



AMERICA FROM ACROSS

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Versions of the African American Past in Toni Morrison

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In her novels, Toni Morrison undertakes a challenging literary project. She rewrites the history of African Americans from their own perspective, fictitiously. Rewriting African American history fictitiously means the rewriting of the history of slavery and its effects today, in other words racism, imaginatively. As a novelist, Morrison seeks to find the appropriate literary form for the representation of the legacy of slavery and often relies on the tradition of the slave narrative.¹ As part of the new representation, she writes from the perspective of African Americans who suffered from slavery, focusing on female experiences in particular. The language of her narratives is interwoven with the patterns of the African American vernacular idiom.

Rewriting the history of African American women and reconsidering the legacy of slavery in their lives is connected to Morrison's project on language. Her aim is to unravel racialized language use, "the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no other meaning than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy".² She calls this language use race talk. This project on language sounds very challenging from the perspective of literary discourse: what exactly are the ways in which Morrison's narratives rewrite African American history and the legacy of slavery and expose racism encoded in language use?

Morrison's statements on legacy of slavery in language use vary. In general, her Nobel Prize lecture puts forward the idea of language as an organism that can recall and produce meaning on its own accord. In this speech, Morrison explains her understanding of the task of a writer as the person who can use language in a way to expose its liveliness, its agency, its ability to produce new

¹ Rushdy 1999, 12.

² Morrison 1993b.

knowledge.³ As the other end, dead language has only one purpose, to maintain “its own exclusivity and dominance”,⁴ a feature to resist. In this formulation, a rewriting of the legacy of slavery means highlighting the dead language of racial stereotypes that has been passed down by generations. Her interviews and lectures on rewriting the legacy of slavery provide a more particular understanding of the legacy of slavery. In these, Morrison highlights the importance of including elements of African American vernacular culture in fictive texts as a way to enhance the language and perspective of the dominated (see below). The vernacular elements include rhythmic patterns, music and song, religious themes and forms, and vernacular discourse in particular, the explication of which belongs to the big frame story of the legacy of the Black Atlantic.

Therefore, a study of vernacular elements in Morrison’s work does not simply mean a list of particular recurring features but rather an investigation into how these patterns provoke the production of alternative meanings concerning African-American racial identity. As Morrison would put it, vernacular elements have an active role in the rewriting of African-American history and the legacy of slavery. In *Beloved*, both characters’ interactions and the literary tropes used subvert existing accounts of the slave experience. Spoken and indirect communication problematizes the formal system of writing and produces new and emotionally disturbing accounts of the slave experience. In 1993 Gilroy referred to Morrison’s *Beloved* with reverence as an exemplary text, in which the “hybridization” of African elements (Gilroy 1993, 219) happens in a way that the African elements become meaningful techniques to grapple with problems in the American context. The essay explores how hybridization happens in the rewritings of the Garner story, a specific undocumented slave story, in *Beloved*.

The hybrid use of African elements in *Beloved* is all the more important to point out because it explains the relative lack of critical response to Morrison’s latest novel to date, *God Help the Child*, which also makes central use of Black Atlantic heritage in

³ Morrison 1993a.

⁴ Ibid.

the making of its fragmentary contemporary plot. However, in *God Help* the vernacular elements fail to produce the hybrid quality of the imaginative reconstructions of the slave past, which is the reason for its lack of critical success.

1. MORRISON’S REWRITINGS OF THE SLAVE PAST

In her article *The Site of Memory* Morrison claims that she cannot fully rely on existing accounts of the history of slavery.⁵ These accounts may come from white or colored authors, but either way, they are limited. On the one hand, accounts from whites disregard the stories of Africans. On the other hand, African Americans themselves also write carefully censored accounts. As Morrison puts it: “popular taste discouraged writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience”.⁶ ‘Too terrible’ details were usually veiled over by silence or careful rendering, for example in Linda Brent’s story of sexual abuse where the white editor, Lydia Maria Child takes responsibility for “drawing the veil from this in/delicate subject and its monstrous nature”.⁷ Morrison claims there is no mention of the interior, psychological life of slaves in slave narratives, either. As a novelist, she goes on, she would like to reconstruct the world on the basis of the existing textual remains, the images in existing narratives, to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceeding too terrible to relate’”,⁸ by filling in the blanks these images or pictures indicate in the existing narratives, by a “kind of literary archeology” as she names it.⁹

In her essay *Memory, Creation, and Writing* from 1984, Morrison explains the nature of this retelling as a confrontation with the received ‘reality’ of the West. Her writing presents an alternative ‘reality’ in that: “[my] compact with the reader is not to reveal an

⁵ Morrison 1995, 90–91.

⁶ Ibid. 90.

⁷ Ibid. 91.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 92.

already established reality [...] In the Third World cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture”.¹⁰ Instead of presenting a Western idea of reality encoded in literature, she presents an Africanized version of reality discredited by the West normally. She writes:

“If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West -- discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’.”¹¹

Also, she states that in order to achieve this goal, her writing needs to make use of traditions of African American culture faithfully. Let me quote the important passage as she beautifully puts it:

“If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.”¹²

In literary criticism, articles that explore Morrison’s connections to the so called ‘jazz novel’ tradition and the “slave narrative” tradition tend to focus on some or all of the above features.

Therefore, Morrison’s task at hand is to reconstruct a new story of slavery and its effects from “images” or sketchy pictures. The new text aims to provide the absent account of the interior or psychological life of the victims of the peculiar institution. This text attempts to represent the internal life of slaves imaginatively, by also making use of vernacular patterns of thought and speech.

¹⁰ Morrison 1984, 388.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 389.

I find it interesting that Morrison names this enterprise “a kind of literary archeology”¹³ in a Foucauldian fashion, and indeed with reason. This is an attempt to reconstruct the ‘discourse’ of the slave subject on the basis of the evidence in the archive, knowing that the archive stores only a limited amount of input, yet hoping to be able to reconstruct not only a story but also the mechanisms of surveillance dictating the production of available textual accounts. In this sense, the neo-slave narrative that reimagines the position of the slave as the subject of discourse in the slave narrative attempts to subvert the language of its predecessor and produce a discourse in which the agency of the slave is allowed to play itself out.¹⁴

2. HYBRIDITY AND BLACK ATLANTIC IN *BELLOVED*

In 1993 Paul Gilroy published his book on the Black Atlantic in which Morrison and her *Beloved* are referred to as exemplary in their hybrid reappropriation of African traditions. For Gilroy the Black Atlantic is a cultural and political space that exists beyond the geographical boundaries of the nation state. The Black Atlantic has been formed by the experience of the African slave trade and the plantation slavery system in the Caribbean and the Americas. The cultural production of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy claims, incorporates African cultural elements in diverse ways. Basic patterns of music and religious practices are easiest to pick out, but Gilroy stresses the diversity of the appropriations, that the African legacy is severed from its origins in diverse ways, reflecting its contact with other cultures. Therefore, for Gilroy the task is not to point out the survival of African cultural elements but the forms in which they have mutated, mixed, have become hybrid. “The history of slavery and the history of its imaginative recovery through expressive vernacular cultures challenge us to dwelve into the specific dynamics of that severance”.¹⁵

¹³ Morrison 1995, 92.

¹⁴ Rushdy 1999, 13.

¹⁵ Gilroy 1993, 223.

For Gilroy, Morrison's *Beloved* serves as a primary example for an imaginative return to slavery in order to study the dynamics of how Africanisms have been sundered from their origins, "marking out blacks as the first truly modern people".¹⁶ Morrison uses the story of Margaret Garner who killed her infant child in order to prevent her from the atrocities of slavery. This story was widely commented on in the 19th century, and Gilroy argues that "[Garner's] tale constructs a conception of the slave subject as agent" who decides it is better to die than suffer slavery, that agent "refuses to concede to slavery".¹⁷ In Morrison's version it is not only black agency that is illustrated in the story: rather "it encapsulates the confrontation between two opposed yet interdependent cultural and ideological systems ... One is the product of Africa, the other... of western modernity".¹⁸ Plantation slavery is the meeting ground where these two systems interact, and an imaginative reconstruction of the Garner incident challenge us to think about the dynamics of the interaction of two systems in it. The infanticide is examined in Morrison's book in order to explore the tension between the racial self and the racial community in the context of slavery.

How is remembering organized in *Beloved* according to this matrix? How are the oppositional forces of hybridizing and community played out in them? Gilroy's analysis is strong on functions but provides little textual analysis. In 2006 Lars Eckstein builds on Gilroy's idea of the Black Atlantic in his analysis of *Beloved*. Eckstein fills in for Gilroy's lack of textual analysis and finds a healing communal function in the performances and dramatizations of music in the novel in particular, as he reads the novel as a jazz novel related to Afro-American musical traditions.¹⁹ In 2010, Jennings

¹⁶ Ibid. 221.

¹⁷ Ibid. 68.

¹⁸ Ibid. 219.

¹⁹ Eckstein points out that the book dramatizes a number of musical styles associated with characters. *Beloved*'s character evokes myths and tales from the African American oral tradition. She can be the spirit child, the spirit of a dead child who returns from the realm of the ancestors to haunt its parents.

in her *Morrison and the idea of Africa* reveals the fundamental role African traditional religious symbols play in Morrison's work. She shows how West African religions and philosophy, African themes and images are used in her landscapes, interior spaces, the bodies of her characters.²⁰ Yet her analysis does not go back to Gilroy,

Also, in folktales the ancestral ghost often returns to teach a lesson. *Beloved* returns to tell her story, the story of silencing her when she was two. Her character is associated with African recitals. Baby Suggs's performances evoke the call and response pattern of the performance of African tales and of the African Christian sermon tradition. Her voice resembles the tone of the spirituals. Paul D's character is connected to the secular tradition of African music: work songs and the blues. He is always humming a tune, whenever he cannot say something, he sings it, he remembers how in the chain gang each of them sang about themselves in the form of the work song, incomprehensible babble for white ears. Also, there is a distinct white musical tradition present in the book, too, through the figure of Amy Denver, whose song in stylized standard English that Sethe learnt and passed on. Eckstein draws attention to the use of Amy's white music that states there is a dialogue between African and Western forms of music in the novel. For Eckstein, music and dance are associated with identity giving potential in the novel. (Eckstein 2006, 119)

²⁰ Jennings documents a list of vernacular features, she pinpoints the significance of ancestral presence in the experiential communities of isolated African Americans in Morrison's novels in general, and *Beloved* in particular, depict. She focuses especially on the symbol of the cross in a circle and the ancestral cosmogram in the texts. She claims that "the aesthetic goal of Morrison's fiction is to dust off survivals of West and Central African civilizations that Christianity obscures." (Jennings 2008, 2.)

Beloved the character is pre-figured by several figures from West-African cosmology for her. She can be identified with the infant Erzulie Ge-Rouge, the tragic goddess of love, who laments the shortness of life and the limitations of love (Morrison 1987, 3). She can also be the seductive mistress Erzulie Freich whose jealous love cannot tolerate rivals (ibid. 4). She can also be a female witch of the Vodun pantheon, an agent of evil. *Beloved*, as African witches, practices Kindoki Kiadia, soul or psyche eating the symbolical eating of the victim's flesh that physically manifests itself as disease (ibid. 9). Also, *Beloved*'s character represents ancestral presence. Africans commonly believe in the afterworld where the ancestors (the living dead) reside when their earthly lives expire. These ancestors instruct their relatives actively and they reciprocally ensure the continued life on one another. Morrison conflates the office of the living dead ancestor with the living elder to create and ancestral presence (ibid. 10). Baby Suggs is the medicine woman or priestess medicinal and psychological healer, the medium between the living and the dead, of Vodun derived religions (ibid. 11).

rather, it refers to Gates's *signifyin'* as a possible theoretical frame for the enterprise. Therefore, her rich account of African mythical elements in *Beloved* stands for a possible reversal of Black Atlantic project in its unproblematized return to ancestral heritage without an interest in the hybrid function of these elements.

3. HYBRIDITY AND FOLK VARIATIONS OF THE GARNER STORY IN *BELOVED*

We all know that *Beloved* itself was written as a response to a document describing how a slave woman called Margaret Garner murdered her two-year-old daughter in 1856. That article had been republished in *The Black Book*, a scrapbook of documents on black history edited by Morrison and others in 1974.²¹ The real Margaret Garner was caught and not put on trial for murder, as abolitionist would have liked to have it, but was returned to her owner who sold her down South, where she died shortly. She never wrote her own story, but her case was widely discussed at the time. Yet the actual final events of Garner's story bear no relation to the events narrated in *Beloved*, as there is no aim to document but to reimagine the absent story of the silenced slave woman and of the murdered child in the novel.

We are all familiar with the core narrative that is based on the Garner story. Sethe, the African American slave mother runs away from her plantation called "Sweet Home" and crosses the Ohio for safety. She had sent three of her four children ahead, one is born *en route* with the help of a white girl, Amy, while her husband fails to join her on her journey. After four weeks of freedom at the house of her mother-in-law, Sethe and her children are found by her master. Wanting to save her children from slavery, she begins to kill the children off one by one but only actually manages to cut the throat of one, of the two-year-old 'crawling already' girl whom she later names Beloved. Sethe is caught, imprisoned, and spared on account of her newborn child. She lives on as a social outcast at

²¹ Morrison et al. 1974, 10

the outskirts of town during the next 18 years as neither the white community nor the black wishes to have anything in common with the brute who murdered her own child and who is obviously devoid of any trace of 'humanity.' She accepts that position and goes on with her monotonous routine without talking, complaining, or remembering. It is the arrival of an ex-slave from "Sweet Home," Paul D, that triggers Sethe's process of remembering the past. As part of telling about the past, Sethe has to confront her own deed in the material presence of a ghost of Beloved, in the form of a twenty-year-old woman who appears on her doorstep just as she would begin to have a social (and love) life with Paul D. She has to talk about the past to him and reflect on it in a series of events at the end of which the ghost is exorcised by African American women for good but Sethe barely survives.

In *Beloved*, the story of a newspaper cutting about the killing illustrates the new kind of account of the experience of slavery. The newspaper clipping in the novel reports Sethe's story and illustrates it with a drawing of her face. The clipping itself is produced by Stamp Paid, a man from the local black community, 18 years after it appeared in the paper. The old man informs Paul D, Sethe's lover about the murder because he is ignorant about the circumstances of the child's death and of Sethe's responsibility. Paul D is illiterate and views the clipping, text and drawing, with suspicion. "Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear ...".²² So he looks at the drawing, says it does not resemble Sethe, and refuses to believe the accusation. Instead, he goes to Sethe to ask her about it. He takes it for granted that the official written text is not to be trusted.

The newspaper clipping also refers to the Margaret Garner's story Gilroy analyzed in *Beloved* in order to trace the vernacular elements of its reconstructions. If one explores in what ways the Garner story is actually re-presented in the text, one will find altogether five appearances, not only one.

²² Ibid. 164.

The first mention of the killing is buried well in the story. Baby Suggs's magic feast and listening into the air, the sense of danger she cannot place dominate the telling, and afterwards she is the one who snatches the dead child from its mother in exchange for the living.

The second appearance of the story comes in the form of the newspaper cutting. It is referred to, it is read for Paul D, but its text never actually appears in the text of the novel but remains absent from it. The whole novel will be a polyphonic rewriting of this trace of the newspaper cutting in the text that is known only through the reactions characters have to it.

The third appearance of the story comes by way of Sethe's response to Paul D's question about her possible involvement in the infanticide. This indirect communication is Sethe's and Paul D's conversation on the issue of the newspaper clipping. Sethe is asked by Paul D about the newspaper clipping to face the insinuations by old Stamp Paid. Paul D is not asking the question straight but shows the clipping, text and drawing, ready for a laugh about the absurdity of the idea. Sethe does not answer the unasked question but Paul D's kind face forces her to begin to tell Paul D about the last days on the plantation, her humiliations, her freedom, and her fear for her children when they were recaptured. By indirection, Paul D understands the accusations are true, the drawing, although inaccurate, is indeed a rendering of Sethe. Saying the opposite of what he does, he leaves Sethe at once who knows exactly what is going on.

The fourth representation occurs later, when old Stamp Paid sees the couple has split up because of his news and Paul D began to drink seriously. This is when Stamp Paid supplements his previous reading of the clipping. Previously he drove his point home by reading the text of the clipping to Paul D, but now he adds his own version by telling Paul D about what happened in that yard 18 years before, that the killing was about love and not about hatred.

The fifth appearance is a reenactment of the killing in a new form. The reenactment happens during the ritual exorcising of the ghost by local women who had ignored Sethe because of her act in

the past 19 years. Denver asks for their help, for their intervention, and some thirty women of the community appear to exorcise the ghost by singing. They hum and wail when Sethe and Beloved step out to the porch and begin singing to get rid of the ghostly presence. They are singing mightily when Mr Bodwin drives by to pick up Denver and take her to work. Sethe mistakes the white man for the slave-catcher who has come to take her Beloved again and rushes forward with a knife to kill him. The women and Denver catch her and hold her down, during the turmoil Beloved disappears.

It is only after considering Sam Paid's oral version of the story and the ritual exorcising of the ghost of the dead child by the local community that Paul D returns to Sethe and the possibility of a life with him opens up for Sethe again. The new life will be one in which the distorting effects of past slavery reaching into the present are taken into account and one which therefore offers a way of processing psychological scars.

The different re-presentations of the Garner story offer different modes of reconstructing it. The first version retells it as part of the story of the community, the act is understood as a result of a lack of solidarity within the Black community. The second version retells the act as an option one takes when isolated. Thirdly, the cutting represents the white version of the story. Then, Sethe's indirection is a version that offers possible contexts as explanation via indirection. Stamp Paid's added oral storytelling represents the total reversal of the white version. Finally, the communal reenactment of the situation has a ritual quality. The singing and exorcising help deal with the past, the knife is now turned against the believed aggressor, as a posited heightened version of agency.

4. SUMMARY

Morrison's *Beloved* performs an act of remembering the Black Atlantic through its reliance on African music and religion. Musical patterns motivate the multiple perspectives of the storytelling; the pattern of ancestral presence is reverberated in the ghostly ap-

pearance of the dead child. The final ritual of exorcising the ghost turns into a ceremony of healing at the end of the story, offering an African pattern of healing for the trauma of African American slavery. This is basically a hybridization of the African rite with a current problem within the African American community. In the novel the interference of a 'white' view of reality is balanced in diverse versions of the Garner narrative that are repeated in different keys. In the final reenactment of ritual, it is the murder of the child that is performed and healed. Through performing the communal ceremony, the community will be able to reconcile with Sethe. African ritual helps the African American community embrace common grievances suffered in the slave past that are manifest in the present as well.

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