Beauvoir, DeLamotte contends that:

Gothic romance by women portrays women's unhappiness and confinement, their horror at finding themselves "immured in their families groping in the dark,"¹⁰³ their profound alienation from the patriarchal institutions that dominate their lives, their sense of claustrophobic repetition, the transcendent impulses that express their longing to escape. But it also – and continuously – portrays a longing for security, enclosure, the bounded world of childhood safety. (1990, 185)

The fairy tale portrays their mutual childhood bonds as well as the bad seed that eventually destroys childhood, and as their fairy tale-like openings go awry their lives become a Gothic melodrama. The blues narrative provides the characters, especially Christine, with subversive qualities that counteract the passive role offered by the Gothic and the fairy tale. Through carefully constructed patterns of parallels and contrasts, the constant interplay of past and present and of different genres, the novel weaves the destinies of the two characters together at the same time as it illustrates their literary cultural hybridity.

These genres also impact the overall themes of the novel. *Love* is a story about childhood and children; about the loss of childhood innocence and hope, about what the world does to children. Their vulnerability and the way they often fall victims to the adult world are recurring themes in Morrison's writing, starting with her literary debut *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and culminating in her latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015). In her latest novel, the mother, Sweetness, now estranged from her daughter, says: "What you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (43), lines that sound like they were taken from *Love*. The destructive work wrought by patriarchy is another Morrisonian theme reflected in genres like the Gothic novel and the blues. Bill Cosey is the bad man of the blues as well as the Gothic patriarch who interrupts childhood and orders the world to conform to his desires. The lives of women and children are upturned as a result.

¹⁰³ From Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (1792) 1975 (New York: Norton.) Exact reference given in DeLamotte 1990, 152.

Junior: A Girl Not Spoken for

This Gothic atmosphere of faded grandeur and of the injustices of a dark and partly obscure past still haunting the present is destabilized with the arrival of Junior. Whereas Heed and Christine are akin to the housebound recluses of Gothic fictions, leading lives enshrouded in the historical time of the past and characterized by resentment and stasis, even regression, Junior represents modern times, movement, and change. She is a character oriented toward the future. She could be seen as one of Morrison's many outlaw characters and as such "signals the transgressive nature of this character, who represents the subversion of established boundaries and limits" (Vega-González 2004, 215). Morrison herself has said that "[o]utlaw 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" (quoted in O'Connor 2003). Junior is a character who challenges limits and resists enclosure. She functions as catalyst, and her arrival on the scene speeds up the events and causes turbulence – not only in the lives of Heed and Christine, but also in the lives of Sandler Gibbons and his family. From a literary viewpoint, Junior is a hybrid character. On the one hand, as trickster she represents African American folktales. On the other hand, she very much resembles the literary figure of the picaresque, found in picaresque narratives, in the shape of a young orphaned girl.

Junior, the outlaw character, could be read as trickster, a figure Morrison frequently uses in her novels. *Sula* is one example, and there are clear parallels between *Sula* and Junior. Both Son and Jadine in *Tar Baby* have trickster qualities and Rosier Smith argues that the centrality of the trickster in *Tar Baby* "speaks for the trickster's ongoing relevance in a contemporary world and for the values Morrison finds in trickster strategies" (1997, 111). Even *Beloved*, the ghost of slavery, has been read as a trickster (Trudier Harris 1991, 160). Morrison's tricksters are characters coming from the outside who challenge the status quo and balance in an environment.

Junior's trickster qualities are rather striking. She is characterized by hunger, by an insatiable appetite, both as concerns food and sex. John W. Roberts states that "Feldman and others have pointed out that the material reward that most frequently motivates the African trickster, and his African American descendant, is food, a not-so-curious concern on the African continent" (1990, 103). Junior is often described as eating and is a perpetually hungry character. When she first arrives at One Monarch Street she devours with great relish the shrimp dish Christine made for Heed; she walks into Maceo's ordering hearty portions of food, and after the final events in the hotel she ravenously eats from the leg of lamb Christine

has left in the oven. After one of her encounters with Romen she also confesses to “her Good Man” that “[i]t was ice cold in the garage, but we fucked anyway eating barbecue” (Morrison 2003, 157).

Hunger and desire are presented in ambivalent ways in Morrison’s fiction. On the one hand, they are basic life-sustaining instincts that represent the opposite of resignation and stagnation. Acknowledging the existence of hunger and desire and attempting to feed them what they crave implies a certain *joie de vivre*. Barbara Hill Rigney writes that “[e]ating, for example, is not merely a euphemism for sexual intercourse or an image of sensuality, as occurs in the works of male writers since *Tom Jones*. Rather, in Morrison’s texts, food, like everything else in her worlds, is metaphoric, diffusely erotic, expressive of *jouissance*” (1991, 83). Marie, China and Poland, the prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*, are examples of characters who acknowledge their desires in a carefree manner. On the other hand, hunger is a dangerous and potentially destructive force that may involve loss of control and possibly unhappiness and destruction. Hunger, in its various shapes, is the symptom of some kind of lack. Sometimes the concrete manifestation of hunger can be misleading. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola appears to crave milk when it is really the picture of Shirley Temple she wants to be close to, because what she deep down craves is the love and respect she thinks Shirley Temple receives. She thinks that if she only had blue eyes, the world would be kind to her.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, she loves Mary Janes for their wrapping, which has the picture of a white girl. The sweet caramels, wrapped in images of sweet white girls, symbolically represent Pecola’s feeling of inferiority. Sugar, sweetness, is a bitter taste, which reflects the role of sugar in African American history. As noted by Emma Parker, “(f)or African Americans, the history of sugar is far from sweet” (1998, 642) since slavery in large part was founded on sugar and thus could be seen as representing capitalism, oppression and even patriarchy.

Junior is not a submissive character and, significantly, does not appear to crave sweet things but rather savoury foods, in particular meat. Junior’s craving for sex and food is really an expression of the most significant lack in her life, which is love and safety. When she is looking at the portrait of Bill Cosey these things come together: “But here, now, deep in sleep, her search *seemed* to have ended. The face hanging over her new boss’s bed must have started it. A handsome man with a G.I. Joe chin and a reassuring smile that pledged endless days of hot, tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she

¹⁰⁴ It is a similar thing in *Love* when Christine and Heed as children are eating ice cream with a silver spoon, hungry for the friendship more than the ice cream, which becomes clear later when Christine is eating with the same spoon trying to bring back happy childhood days.

robbed apples from the highest branch” (Morrison 2003, 30). Her vision is an idyll that promises kindness, security, and abundance – even transgression; the apple a potentially symbolic fruit connoting sin and desire. Junior’s lust for the apples on the highest branches means she wants things previously unattainable for her. Similar thoughts seem to be crossing her mind as she looks at Romen sleeping: “This beautiful boy on whom she had feasted as though he were all the birthday banquets she’d never had” (196).

Her appetite for sex is also considerable, and her overt and even aggressive sexuality is signalled from the start in the story. The day she appeared on the streets of Silk the temperature was “low and the sun was helpless to move outdoor thermometers more than a few degrees above freezing” (Morrison 2003, 13), yet Junior had “*a skirt short as underpants and no underpants at all*” (10). As she parades into Maceo’s, L observes that “[s]he still wore that leather jacket, and her skirt was long this time, but you could see straight through it – a flowery nothing swinging above her boots. All her private parts going public alongside red dahlias and baby’s breath” (66). Although John W. Roberts states that food rather than sex was the preferred gratification of the African and the African American trickster (1990, 103, 109), some African tricksters have been portrayed with clear phallic characteristics. In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates argues that the trickster Esu is “[f]requently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis” (1988, 6). This is also a feature of other American tricksters. Andrew Wiget describes the Native American trickster as “oversexed, underfed, dissatisfied, and on the move” (1990, 86). The men in the community, like Sandler and Romen, are struck by Junior’s flaunted sexuality. The first-person narrative in fact starts with the arrival of Junior, walking the streets of Silk, and drawing the attention of everyone who sees her. In her relationship to men, Junior at first seems to represent an inversion of the power structure in male–female relationships as these are portrayed through Heed and Bill Cosey, and Christine and her male friends. Junior represents “some of the tricksters of tradition – ever guided by personal desires and frequently identified as masculine” (Harris 1991, 160–161), but with the significant difference that she is a woman. Men are drawn to Junior, who resents being controlled; she will not let others use her against her will regardless of what measures she needs to resort to in order to avoid this. She is in control in her sexual relationship with Romen; she seeks him out and decides the conditions for their affair, even though these conditions involve his use of physical violence against her.

Like the trickster figure, Junior is a character who repeatedly crosses boundaries; she breaks out of situations and enters new contexts. Tricksters are generally seen as figures that “challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries” (Jeanne Rosier Smith 1997, 2).

For instance, Gates describes the African trickster Esu as “the guardian of the crossroads” (1988, 6). Junior repeatedly moves from one social sphere to another. Her first attempt to break out and find a new environment for herself was made when she was still a child: “She was the first Rural to speak up and make a stab at homework” (Morrison 2003, 56). It was highly unexpected that a girl with her social background would even attempt to succeed at school, but even at this young age Junior is determined not to let her environment get the better of her. After being bullied around by her uncles, she is forced to leave the Settlement and runs away. While on the run, she steals a G.I. doll from a store and ends up in Correctional where she becomes a model student. At Correctional she nearly kills the Administrator and consequently ends up in prison, but even this situation she manages to turn into something positive: “Reform, then Prison refined her insight” (118).

Her trajectory – from the Settlement, to running away before Correctional, and finally Prison – represents several changes of context, but these could all be said to constitute a predictable path. The next move Junior makes, moving into the house with Heed and Christine, represents a more surprising change of social scene. Junior reveals herself as an opportunist who is constantly trying to improve her own situation:

Unlike what people thought, in the daily grid of activities, to plan was fatal. Stay ready, on tippy-toe. And read fast: gestures, eyes, mouths, tones of speech, body movement – minds. Gauge the moment. Recognize a chance. It’s all you. And if you luck out, find yourself near an open wallet, window, or door, GO! It’s all you. All of it. Good luck you found, but good fortune you made. (Morrison 2003, 118)

There is an element of unscrupulousness and audacity about her, which foreshadows her role in Heed’s fall. This ruthless opportunism resembles the qualities of animal tricksters. Roberts argues that “[t]he animal trickster, in his rebelliousness, characteristically indulges in actions that are not only socially unacceptable but also morally tainted” (1990, 101). She steals, she even kills, if that is what it takes. She finds herself in a new situation, but one that she has prepared for all her life. She quickly forms a plan for how to take advantage of the situation in One Monarch Street, and in a clandestine way joins Heed and Christine in their fight over the house and the money. In this process Junior draws on previously acquired deviousness:

In time the women would tire of their fight, leave things to her. She could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it, the way she had at Correctional when Betty cut in on Sarah at the Christmas Dance and they had fought themselves into Isolation. Junior had brokered the peace when the girls returned, bristling, to the Common Room, threatening behaviour that could ruin it for the whole of Mary House. Siding with each antagonist she had become indispensable to both. How much harder could it be with women too tired to shop, too weak to dye their own hair? (120)

Both Heed and Christine should be on guard against her as she will exploit them and their relationship for what it is worth. Junior's scheming could be ascribed to her trickster qualities.

In John W. Roberts' view,

[t]rickster tales characteristically portray situations in which the principal actors create alliances that they inevitably break, or break long-standing ones in pursuit of their own apparently egocentric goals. The prevalence of false friendship, in which contracts are made and violated, has been noted by several scholars as a peculiarly African trickster-*tales* pattern. (1990, 104)

It soon becomes obvious that it is harder than she predicts to deal with the old women, and Junior, though resourceful and street-smart, is up against powers that equal her own.

The trickster is a figure whose identity is fluid and indeterminate, which enables him to easily change scenes. Junior's shifting identity is signalled by her name. Christine senses its falseness: "Junior Viviane. With an *e*. Sounded like a name from a baseball card" (Morrison 2003, 23). Junior was named Junior by her father, "either after himself – Ethan Payne Jr. –, or after his longing, for although Vivian already had four boy children, none of them was Ethan's" (55). We are informed that "Vivian finally did choose a name for the baby and may even have used it once or twice after Ethan moved back to his father's house. But 'Junior' stuck" (55). We are, however, never informed what this name is. When Junior enters school she is asked about her last name and, not knowing what this is, she gives her name as Junior Vivian. In Correctional she refuses to offer more than her first name and, consequently, "'Junior Smith,' they wrote, and 'Junior Smith' she remained until the state let her go and she reclaimed her true name with an *e* added for style" (59).¹⁰⁵ Junior's names reflect her "unrootedness" and her conditional freedom. While the lives of the Cosey women are burdened by the family past, Junior is free in the sense that she answers to no one but herself. As Christine puts it: "Junior had no past, no history but her own" (169). Junior is dangerously free, and resembles a frequently recurring character type in Morrison's books that Rigney calls "wilderness characters" (1991, 52) and Morrison herself describes as "the misunderstood people in the world" (quoted in Rigney, 51). Most of these characters are male – like Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, Ajax in *Sula*, Guitar in *Song of Solomon* and Son in *Tar Baby* – but the most important wild character is Sula. These characters are pariahs and Rigney argues that "there is

¹⁰⁵ Irregular naming practices are not uncommon in Morrison's fiction. In *Song of Solomon* Pilate got her name because her father thought the letters on the page in the Bible looked like "a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees" ([1977] 1989, 18). Heed's full name is Heed the Night and her family members go under the names of Bride, Welcome Morning, Princess Starlight, Righteous Spirit and Solitude. Naming is also an issue in many other African American texts. Slave narratives often recount how slaves would rename themselves after slavery as a step in the process of claiming their own identity. Naming has been used as a device in later works, like in Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the main character's name remains unsaid.

no such thing as safety for Morrison's wilderness characters, and they are inevitably hunted down, separated from community, or even destroyed" (Rigney, 52) – like Junior.

Quoting Susan Feldman, Roberts argues that although the African trickster shares the principal trait of superior cleverness with tricksters from other cultures, he was typically represented as an underdog (Roberts 1990, 102–103.) This trait is visible in African American tricksters as well as in enslaved Africans in America, who “embodied their view of the trickster primarily in tales of Br'er Rabbit and other animals who, in the wild, would have been considered prey for those animals most often acting as dupes. They portrayed the animal trickster as smaller in stature than the dupes against whose physical power the trickster had to match wits for survival” (Roberts, 109). Junior, in spite of her cynical opportunism and cleverness, is undoubtedly a social underdog and she expresses a vulnerability that contrasts with her provocativeness and self-assuredness. Christine, who fears and dislikes her, senses how difficult it is to distance herself from her: “It also gave her reason to sustain a lowered gaze, because she did not like the heart jump that came when she looked in the girl's eyes. She had the unnerving look of an underfed child. One you wanted to cuddle or slap for being needy” (Morrison 2003, 23). L, too, senses her vulnerability and describes her as having “*the kind of eyes you see on those 'Save This Child' commercials*” (66). Junior comes from a socially disadvantaged position, and her opponents have frequently been bigger, stronger and more powerful than her, such as her uncles and the Administrator at Correctional.

Junior's feet symbolize her ambivalent character as both victim and survivor. Her legs draw attention because of her sexy black leather boots. She never takes them off before other people, she even makes love to Romen with her boots on, and they illustrate her ability to turn a challenged and disadvantageous situation into something empowering. Apart from being eye-catchers, her boots serve to hide the fact that one of her feet is deformed because its toes have grown together. Romen, when he catches a glimpse of it on one of the rare occasions when she takes off her boots, observes that “the foot she slipped into her sock looked to him like a hoof” (Morrison 2003, 154). This allusion to the devil is not inappropriate considering her role in Heed's fall. Significantly, the first time she takes off her boot is when she and Romen make love in the attic of the old hotel. This shows the ambivalence in her character. When she takes off her boot and lets her flaw be shown, she lowers her guard at the same time as she symbolically shows her devilish trait. This also takes place at the same location where she causes Heed's fall with her foot. Susanna Vega-Gonzalez suggests that her limp makes her reminiscent of the African God of crossroads, Legba (2004, 216), and Gates writes that “Esu [another name for Legba] 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” (1988, 6).

In other novels by Morrison, such larger-than-life elements are less ambiguous: There is little doubt that *Beloved* is a ghost;¹⁰⁶ there is also no doubt that Pilate in *Song of Solomon* is actually lacking a navel, and in *Tar Baby* there is a whole world of forest women and blind horsemen. However, in contrast to other Morrisonian characters with a physical deviance, Junior’s foot is not in fact a larger-than-life feature. Junior’s deformity has a realistic explanation; her foot is deformed because she was mistreated as a child. It symbolizes her vulnerability rather than her strength,¹⁰⁷ and reminds us that it is not from choice but rather from necessity that Junior repeatedly changes environment. Junior’s life is to a great extent conditioned by her being a poor, black girl. As a child she was the victim of violent male relatives, and the novel gives a touching portrayal of her loss of childhood: “The crayons were gone and the hand that once held them now clutched a knife...” (Morrison 2003, 59). The crayons are a symbol of childhood, and the knife, sadly, a symbol of her life as adolescent and adult. In *Correctional* she was the victim of the Administrator’s sexual harassment, and her running away is a pursuit of opportunities as well as an escape from oppression.

The features of hunger, both sexually and gastronomically, as well as the propensity for transgressive behaviour and challenging of boundaries, are also features that create a bridge between the trickster and the carnivalesque, something which further accentuates Junior’s strength of character. The carnivalesque in literature, as this is discussed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, is associated with the folk culture of laughter in medieval times and with the literature of Rabelais. This carnivalesque folk culture of laughter is essentially irreverent and life-affirming and does not respect existing boundaries and hierarchies. This is reflected in the symbols of carnival “that are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (Bakhtin 1984a, 11). In carnivalesque literature and imagery there is much focus on the body, especially its open and transgressive states. An open or grotesque body is a body that is not closed to the world: “it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin, 26). It means that there is focus on the places where the body can open up to the world, “on the apertures or the

¹⁰⁶ Although arguments have been made to the contrary, perhaps most notably by Elizabeth B. House, who in “Toni Morrison’s *Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved*” makes the case that *Beloved* is no relative of Sethe’s but “simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery” (quoted and discussed in Plasa 2000, 66).

¹⁰⁷ Even Eva’s missing leg in *Sula* could be read as a symbol of strength since it is intimated that she chose to have it chopped off for money.

convexities” (26). Junior’s hunger and her shameless attempt at satiating her hunger could be read as carnivalesque features. Hunger and desire concern a body’s relationship to the surrounding world; satisfying the hunger means taking the world in, literally and metaphorically speaking. In this context eating and drinking are some of the most characteristic representations of the grotesque body (Bakhtin 1984a, 281.) Eating is joyous and triumphant as it is the body expanding itself at the expense of the world; “[t]he limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage” (281). Read in this light, Junior’s ravenous eating is symbolically like a banquet where she is feasting on the world; helping herself to it without it getting the better of her. Her sexual appetite further enhances her carnivalesque potential, especially since it coexists with her appetite for food. The empowering inversion which is a component of carnival is at work here since she is the one helping herself to things previously held from her. In her sexual relation with Romen she is in charge and is not exploited.

Moreover, Junior resembles the picaro, a figure from the western literary tradition. There are many points of confluence between the picaro and the trickster, and the picaresque narrative shares features with the trickster narrative. The restlessness of the trickster as he moves from one environment to another reflects the episodic nature of the picaresque narrative where the picaro is exposed to adventures on his road through life before circumstances make it necessary for him to move on. Michael Alpert describes the picaro as “a cynical youth, brought up the hard way and determined to treat others as cruelly as he has been treated himself” (1969, 7). Furthermore, the picaro is more antihero than hero. When *Love* weaves together the trickster and the picaro, it joins the intertextual company of several other African American texts, for instance the texts in the slave narrative tradition. Stefania Piccinato notes that “[a]s many an essay has explored, the slave narrative is strictly related to the picaresque literary tradition” (1994, 88), and she quotes Charles Nichols when she argues that “[t]he desperate jeopardy of his condition forces upon the servant-slave-picaro the urgency of his search for an identity, for survival.’ And so, consequently, the hero is forced into deception and trickery, drawing on his or her ingenuity and skill” (89). Similarly, Keith Byerman reads the “deceit, masking, forgery or lying of the slave narrators” (1982, 70) as showing “the traditional triumph of the trickster” (80).

One difference between trickster tales and picaresque narratives is the latter’s association with realism; they are “realistic in manner” (Abrams 1993, 130). When the picaresque narrative first appeared it represented a contrast to the novel of chivalry which “had a real hero, a very perfect gentle knight ... who lived in an unreal world, never had a

base thought, idealized women, and performed incredibly brave (and impossible) deeds against ghastly odds” (Alpert 1969, 7–8). This turn to realism is also reflected in the relationship between the slave narrative as picaresque story and the southern romance:

The picaresque novel, especially in its early versions, can certainly be seen as an intentionally ironic reversal of the heroic, chivalric ideal, whereas the slave narrative – very often itself enriched by rhetorical turns of speech based on subtle forms of irony and parody – in its crude disclosure of the world of fear, aggression, and moral deprivation undoubtedly performs a similar function vis-à-vis the Southern romantic tradition.” (Piccinato 1994, 89)

It could be argued that in *Love* the aesthetic doubleness of Junior, that is, her narrative identity as trickster and picaro, both centres and decentres her character. The two genres converge on her role as an underdog in society, and her loneliness and lack of supportive elements necessitate her sometimes subversive opportunism. However, the realism of the picaro contrasts with the larger-than-life quality of the trickster and it is never quite settled whether we are to read her strictly within the bounds of realism or not. Nevertheless, through the portrayal of Junior, the novel gives a realistic picture of how society treats a poor black girl with no family to stand up for her. While Heed and Christine have the luxury of carrying out what could be described as a family feud over Bill Cosey’s will, Junior has no inheritance to fight for, and she is forced to use her cunning to steal and cheat her way through life; “Junior had no past, no history but her own” (Morrison 2003, 169).

The ambivalence inherent in Junior’s character is partly caused by her hybridity as trickster-picaro, but it is further deepened by her textual dialogic interaction with Christine and Heed. Mostly because of her age she appears as Heed and Christine’s foil, whose traits form contrasts to those of the two elderly women. She is young, healthy, unattached, without means, and on the move. While they lead invisible lives of confinement Junior relishes being on display. But Junior is also a parallel to them, and the three women living in the house on Monarch Street for a while form a dialogic threesome. Heed and Junior share a similar background; they both come from poor and socially dysfunctional families. Heed’s parents readily gave her away, or sold her, to Bill Cosey. None in Junior’s family missed her when she ran away, and she stayed a runaway for six weeks without anyone reporting her missing. They both have a socially challenged starting point in life and as a result suffer oppression and discrimination. Both Heed and Junior are realistic, scheming and smart women determined to make the best of things. However, many of Junior’s trickster qualities find their contrast in Heed; the Cinderella version of the fairy tale used to narrate Heed’s childhood offers social elevation through marriage, which in turn places her in a passive role. This

passivity continues in the Gothic entrapment of her later life. Rather than being free and on the move she is contained in a domestic space that limits her freedom, and she shows little appetite for either food or sex. Neither can she quite match Junior's wit. While Junior with her trickster qualities is a hungry character driven by an appetitive desire for satiation, Heed, in her partly self-chosen domestic confinement, is driven only by her desire for wealth and position.

The text also presents Junior and Christine dialogically through their parallels and contrasts. Their social backgrounds are vastly different, but, like Junior, Christine ran away from home. Although not literally chased from home like Junior, Christine felt pushed out and sacrificed by her own family. Her adult life, as conveyed in a narrative inspired by blues, has certain affinities with the narrative of the trickster-picaro. Like Junior, she was in her youth a very attractive woman with an appetite for life, someone who did not miss the company of men, but, unlike Junior, she was easily controlled by men, and despite the element of bad blues woman traceable in her character she did not manage to turn her defeats into victories. She also lacks the personal strength and the cunning it takes to dominate. In the narrative present of the novel she consequently seems like a loser living downstairs in the servants' quarters forced to wait on her arch-enemy, who is, sadly, the only real love in her life. Heed and Christine live in an upstairs/downstairs arrangement that reverses the original hierarchical positions between them. Junior, with her transgressive trickster qualities, moves in both spheres.

Junior as opportunistic trickster-picaro enters the Gothic narrative of Heed and Christine, and this changes both her life and theirs.¹⁰⁸ This is furthermore a crossing of boundaries that implies a crossing of genres and thus affects the structure of the novel. When Junior enters the house on Monarch Street, the picaresque trickster narrative enters the Gothic tale and the two mutually impact each other, entering into a generic dialogue. Junior functions as catalyst in the Gothic tale that envelops Heed and Christine. She changes the lives of the people she comes into contact with,¹⁰⁹ something which is more typical of the trickster than the picaro. In the early stages of the story Junior could even be seen as a Tar Baby figure; a figure that changes the lives of those who attach themselves to her. However, she is also herself susceptible to change. Junior is drawn into the Gothic tale through her ensuing

¹⁰⁸ It is not the first time Morrison uses a trickster figure who comes from the outside and enters a domestic scene replete with family issues. In *Tar Baby* this is very obviously the case.

¹⁰⁹ Romen's life is changed for the better after his relationship to Junior as it results in his coming of age both sexually and eventually also personally. In the end Junior is directly responsible for the catharsis in the relationship between Heed and Christine, but also for the death of one of them.

relationship with Bill Cosey. Junior is the only female character in this novel who has never had a real-life relationship with him. In this respect, he does not haunt her past life like he haunts the past lives of the other female characters. She does, however, initiate a relationship with him through his portrait, or rather, with his ghost as it transcends the frames of the painting in a most Gothic fashion, and he thus comes to haunt her present existence. Through this otherworldly relationship she seems for the first time to change not only social sphere but to be in contact with another dimension. Vega-González sees Junior as a figure in-between the natural and the spiritual world, something which could be ascribed to her trickster qualities as well as features of the Gothic genre. The rest of the household is affected by the presence of Bill Cosey, whose ghost, at least metaphorically speaking, haunts their lives.

Junior, on the other hand, seems to relate to his ghost as a physical presence:

In the hallway on the second floor she was flooded by his company: a tinkle of glee, a promise of more; then her attention drawn to a door opposite the room she had slept in. Ajar. A light pomade or aftershave in the air [...] His happiness was unmistakable. So was his relief at having her there, handling his things and enjoying herself in front of him. (Morrison 2003, 119)

The portrait becomes the trope where the trickster-picaro enters the Gothic fiction. Whether Cosey's ghost actually haunts the place, or whether he is a figment of Junior's imagination, and thus a sign of her slipping grasp of reality, is not settled by the novel. However, since there are other ghosts in this novel there is no reason to doubt Junior's sightings. Regardless of how his spectral presence should be interpreted, he becomes her "Good Man" and in front of him she lowers her guard: "Funny how being seen all the time, watched day and night at Correctional, had infuriated her, but being looked at by her Good Man delighted her" (116). She becomes one of the women whose lives he dominates, and this is yet another parallel to the lives of Heed and Christine. The difference is that they are long since disenchanted with him while she is in her first stages of infatuation and admiration. To her he is both lover and father figure and thus a reminder of the parallels that connect Junior, Heed and Christine.

The different genres further accentuate the novel's use of both African American and European American traditions. Junior is a culturally hybrid character grounded in both these traditions. Moreover, the genres used in the presentation of Junior contribute to developing the underlying themes of childhood and the adult world's treatment of children as well as the theme of patriarchy's destructive potential. Junior is an unloved and uncared for child, forced to grow up prematurely. Her life has been coloured by neglecting parents but also by abusive men. The trickster tale could have offered a happy ending, as the Cinderella tale could have done for Heed, and it also accentuates Junior's potential as dandelion child, that is, her

resilience and adaptability. However, the possibilities it suggests are curtailed by the other genres, especially by the Gothic tale that eventually traps her.

L – the Word Not Spoken

L is one of the most interesting characters in *Love*. She is an embodiment of the generically and culturally double-voiced nature of Morrison's eighth novel and crosses genres as well as cultures. L joins the line of Morrison's often intricate and puzzling narrators; in *The Bluest Eye* there are two main narrators, one third and one first person, who cooperate in the telling of the story; in *Beloved* several of the most important female characters participate in the narration; and in *Jazz* the narrator is a disembodied voice whose identity is only hinted at. In many of her novels Morrison lets the characters tell their own stories in direct speech within the frame of a third person narrative, outside the diegesis and without a diegetic interlocutor in the text. In *Love*, L's voice is reminiscent of the narrative voice in *Jazz* (Wardi 2005, 207), yet there is a significant difference between them. In *Jazz* the narrator remains unidentified¹¹⁰ whereas in *Love* she is gradually revealed to be an identifiable character. However, because of her status as ghost in the narrative's present, she moves more freely in time and space than is usually the case with first-person narrators; her voice appears strangely omnipresent and disembodied, and it is as if narrative restrictions of space and time do not apply to her. She not only comments on the events of the past when she is still alive, but also presides over the present of the story as a voice from the other side. Her aloofness with regard to the other characters as well as her ostensible detachment from their conflicts give her an air of authority. L is the only character in *Love* who is also a narrator, and like other character-narrators in Morrison's novels she speaks partly outside the diegesis of the text: her interlocutor is the reader and not another character, something which lifts her discursively above the other characters in the novel and makes her almost level with the third-person narrator.

L's tone of voice represents one of the hallmarks of Morrison's texts. She has on several occasions stated that she wants her prose to have effortless oral qualities. In an interview with Thomas LeClair she said that "[t]he part of the writing process that I fret is getting the sound without some mechanics that would direct the reader's attention to the

¹¹⁰ The concluding lines of *Jazz* are nothing if not ghostly as the narrator directs him- or herself to the reader: "If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where you're hands are. Now" (229). In light of these last lines the most likely interpretation would be to see the narrative voice as simply the voice of the book itself, asking us to watch our hands as they are turning the pages. The novel in other words brings to mind, or enacts, Gates' trope of the Talking Book.

sound” (Morrison [1981] 1993b, 373). In *Love*, this oral signature is particularly noticeable in L’s discourse. As narrator, L is a prominent presence. Her voice is distinct; intimate, and colloquial, even confessional, and the quality of the language is distinctly oral, as in the opening lines: “*The women’s legs are spread wide open, so I hum. Men grow irritable, but they know it’s all for them*” (Morrison 2003, 3). This *in medias res* opening is characteristic of Morrison’s novels, and is particularly noticeable in those novels that open with the voice of a first-person narrator, like *The Bluest Eye*; “Quiet as it’s kept...” and *Jazz*; “Sth, I know that woman.” These opening lines strike an oral note, as if passing on gossip, making the reader a confidante. The oral quality of the language heard in L’s voice reflects a vernacular tradition of storytelling more than it does a written tradition.

Bakhtin’s concept of *skaz* can serve to explicate L’s style and function.¹¹¹ *Skaz* is “*an orientation toward the oral form of narration, an orientation toward oral speech and its corresponding language characteristics*” (1984b, 191). However, it is also, and even more importantly “*an orientation toward someone else’s speech and only then, as a consequence, toward oral speech*” (1984b, 191). *Skaz* is typically a version of stylization, which means that “*someone else’s verbal manner is utilized by the author as a point of view, as a position indispensable to him for carrying on the story*” (Bakhtin 1984b, 190). In *skaz* as stylization, it is, in other words, not only the language of the other and its oral quality as such that are central, but equally as much the characteristics of the other person embodying the voice:

It seems to us that in most cases *skaz* is introduced precisely for the sake of *someone else’s voice*, a voice socially distinct, carrying with it precisely those points of view and evaluations necessary to the author. What is introduced here, in fact, is a storyteller, and a storyteller, after all, is not a literary person; he belongs in most cases to the lower social strata, to the common people (precisely this is important to the author) – and he brings with him oral speech. (Bakhtin, 1984b, 192)

The term “literary person” requires a closer examination. L is a literary person in the sense that she is a character in the novel. However, this is probably not what Bakhtin means by the term. Rather, it implies a narrator and/or character capable of narrating a story in a conventional literary and thus characteristically written language. There are thus two features of *skaz* as stylization that are of significance to Bakhtin: one of these is that the other, whose language is stylized, is an other that is socially distinct from the author. The other feature is that this is a person who in conventional terms could not be described as literary. L’s voice is intimate and colloquial, and her narration has clear spoken qualities. The epithet storyteller is

¹¹¹ In an article on *Song of Solomon* Elliott Butler-Evans writes that “Although Bakhtin’s formulation of *skaz* cannot be applied to Morrison’s text without some modification, its emphasis on the role of orality and storytelling is clearly related to her positions on both” (1995, 124).

thus a label that suits her role and presence in the novel. Her voice is not what one would associate with the voice of a “literary person”; she is not a character who is likely to be a fine writer but she could be an excellent teller of stories. *Skaz* is to some extent a feature of all narration (Bakhtin 1984b, 191), and the element of stylization is not always very prominent. However, despite its oral quality, L’s language is still written literary language, and this accounts for some of the novel’s double-voicedness: “To see in *skaz* only oral speech is to miss the main point. What is more, a whole series of intonational, syntactic, and other *language* phenomena in *skaz* (when the author is oriented toward another person’s speech) can be explained precisely by its double-voicedness, by the intersection within it of two voices and two accents” (Bakhtin 1984b, 192). *Love* is a clear case in point where the oral accent is heard through the novel’s written accent.

L draws attention to herself as narrator of the story and sometimes it seems as if the whole novel is her story, perhaps, even, her own invention. In her “introduction,” the opening chapter, she comments on what we are about to read:

They live like queens in Mr. Cosey’s house, but since that girl moved in there a while ago with a skirt short as underpants and no underpants at all, I’ve been worried about them leaving me here with nothing but an old folks’ tale to draw on. I know it’s trash: just another story made up to scare wicked females and correct unruly children. But it’s all I have. I know I need something else. Something better. Like a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down. I can hum to that. (Morrison 2003, 10)

This is precisely the story of *Love*. At the end of the novel we see how Heed and Christine, who have been living under the spell of Bill Cosey, take him down in the sense that they finally manage to free themselves from him, overcome their hostility toward each other, and share the dark secrets they have been carrying with them all their lives. It could also refer to L’s own interference in the life of Bill Cosey. This metatextual commentary enhances the oral qualities of the story and the place of the storyteller within it.¹¹²

It is not just her language that marks her as storyteller-narrator. Her personal characteristics are essential to her position in the novel. As character and narrator L appears knowledgeable and well informed as well as moral. She is an old woman, wise from age and experience. She knows the old communal stories, like the stories about the police heads. She remembers the way things used to be and can, like a storyteller, pass on information about the past. She is also familiar with the ways of the present, although she claims she does not fully

¹¹² The temporal location of this passage is interesting. If the novel were to be circular the passage would have to be retrospective. Like in *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator, and thus also the reader, know what has happened already from the opening. This is, however, not the case in *Love*. L’s opening is spoken after Junior moved into the house but before the events have developed and the outcome is clear.

understand them. It could even be said that L in many respects functions as a moral centre in the novel since she represents just the kind of voice and persona the reader can trust. Since L is both character and narrator she has the opportunity to characterize herself, which she does in the opening of the novel: “*My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet. Later on I was thought to have the wisdom maturity brings*” (Morrison 2003, 3). She describes herself as she has been seen by others. This underlines the dialogic formation of character which is so central in the novel: a character does not only exist in and of herself but also in and for others; this gives her credibility at the same time as it destabilizes her character. The words she uses are not her own words but the words of others used to describe her, and she can thus not be accused of promoting herself. At the same time, the words “considered,” “called” and “thought to” are conspicuously vague and therefore do not convey authority, and they remind us of the possibility that other people may be wrong about her. L’s reliability is therefore debateable.

L opens the novel by commenting on today’s moral standards and makes it clear that she resents the over-explicit sexual behaviour and the general lack of subtlety that now prevail. She implies that understatement is more her style: “*Nowadays silence is looked on as odd and most of my race has forgotten the beauty of meaning much by saying little*” (Morrison 2003, 3). She describes herself as background noise: “*I’m background – the movie music that comes along when the sweethearts see each other for the first time, or when the husband is walking the beachfront alone wondering if anybody saw him doing the bad thing he couldn’t help*” (4). This enigmatic comment makes more sense only after we have read the book and know that she is a ghost that haunts the living. She admits that her music, her unseen presence, influences people, but her conclusion is nevertheless that her hum “*is mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world*” (4). Her self-defined presence is almost an echo of Toni Morrison’s own characterization of her narrative: “To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about” (1984, 341). In other words, L presents herself as a morally old-fashioned woman, modest and discreet, and as a marginal presence rather than someone who is the centre of attention. She is background music, not solo artist. However, the ambivalences of the opening warn us that there might be more to L than meets the eye, and the ear, at first encounter.

L embodies both the figure of the servant and the ancestor – the latter is a figure often found in African American texts and that can be traced back to a black, vernacular storytelling tradition, whereas the former is a presence in many novels, for instance in Gothic family

romances. Her position as loyal servant to the Cosey family situates her simultaneously outside and inside the story, thus echoing Bakhtin's description of the servant in literature: "The servant is the eternal 'third man' in the private lives of his lords. Servants are the most privileged witnesses to private life. People are as little embarrassed in a servant's presence as they are in the presence of an ass, and at the same time the servant is called upon to participate in all intimate aspects of personal life" (1981, 124–125). Like other "literary servants," for instance Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), another Gothic family romance, she has access to private information, yet occupies a seemingly disinterested role. As an in-house servant she has been a member of the household without being a member of the family. Without a family of her own, she has devoted her life to serving her master and employer, and caring for his family. We sense that L is both meddling and inquisitive at the same time as she, as a good servant should, knows her place.

L also embodies the ancestor figure, who has been a frequent presence in African American literature, and in *Love* we see the ancestor as servant, or, the servant as ancestor. The ancestors in Morrison's texts are invariably women. Barbara Hill-Rigney says that "[t]he African mothers, the ancestor figures as Morrison often refers to them, are the primary namers in Morrison's novels, just as they are the transmitters of culture and the inventors of language, itself the operative agency of culture. It is they who always 'say the important things'" (1991, 45). The ancestor is a bearer of traditions and thus represents continuity and a link to the past. Like Aunt Jimmie in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva in *Sula*, Circe and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, and True Belle in *Jazz*, L is the female elder "in the know," the glue that holds the family together when the going gets tough, and the one who interferes and does what she deems expedient in times of crises. Only, here it is not her own family but that of her employer that is at stake. L, in fact, has no family of her own. The ancestor is a figure with more authority than the servant since the servant, given his/her position as such, inevitably occupies a socially subservient role. The ancestor could play a central and authoritarian role in the community, a position not available to a servant, except in subversive ways. L intriguingly combines these two roles and represents a revision of the character of the black servant. The loyal black servant, or slave, is typically found in plantation novels by white authors, often resembling an uncle Tom or a black mammy. In *Love* the loyal servant is decidedly of an independent mind, and since her employers also are black there is no racial gap between employer and servant. Both Heed and Christine seem to have regarded L almost as a family member. They associate her with the sweet smell of cinnamon bread and genuinely miss her after she is dead, but, significantly, they cannot remember her name.

L is a central agent in the dialogic mechanisms of the novel. She is of immense importance to the dialogic presentation of characters and events because of her status as character-narrator. She offers the clearest testimony of Bill Cosey's character as positive. It is L who describes "*his tenderness cradling Julia in the sea*" (Morrison 2003, 200), presented to us as one of the novel's rare instances of true love. Likewise, it is L who closes the novel and warns against being morally judgemental: "*I don't care what you think. He didn't have an S stitched on his shirt and he didn't own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love*" (200). L's closing remarks serve the purpose of defending Bill Cosey.

Ironically, perhaps, it is her position as character that weakens her position as moral authority in the novel. One of the morals of the story is that there are many angles from which to regard and evaluate characters and events, and this is also valid for L. There is no doubt that Bill Cosey occupies a prominent position in her life: "*... the first time I saw Mr. Cosey, he was standing in the sea, holding Julia, his wife, in his arms. I was five; he was twenty-four and I'd never seen anything like that [...] I believed then it was the sunlight that brought those tears to my eyes – not the sight of all that tenderness coming out of the sea. Nine years later, when I heard he was looking for house help, I ran all the way to his door*" (Morrison 2003, 64). Far from neutral and detached she is smitten by Cosey and, like the other characters, fascinated by him. As a character, though a ghostly one, there are things she does not know; she cannot be entirely omniscient. L has never known the events of that fatal summer day when Heed and Christine were planning their picnic. This incident has never been talked about by anyone and is unknown and therefore unspeakable, except for the third-person narrator. Neither is L merely a passive witness to events or background humming. On the contrary, L is in fact one of the most important agents in the novel, and is directly responsible for the present situation of Heed and Christine. A central mystery in the novel is the death of Bill Cosey. Vida is convinced he was killed but is at a loss as to who did it because "those who might have wanted him dead – Christine, a husband or two, and a few white businessmen – were nowhere near. Just her, L, and one waiter" (37). Towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that L killed Bill Cosey, tore up his will, in which he left everything but his boat to his mistress Celestial, supplied a fake will as replacement and thus "[g]ave them [Heed and Christine] a reason to stay together" (201). No one suspects L of wanting to kill Bill Cosey since she has nothing to gain from his death, and there were lots of people who could have wanted him dead. However, L did not kill Cosey for personal gain or because she wanted revenge: she did it out of love for Bill Cosey's family, and can thus be

added to the list of Morrison's characters who kill their loved ones with premeditation out of concern for them and their surroundings. So L is both the caring house servant, willing to protect her employers at any cost; the ancestor figure who does what she can to keep the family together, and a murderess who poisoned her employer out of love, firmly believing that the end justifies the means. She is a generically composite figure, summoning up such genres as the Gothic family romance, African American folk traditions and even the murder tale.

L is the novel's master cook and food occupies a central place in *Love*; it is connected to questions of genre, and to class, gender and power.¹¹³ The distribution of hunger in Morrison's novel is in many respects in correspondence with what Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran discuss in their work on food and desire in nineteenth and twentieth century women's writing. The prevailing Victorian ideal of womanhood deemphasized female sexuality (Heller and Moran 2003, 22), deemphasized the physicality of the female body even:

The "lady-like anorexia," with its emphasis on the physical delicacy of the middle- or upper-class lady (...) is part of this class discourse that situates the appetitive woman as lower class, either as the stout, buxom servant, or as the fallen woman or prostitute. Such class polarities could also be mapped onto race, distinguishing the white "lady" from the sexually appetitive native or slave. (Heller and Moran 2003, 23)

In *Love*, Heed, once lower-class, now an upper-middle class widow, arthritic and physically delicate, is devoid of physical hunger and cannot cook, partly because she has been kept out of the kitchen due to her class and position. When Junior asks her "'Why wouldn't they let you in the kitchen,'" Heed answers "'Oh, I wasn't much of a cook. Besides, I was the wife, you know, the hostess, and the hostess never ...'" (Morrison 2003, 125). Junior, the lower-class opportunist, on the other hand, displays unashamed hunger for physical fulfilment, and also claims to be a fair cook. L is interesting in this context, being widely known for her cooking skills, and she evokes issues of class as well as gender. As cook she occupies a traditionally feminine position as nurturer and provider of food, and in this position L enjoys great respect and also power.

As domestic space the kitchen can be interpreted in contrasting ways. It can be seen as a confining and oppressive space that keeps women away from the public and political arena, but it can also be seen as an alternative and empowering space. Patricia Moran writes that "(t)he importance of the kitchen as a space in which women can promote 'ways of knowing'

¹¹³ Knowledge of and respect for food sometimes appear like moral indicators. L is disgusted as she watches the boy Theo, one of the gang of rapists, carelessly scoop the different dishes onto the styrofoam plates at Maceo's: "*I got so heated watching Theo disrespect food I dropped the bread into my cup, where it fell apart like grits*" (2003, 67).

antithetical to the values of a patriarchal, racist, and capitalist culture has been argued with particular passion and eloquence by women of color” (Moran 2003, 217).¹¹⁴ In Morrison’s fiction the preparation of food is typically presented positively, as in *Beloved* where Baby Suggs’ culinary feast takes on biblical proportions as she feeds the whole community with meagre means – in celebration of her returned family and in defiance of slavery and racism. Baby Suggs is the novel’s ancestor figure, healer, and also a character associated with love, and thus she shares traits with L. The struggle over Cosey’s inheritance concerns the continuation of patriarchal structures, despite the fact, or rather because of the fact, that he has no son to pass his dynasty on to. It is a formal, legal affair meant to secure patrilineal succession which, due to the absence of a son, ends up like a triangular squabble involving his wife, his granddaughter and his mistress. On this scene L represents alternative spheres in terms of class as well as gender. She is the female servant who uses cooking and nurturing to settle the matter when she decides to poison Bill Cosey with foxglove. Symbolically, the forged testament is written on one of her menus, thus bringing together a legal, masculine and a domestic, feminine sphere. The prominence of food in Morrison’s novel, accentuates L’s dual role as servant and ancestor figure, but her association with the ancestor figure magnifies her importance since it does not imply the subservience of the servant.

The novel elegantly draws attention to and eventually also puns on L’s name. The other characters wonder about it and in her second entry in the novel she declares that “[a]nybody who remembers what my real name is is dead or gone and nobody inquires now [...] Some thought it was Louise or Lucille because they used to see me take the usher’s pencil and sign my tithing envelopes with L. Others, from hearing people mention or call me, said it was El for Eleanor or Elvira” (Morrison 2003, 65). Her name is never mentioned, it is the word not spoken, but is revealed indirectly by herself at the end of the story: “if your name is the subject of First Corinthians, chapter 13, it’s natural to make it your business” (199).¹¹⁵ Thus it could be said that love/Love, both with and without a capital letter, killed Bill Cosey. Again there is a certain parallel to Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, who exercises “long-distance love” after her death, a love that literally still touches Sethe: “Just the fingers, she thought. Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out

¹¹⁴ Moran refers to Paule Marshall as an example: “Paule Marshall writes that the women who gathered in her mother’s kitchen at the end of long days spent providing domestic labor for white women sought a form of therapy there” (2003, 217). It is in other words a parallel to what Alice Walker writes about her mother’s gardening.

¹¹⁵ In a conversation with Cornel West, Morrison said that “whatever else the story was about, it was important that the word ‘love’ be withdrawn from the text. I went over it and over it to make sure that that word was never used except by somebody who had earned it” (Morrison 2004, 20).

of this no way. Sethe bowed her head and sure enough – they were there. Lighter now, no more than the strokes of a bird feather, but unmistakably caressing fingers” (1988, 95).¹¹⁶

L fits seamlessly into the Gothic aspects of *Love* at the same time as she evokes African American folk culture and folk tales. Bernard Bell has suggested that Morrison’s familiarity with the Gothic genre should be seen in light of her knowledge of African American ghost tales: “On one level, perhaps, the early influence of black folklore, storytelling, and ghost stories explains the Gothic element in her novels” (Bell 2004, 175). In *Love* the presence of supernatural elements is a point of confluence between African American folktales and the Gothic genre and these two genres come tentatively together in Junior, but more unequivocally so in the character of L. Both domesticity and the presence of the supernatural become tropes where the centripetal forces between the genres, their parallels, are strong. L is thus an embodiment of the culturally and generically double-voiced nature of Morrison’s fiction. L occupies a space between the living and the dead, she represents a kind of spectral reality. Her ontological status as ghost does not become clear until the last parts of the novel, and L’s location and uncertain existence, made palpable through her already mentioned strangely disembodied voice, is an uncanny element that haunts the reader. She describes herself as though she were actually present among the living; “*I was resting by the sink and blowing on a cup of pot liquor before dipping my bread in. I could see her pacing like a panther or some such*” (Morrison 2003, 66), and her “life” as dead seems to be “*just more of the same*” (135) – a continuation of life among the living, except no one sees her. No one but the readers discovers that Bill Cosey was murdered and that L was a killer. In this respect L holds her promise; she is discreet. When we reach the end of the novel and realize that *Love* is also a murder story, a secret divulged to the readers but not to the characters, and that L is indeed a ghost, the impression of horror becomes more concrete and problematizes the boundary between living and dead. A phrase like “*I glide there still*” (65), which appears enigmatic early in the novel, gains meaning in light of her “ghosthood.”

The porous boundary between life and death is of crucial importance also in Morrison’s *Beloved* and may be seen as a hallmark of her literary style. *Beloved* has been said to reflect the African American world view that death is merely a threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead: “Certainly in the black folk tradition, a ghost might occasionally appear among the living – to indicate that all is well, to teach a lesson, or to guide the living to some good fortune, including buried treasure” (Trudier Harris 1991, 156).

¹¹⁶ In fact, it seems as if L has developed from both Sethe, who kills as an act of love, and Baby Suggs, whose love is felt in the community after her death.

The permeable boundary between the two worlds and the dialogue between them are in *Love* represented by conversations between the dead and the living. L communicates directly with the readers but not, it seems, with the other characters. Apart from feeling the intense smell of cinnamon-flavoured bread in the attic of the abandoned hotel, the other characters do not suspect her active role in the narrative events and do not communicate with her. Whether or not they know of her ghostly existence is unclear. Heed and Christine continue their conversation after Heed has passed away and Junior has been communicating with the late deceased Bill Cosey. L and Celestial are also in touch and see each other “on the other side” as they both sit by Bill Cosey’s grave. What makes the associations with African American folk culture so strong is the fact that the characters react to a certain spectral presence as if it were natural; none of them shows any fear. The smell of cinnamon bread appears only to be expected and Christine evinces no surprise at her ability to communicate with Heed after Heed’s death.

L is a complex and enigmatic character who enhances the novel’s dialogic focus on boundaries and transitions. Her character also underlines the cultural hybridity of *Love*. In her roles as storyteller, ancestor, servant, cook and nurturer she reflects black folkloric forms as well as western written genres, like the Gothic novel, perhaps even the crime story. L occupies a prominent place in the novel. She is important not the least because she accentuates the power of the feminine sphere. As matriarch and cook she, as the only character, takes on Bill Cosey and actually defeats him. However, the feminine ascent she thus prepares the ground for does not turn out as intended. The stalemate situation of Heed and Christine’s rivalry is not much better than their dependency on Bill Cosey.

3. Falling in *Love*

The climax of the novel is enacted in the attic of the old Cosey hotel. Junior has prepared the grounds for this climactic ending; she has literally functioned as door opener as she has brought Romen to the old hotel to make love, the first occasion in years that anyone has entered the resort. This forewarns us of the centrality of the Cosey Hotel, a quintessentially Gothic setting, and Junior, a character with “tricksterish” ambitions, in the novel’s final parts. It is also an ending that brings out the novel’s melodramatic potential.

Heed’s fall down the ladder is a dramatic moment that causes a reversal in the relationship between Heed and Christine as well as in the relationship between Junior and Romen. The use of the stairs as setting brings us back to the opening of the novel where the

icy steps outside One Monarch Street foreshadow the ending. Stairs and corridors are familiar in Gothic texts with castles or mansions as settings, and they are also frequently used in melodramas. Writing about the melodrama as a film genre Thomas Elsaesser states that “[l]etting the emotions rise and then bringing them suddenly down with a thump is an extreme example of dramatic discontinuity, and a similar, vertiginous drop in the emotional temperature punctuates a good many melodramas – almost invariably played out against the vertical axis of the staircase” (1992, 528). In *Love*, too, stairs are crucial in the context of dramatic and important emotional incidents leading to change in the lives of Heed and Christine. The staircase and corridor figure in Heed’s fall from innocence and into experience: “Heed runs into the service entrance and up the back stairs, excited by the picnic to come and the flavour of her bubble gum” (Morrison 2003, 190). As she ascends she is elated, and the pink bubble gum accentuates her childishness. The event itself is even accompanied by *melos*,¹¹⁷ by music “so sweet and urgent Heed shakes her hips to the beat as she moves down the hallway” (190). After her meeting with Cosey, “Heed bolts back down the stairs. The spot on her chest she didn’t know she had is tingling. When she reaches the door, she is panting as though she has run the length of the beach instead of a flight of stairs” (191). Heed’s other, and physical, fall, from the ladder in the attic, is described in filmatic terms as this is how it is seen by Christine: “the falling is like a silent movie and the soft twisted hands with no hope of hanging on to rotted wood dissolve, fade to black as movies always do” (177). Also here the downward movement corresponds to an emotional change. Before the fall, they each feel for the other “a hatred so pure, so solemn, it feels beautiful, almost holy” (177). After the fall Christine is overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness and abandonment, and “[t]he holy feeling is still alive, as is its purity, but it is altered now, overwhelmed by desire” (177).

Morrison has said about her novels that “at the end of every book there is epiphany, discovery, somebody has learned something that they never would otherwise” (Koenen [1980] 1994c, 74). The past, which has been omnipresent in the novel, is brought to the surface and confronted in an almost *Ibsenesque* manner; events of the past have impinged on the present all the time and eventually can no longer be kept at bay. Skeletons of the past stir, literally speaking: “There in a little girl’s bedroom an obstinate skeleton stirs, clacks, refreshes itself” (Morrison 2003, 177). The Gothic setting of the dark and dusty attic with its many closed-off rooms full of boxes containing memorabilia from the past takes on a symbolic significance. It reflects the minds of Heed and Christine as they finally retrieve and

¹¹⁷ The adding of *melos*, music, to drama was done to underline emotions, hence the term melodrama. This brings to mind L’s background humming.

confront a repressed past. The elements from the past they have lived with and reworked in their minds are mostly the wrongs they each think the other guilty of. They have suppressed their unique childhood friendship as well as the episodes from the past that first introduced distance between them; when Bill Cosey touched Heed and subsequently was observed by Christine while masturbating. The retrieval of Christine's yellow bathing suit, the one she puked on after watching her grandfather, brings on these memories.

Despite the central position of Bill Cosey as character, mystery and object of hate and fascination, *Love*, like most of Morrison's novels, primarily focuses on the lives of girls and women. Morrison has stated: "I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really all about" (Morrison [1983] 1994e, 154), and what is ultimately the focal point in *Love* is the relationship between Heed and Christine. There are clear parallels between the endings of *Love* and *Sula*. *Sula* is also the story of a very special friendship between two girls, a friendship that breaks over a man, but here there is no reunion at the end, only Nel's belated recognition of the fact that the person she misses the most in her life is her old-time friend Sula:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

Morrison has described her intentions with *Sula* in the following way: "What I really wanted to say about the friendship between Nel and Sula was that if you really do have a friend, a real other, another person that complements your life, you should stay with him or her. And to show how valuable that was, I showed a picture of what life is without that person, no matter how awful that person might have treated you" (Morrison [1980] 1994c, 74). *Love* eloquently shows how the lives of Heed and Christine have been without each other, and it also hints at how their lives could have been had they stayed together. It is not their conflicts with Bill Cosey – grandfather, husband and father figure – that have corrupted their lives; it is their emotional and/or physical distance from each other. Writing about *Sula*, Karla Holloway says that

... I understood that this was not a book about women bonding to each other. Instead it is a book about each woman bonding to self, to a sense of "her self" as *woman* [...] But instead of seeing that this awareness is essentially an acknowledgement or remembrance of the bond that existed between two friends, I see Nel's awareness as an acknowledgement of femaleness, a woman whole, both in and of herself. (Holloway and Demetrakopoulos 1987, 67)

It is, importantly, both women's bonding to each other and women's sense of self that are at stake since these are two sides of the same issue. Neither Christine nor Heed is complete without the other. The only times in their lives when they were really happy were the times they were together as friends because this was the only time that their selves were complete. If we look at the lives of some of the other female characters, like May and Junior, they are lonely women because they miss the close and reliable relationship to another woman.

Junior, although instrumental in the novel's final scenes, is herself sidelined. Unlike Christine and Heed, Junior experiences no catharsis. On the contrary, her trickster qualities are curtailed as she is trapped by the Gothic tale she has been working within without fully understanding its implications. The Gothic tale offers her no sustained powers. Her freedom is curtailed by her involvement in the feud between Heed, Christine and Bill Cosey. Although she is the one most literally responsible for Heed's fall this also becomes her own fall. The melodramatic and Gothic tale of passion, jealousy, and past deeds traps her and becomes her Briar Patch. In an African American animal tale the rabbit succeeds in escaping his enemy, Mr. Fox, by manipulating the fox to place him in a Briar Patch, a habitat well-known to the rabbit, who subsequently escapes. Junior, too, tries to manipulate her surroundings, but unlike Br'er Rabbit, Junior cannot this time run off from the scene with a "lickety split." For the trickster, there is always a way out. Jeanne Rosier Smith writes that "[p]erpetual wanderers, tricksters can escape virtually any situation, and they possess a boundless ability to survive" (1997, 7-8), whereas for the picaresque the opportunity for escape is limited and always conditioned by context and circumstance. At the end of the novel Romen and Christine have Junior locked up in one of the rooms downstairs in One Monarch Street, and her freedom depends on their will. For a while Junior appeared like a potential tar baby figure; people attaching themselves to her would face problems detaching themselves without suffering. However, in this grand finale Junior is reduced to a scheming, but helpless young girl, divested of her powers.

Throughout the novel we have seen Junior's powers but also the gradual weakening of these, and there are episodes, or circumstances, that show her loss of strength and independence. One such episode is when Junior first takes her boot off when she and Romen make love in the old hotel, and when Romen holds her foot and kisses it the last time they are together in the house on Monarch Street after Junior has caused Heed's fall. Junior's powers seem to weaken as her vulnerability is revealed. Her relationship to Bill Cosey is literally fading, and his spectral presence vanishes after Junior becomes too involved in the relationship between Heed and Christine. After Heed's fall Junior searches for him but cannot

find him: “He had been missing for days now, and had not appeared in the hotel attic or returned to his room. Confronting his portrait, eager to report her cleverness in the hotel, she had suppressed suspicions of his betrayal, ...” (Morrison 2003, 196). She is not victorious in the end; rather, she has been outwitted. Unlike the trickster who can trick his way out of any situation, at the end of the novel *Junior* is like one of the Gothic’s entrapped women.

What emerges in *Love* as the only true and certain thing from among the debris of deconstructed genres and complicated lives is the true love between Heed and Christine. L describes it in the following way as:

a child’s first chosen love. If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one. (Morrison 2003, 199)

It is the love of children, love formed in childhood before an awareness of boundaries, of prejudice and social class, has been formed, before the existence of hate. This is, arguably, a romantic view of childhood, or, perhaps rather, a romantic view of children. Their love for each other transcends everything, and when Romen finds them they lie in each other’s arms, one dead, the other living. Curiously, it is not even absolutely clear who is dead and who is still alive. The novel conspicuously obscures this fact. Heed has fallen down the stairs and broken several bones in her body, but Christine is experiencing symptoms of a heart attack. Most likely, though, Heed is the one who has died, but there are signs that Christine is about to join her.

Love ends like an illustration of its most important paratext, the passage in the Bible that gives the novel its name; 1 Corinthians, 13¹¹⁸:

I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have not love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains – but if I have not love I am nothing.

Christine and Heed regain their dignity only in the novel’s finale where they manage to put all the conflicts of the past behind them. In their loveless and unhappy lives they appear undignified and sometimes foolish, like noisy gongs and clanging bells; they are not in harmony with their selves and with the world around them. Romen also associates lovelessness and moral depravity with a lack of musicality. After the gang-rape of Faye, he hears the outcries of Faye’s friends, “their shrieks, their concern, as cymbal clashes, stressing, but not competing with, the trumpet blast of what Theo had called him” (Morrison 2003, 47).

¹¹⁸ It is not the first time Morrison uses or refers to this book of the Bible. In *Song of Solomon*, First Corinthians is named after this chapter, and in *Tar Baby* the epigraph to the novel is a quote from 1 Corinthians 1:11.

Morrison herself has stated that “I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation” (Morrison [1981] 1993b, 374), and this is very clear in *Love*. There is a strong element of catharsis; evil is confronted and exorcised, and love prevails. The ending is nevertheless more tragic than happy as it is clear that Heed and Christine, who as children found a relationship and a love not many people are privileged enough to find, have wasted their lives hating each other, and it is only as one of them is dying that they manage to retrieve their love. The ending is thus deeply ambivalent; *Love* is a story of wasted and troubled lives, but it also shows the existence of a love so strong it has survived a lifetime of neglect and abuse.

4. Conclusions: Unspoken Sentences

The different genres at work in *Love* constitute the novel’s aesthetic doubleness as it draws on genres and texts from the African American as well as from the white western tradition. The novel’s polyphony of genres introduces intertextual associations as varied as Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Br’er Rabbit and other trickster tales, to mention some. This cultural aesthetic hybridity is particularly visible in Morrison’s construction of literary characters. Again, Derrida’s description of texts as participating rather than belonging in genres is relevant. None of the characters belong unequivocally in any one genre but are best seen as participating in several.

The characters are compared and contrasted through the various genres they participate in. On some points the different genres converge, thus showing similarities between the lives of the different characters. This mechanism could be seen as the working of centripetal forces, forces that unite. On other points the genres are discrepant and show differences between the lives of the characters, something which could be seen as the working of centrifugal forces. This is particularly visible in the context of Heed and Christine who both are characterized through the genres of the Gothic, the Cinderella fairy tale and the blues. Heed’s strong trickster features set her apart from Heed and Christine while the genre of the Gothic become a common frame for these characters.

Also within each character we can see that the different genres work to centre and decentre the characters, thus simultaneously suggesting and resisting closure. This dialogic presentation of character also causes the novel’s themes to unfold. *Love*’s investigation into interhuman relationships and the nature of love is the theme most explicitly dealt with, but from this grow also the themes of the adult world’s cruel treatment of children and

patriarchy's oppression of women. We see several versions of a problematic childhood and its destructive effects on adult life, and we see many complicated relationships between men and women. Race is also a factor, although it is not placed at the front, primarily represented by Dark's racial treason that throws dark shadows over the family. Race thus forms a backdrop, similar to what it does in *The Color Purple* where the murder of Celie's father has conditioned much of her life.

This dialogic aesthetic forces its readers to perform relational readings. The various dialogic mechanisms between characters, time levels, and literary genres and styles unsettle the text, and its refusal to clarify and draw stable conclusions challenges its readers. As the narrative develops, the reader has to juggle an increasing number of perspectives at the same time, and the creation of meaning is an ongoing process in which the reader takes active part. In other words, the text opens up a dialogic space, a third space, where we as readers can and must enter the text. Morrison herself has repeatedly made this point, and she has been quite explicit about the role of the reader in relation to her texts:

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it (Morrison [1983] 1994f, 164).

She has compared these strategies to jazz and African American music:

Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that – because I want the feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more – that you can't have it all right now. (Morrison [1983] 1994f, 155)

This point has also been made by critics, and Marilyn Mobley McKenzie states that “[t]o assess the significance of Morrison's novels, it is critical to interrogate how her narrative aesthetic and cultural politics have shaped spaces for the readers to enter the texts” (2004, 221–222). It is, however, important to bear in mind that the ambiguities are constructed and deliberate and not the result of an improvised, jazz-like composition. A novel is not, like a jazz performance, the result of improvisation but rather of careful composition.

In light of its lack of stability and clear textual authority it may be tempting to conclude that *Love* is written in a truly postmodern mode and that its constantly shifting positions and genres are a play with the reader. However, this is not the case. The variety of perspectives and relations do not imply that existence is arbitrary and that the truth does not

exist, but it warns the reader not to make hasty conclusions and accept simplified, absolute interpretations. An event can appear different from different perspectives; an act that to some may seem like an inexplicable atrocity may to others appear more reasonable, or at least explicable. When discussing *Sula*, Morrison compared the portrait of its main character to a cracked mirror: “I thought of Sula as a cracked mirror, fragments and pieces we have to see independently and put together” (Morrison [1981] 1993b, 376). The implication of this metaphor is that there is a way of piecing the fragments together, it is not arbitrary how we do this, but the process of construction is itself illuminating as it demands that we consider both each separate part and its relation to the totality. In *Love* the elegant double C monogram on the plates is a mystery, and different people interpret it differently. It could refer to the “sweet Cosey Child” mentioned on the will written on L’s menu, in which case it could refer to both Christine and Heed but also to Celestial. It could be the initials of “Christine Cosey” or “Celestial Cosey,” his possible wife to be. Neither the characters nor the readers know what it stands for, but it can be assumed that the letters had a specific meaning when they were printed on the plates. Although we cannot access it this does not mean that the letters do not have a concrete reference. L’s name and the sign outside Maceo’s saying “Maceo’s Café—ria” are similar cases; L’s name is forgotten and she is just referred to by her initial letter, and “they gave up calling Maceo’s Maceo’s or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it’s known as” (Morrison 2003, 65). Time and lack of use have obscured but not obliterated the original words.

Since *Love* shows that reality is many-faceted and sometimes contradictory it follows logically that closure and finality must be absent. In this way *Love*’s dialogism and generic polyphony become ethical concerns that force us to always take the other and the other’s perspective and situation into account. Perspectival dialogism, the coexistence of parallels and oppositions, the interrelatedness of the past and the present, and the heteroglossia of different genres emphasize the relationality, but not the relativity, of existence. Characters are constructed through different perspectives; as parallels and oppositions to each other; on the basis of both past and present events, and their lives are seen as comprising different yet related genres. The other does thus not exist in isolation but is a dynamic part existence. At the end of the novel the dialogic creation of character surfaces in a very concrete way as Heed and Christine reflect on the nature of their relationship to Bill Cosey and on their view of him as a human being:

We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere. He was everywhere. And nowhere.

We make him up?
He made himself up.
We must have helped. (Morrison 2003, 189)

They realize that their picture of him does not equal him as he really was; into their image of him they have projected themselves and their prejudices and hurt feelings. The Bill Cosey they have spent their lives obsessing about is only part reality, the rest is imagination, and where the boundary between the two goes is uncertain.

L seems to conclude on the issue of Bill Cosey at the end of the novel where she attempts to wrap things up: “*You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. Depends on what you hold dear – the what or the why. [...] He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love*” (Morrison 2003, 200). However, L’s status as moral commentator offers another challenge; she is a murderess, who has murdered with cold blood believing that the end justifies the means, in a position to condone or condemn other people?

The title of Morrison’s eighth novel indicates that it is a novel about love, but it is confusingly so; it does not give an obvious answer to the question of what love is. Susana Vega-Gonzalez comments that “[a]lthough the novel is supposed to deal with love, the term is only mentioned once by a living character” (2004, 218), and she concludes that “[t]hus, *Love* is more about the absence of love in the form of hate, betrayal, lust and deceit rather than about its presence” (218). Anissa Janine Wardi sees love as having to do with action and deeds rather than with abstract thoughts and feelings: “Rather than seek love’s perfection, Morrison examines love’s work, work that renews, recovers, and heals” (2005, 215). However, love is indeed present, and it is a most abstract thing. Love is the name not spoken in *Love*, and redemption lies in the ability to know and experience love. L, as her name suggests, is an experienced witness to love:

Before I was reduced to singsong, I saw all kinds of mating. Most are two-night stands trying to last a season. Some, the rip-tide ones, claim exclusive right to the real name, even though everybody drowns in its wake. People with no imagination feed it with sex – the clown of love. (Morrison 2003, 63)

“The real name,” so euphemistically referred to here, is love. Romen realizes this as he realizes that sex is the clown of love: “Stupid! Clown! He was trying to warn him, make him listen, tell him that the old Romen, the sniveling one who couldn’t help untying shoelaces from an unwilling girl’s wrist, was hipper than the one who couldn’t help flinging a willing girl around an attic” (195). Junior, too, comes to realize what love is in the end after Romen has licked her mangled toes: “The jitter intensified and suddenly she knew its name. Brand-new, completely alien, it invaded her, making her feel wide open and whole, already approved

and confirmed by the lollipop lick. That was why, later, when he'd asked her a second time, she told him the truth" (196). After his realization, Romen runs to the aid of the two old women, whereas for Junior it is too late, at least this time around; she cannot undo things already done. For Christine and Heed it is not entirely too late and they re-experience their love for each other before they die. The last words Heed says to Christine are: "Love. I really do" (194). These are epiphanic moments for the characters. In *Love*, love, then, is a sublime experience elevated above sex and gender issues, and it has to be experienced, not explicated. This is also what the novel does; it shows us, but does not tell us. The ability to really and truly see and relate to the other, to be moved by the other, is a condition for the experience of true love. When Heed married Bill Cosey, the new roles she came to play as Christine's stepmother, Cosey's mistress, and possible heiress to the Cosey Resort, made Heed and Christine lose sight of each other, and lose sight of themselves in the other. This is why they could not love each other unconditionally like they did as children.

Concluding Remarks

The close reading of the texts in this study has shown that literary categories, like genres, traditions, and even literary periods, appear susceptible to breaking down on closer analysis. No absolute, defining lines can be drawn between different genres and traditions; they tend to glide into each other and intertwine. However, such problems of delineation should not lead to the conclusion that these categories are obsolete and useless as frames of reference. Even at a time when globalization and transnational perspectives become increasingly important there will always be a need to relate texts to traditions and genres, but we need to do so with caution, remembering that they are not given, stable structures, but rather flexible hybrid paradigms that change with time and use.

Genres and traditions are in constant movement through processes of continuance and rupture, repetition and innovation. Charles Rosen writes that

[t]here are basically two ways to kill a tradition. The first is a stiff-necked adherence to established practices, rejecting any adjustment for the changes in outlook and new ideals that naturally come to pass in time, an adherence that transforms and exhibits the works of the past as a collection of fossils... The second way is a process of radical modernization that takes no account of history and brings the tradition up to date while ignoring the social and artistic ideals that made possible its creation and development. (2012, 398).

Rosen's statement is relevant also in the context of genres and a tradition like African American literature. Genres and aesthetic forms can be used in unconventional ways in a text and thus represent renewal, but knowledge of their history and prior use can add to the understanding of the text and its strategies. Sometimes change and renewal are brought on, and fossilization prevented, by cultural meetings and crossings, as shown in my discussion of the texts in this study.

Close readings of individual texts, aiming to interpret their meaning and purpose, are necessary in order to investigate how the texts use and relate to already existing genres and traditions. My analyses of Toomer's *Cane*, Walker's *The Color Purple* and Morrison's *Love* confirm that genres from the African American tradition and from the European American or western tradition mostly coexist dialogically, as a polyphony, in the architectonics of the texts: they are distinguishable voices contributing to the textual whole, and neither merge nor exclude each other. The analyses further reveal that African American and European American genres and forms do not only represent centrifugal forces in the texts, that is, they are not generally in opposition to each other. As often as not they serve to enhance the same points and thus represent centripetal forces. For instance, in *Cane*, the Gothic, Symbolism and the blues highlight the theme of loneliness, one of the book's central themes. In other regards

they represent centrifugal forces and contrast with each other. Even in such a curious collocation of genres as the slave narrative, the epistolary novel and the blues – bringing together as unlikely literary friends as Harriet Jacobs, Samuel Richardson and Ida Cox – genres serve to challenge, enhance and complement each other. Literary double-consciousness is thus embedded in the texts' cultural double-voicedness; the literary body has a composite identity, reflecting Du Bois' concept of twoness: "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" ([1903] 1994, 11) in the same body.

This shows that intercultural influences should not be considered threats to the purity and solidity of genres and traditions, but are better seen as representing developments of them. Ethnic literatures and texts commonly not included in the western canon are in fact important participants in it since they both continue and revise its central literary genres, thus contributing to enrichment and renewal of established literary paradigms. It further shows that western canonical genres represent no threat to the identity of African American literature since the latter's treatment of them is both conscious and creative and the result of neither mimicry nor subordination. In other words, there is no reason to consider the textual and cultural dialogues and crossings as anything but valuable, for African American as well as American and traditional western literature; aesthetic and cultural hybridity is more likely than not an asset. Derek Walcott's praise of syncretic creole culture is valid also for African American literature. He uses a cracked, reassembled vase as metaphor: "Break a vase, and the love that assembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole." (1998, 69). The quilt as metaphor could also be employed; the fragments of fabric sewn together form new patterns and establish new connections while carrying memories of the past.

What this illustrates is that literature springs from and references a specific social and historical context, it is situated, which can cause significant differences between texts originating in different cultures, but literature also references a textual universe consisting of communities of texts, and these operate across social and historical boundaries, making it possible for Tolstoy to be the Tolstoy of the Zulus. The genre of the slave narrative may have originated in slave societies in America, but this does not mean that the genre cannot travel and contribute to other genres and discourses. Likewise, the epistolary novel, with its eighteenth-century European origin, has shown itself malleable and usable also in other contexts. Then there is also the human aspect; literature expresses a common human experience that translates across cultures. The two-ness that DuBois talks about can in an international context favourably be expanded into a notion of plurality. When the literary texts

that form the object for literary analysis embody this plurality it is essential that we meet them with reading practices that investigate conversations between traditions. The question should not be whether a text belongs in a tradition or a genre, but rather to what extent and how it participates in it.

There are a number of areas within literary studies that would benefit from reading across traditions and where such practice would facilitate new insight. One such area is the study of literature and music. As already shown, African American music has been a pervasive topic in the context of African American literature and criticism, and a musical genre like the blues has been used to define and explicate this literature ideologically as well as aesthetically. It has been used to ground it culturally, often to set it apart from canonical western literature. Contrastively, when canonical works in the western tradition are studied in light of music, they are often associated with classical music, and attention is drawn to music's non-mimetic, transcendental nature, in other words, to universal, timeless features. An intercultural approach could investigate to what extent the critical work in these fields varies significantly; what is it critics do when they conjoin music and literature, and to what end? From the point of view of textual analysis, a pertinent concern would be how African American and canonical western works of literature relate to different musical traditions. Some works of literature would serve to instantiate such an approach better than others, for instance Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* (2002).

In this study, *Cane*'s relationship to African American musical genres has been pursued, but its cultural and generic hybridity and dual emphasis on local and universal features could open up for a co-reading of African American as well as classical music traditions. This would emphasize its grounding in both African American folk culture and western modernism, and could spawn deeper understanding for the different ways that music is being used by authors and literary critics alike. A novel like Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* deliberately includes African American music and various forms of western classical music, and thus forces attention to both traditions and their co-existence in its account of race relations in the United States. Like Toomer's *Cane*, it is a novel that begs to be analyzed from a cross-cultural perspective, which illustrates that it is not only literature often labelled "ethnic" or "minority" literature that benefits from intercultural reading practices; is highly relevant and called for in relation to all literatures.

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