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## THE AFRICAN PAST IN AMERICA AS A BAKHTINIAN AND LEVINASIAN OTHER. "REMEMORY" AS SOLUTION IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELLOVED*



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### 1. ALTERITY AND OTHERNESS

An apparently insignificant linguistic parallelism found in both *alterity* and *otherness* enables us to understand a philosophical and literary theme that lies under Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), namely the dichotomy *subject/object*, in which *I= self/ other*. This similarity turns out to be a crucial key to an understanding of *Beloved* as a literary work implying the claim that the absurdity of black existence in white America may be regarded as a past, nightmarish experience that must not influence black people's present days and coming years.

Despite the dangers of remembering the past, African American artists have insistently based a large part of their aesthetic ideal on precisely that activity [...]. This insistence on the interdependence of past and present is, moreover, a political act, for it advocates a revisioning of the past as it is filtered through the present [...]. It [Morrison's work] must [...] signify on the past which has been constructed out of a denigrative ideology and reconstructing that part which will serve the present. (Rushdy 1992: 567)

Something is altered, but it also alters. Likewise, something is *othered*, made other, but it also *others*, makes other(s). Stated thus, the words at issue are

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similar, not only semantically, but also syntactically, since subject and object are interchangeable: 'I *alter-other* you', and 'You *other-alter* me'. Therefore, if we take into account the traditional linguistic voice-system, both involve either active or passive processes. *Subject* and *object* positions are exchangeable. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the object of an active clause may be the subject of a passive one, and viceversa. Both may *return* to their original position in the clause, to their original self, so to say. This reciprocity, shared also by both *alter* and *other*, accounts for Levinas's theories of Time and Bakhtin's general ideas on the other.

Bakhtin posits two stages in every creative act, to wit, i) *empathy* or *identification*, and ii) *exotopy*, a reverse movement whereby the individual returns to his starting position (Todorov 1984: 99), but now realizing the intrinsic otherness of this original position, since living with the other is not a matter of accepting the other, but also of being in its place, of imagining and making oneself other for oneself (Kristeva 1991: 13).<sup>2</sup>

Lo otro no es de ningún modo otro-yo, un otro-sí-mismo que participase conmigo en una existencia común. La relación con otro no es una relación idílica y armoniosa de comunión ni una empatía mediante la cual podamos ponernos en su lugar: le reconocemos como semejante a nosotros y al mismo tiempo exterior; la relación con otro es una relación [...] con su exterioridad o, mejor dicho, con su alteridad. (Levinas 1993: 116-117)

Levinas and Bakhtin agree in considering the relationship between one's self and the other not only a total identifying reciprocity, empathy, but also *what I am not*. This is why the fusion with, or penetration in, something or someone else (assimilation, or even appropriation of the other) must be followed by a keeping at a distance, a non-fusion with the other. *Alterity* and *otherness* then show that, given the active/passive voice (*op*)*position(s)*, the interchangeability regarding subject/object may be comparable to Levinas and Bakhtin's philosophical propositions on the other. In my view, that self and other (subject and object) can be *altered* suggests the identification of the *empathy-exotopy dynamism* with the aforementioned syntactic process; hence the importance of regarding the time gone by, the events, phenomena and conditions that have existed or have happened at some earlier time, as literally other(s). Our past may be made *present*, but we must not forget that it is also *absent*.

The alienness exists not in something not yet known [...] but in something that becomes known only in [a] paradoxical mixture of presence and absence, of proximity and remoteness. In this sense, *the alien resembles the past* to which we gain access by recollection. (my emphasis, Waldenfels 1995: 36)<sup>3</sup>

The *quest-ion* of Time as other is one of the thematic fields developed throughout Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, especially those aspects related to an earlier period of one's life that is thought to be of a shameful, embarrassing and worrying nature, to the extent of endangering one's present and future life; hence Morrison's neologism *rememory*, a complex new term that involves a revised philosophical and literary insight concerning past events in general, on the one hand, and the nightmarish African history in America, on the other.

Clearly, for Morrison, the questions: "Who am I?" and "Where are we going?" are inseparable from "Where do we come from?", and the two sides—the search for self definition and an understanding of what the past is about—interact constantly throughout her work. (Guth 1993: 575)

In order to explain the meaning of *rememory* I will quote the passage in which the aforementioned term first appears. Denver has seen her mother on her knees in prayer, which, the text says, "was not unusual. What was unusual was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist" (Morrison 1991: 36).<sup>4</sup> Denver asks Sethe what she has been praying for. Sethe's answer is worth analyzing.

Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk [...] I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my *rememory*. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my *rememory*, but out there, in the world [...] Even if I don't think of it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there.

Can other people see it? asked Denver.  
Oh, yes. Oh yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's

when you bump into a *rememory* that belongs to somebody else.  
(my emphasis, 44-45)

*Re-memories*, then, are places, or better, *pictures* of certain places triggering off *re-presentations*, *vivid* descriptions or accounts. Morphologically, the word *rememory* is formed by prefixation, where i) *re-* occurs originally in loan words from Latin (*memory*), used with the meaning *again* or *again and again* to indicate repetition, or with the meaning *back* or *backward* to indicate *withdrawal* or *backward motion* (Webster 1989); and ii) *memory*, the lexical base, the mental capacity or faculty of retaining and *re-viving* impressions, or of recalling or recognizing previous experiences (Webster). In *rememory* we find two semantic levels, i) those meanings involved in the prefix *re-*, to wit, the repeated, constant action of going back (-ward) in time, and ii) those implied by the morphological root, *memory*, and the word *picture*, particularly the meaning conveyed by (*re-*) *vive* and *vivid* (Latin *re-vivere*, to live again).

The significance of such a neologism remains, however, incomplete. The prefix *re-* hides another concept, as we have seen, *withdrawal*. This is the semantic key that will allow us to understand the literary and philosophical dimensions of the word at issue. *Withdrawal* may convey the meaning of removing oneself (one's self) from some activity, as when thinking repeatedly about the past. This attitude may become an obsession that negatively dominates one's present. I daresay that the affix adds a *transcendental* meaning to the lexical root here, since it modifies, changes, the word by suggesting a very significant nuance. What is more, if we keep on studying Sethe's words in the same section we will reach more conclusions.

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away [...]. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there —you who never was there— if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over —over and done with— it's going to always be there waiting for you. (45)

She explains to her daughter that it is not necessary to be or have been physically *present* in the places where those pictures coming from the past have or have had their origin. But when Sethe talks about "a thought picture"

and when she says "you who never was there", she also implies another reading: one may feel the influence from the past even if one is *absent* from it. How? Through storytelling, for instance.

We usually define *presence* as the state or fact of being present, as with others or in a place; attendance or company, immediate vicinity, close proximity (Webster). *Absence*, however, is the state of being away or not being present; not in a certain place at a given time; away, missing; not present; non-existent (Webster). The point is that, etymologically, their ultimate meanings coalesce. As far as content is concerned, they seem to be the same:

-Latin < *praesent* < *praesens* < *praeesse*. That is, *pre-* + *-esse*, *pre-* meaning *in front of* or *before*.

-Latin < *abesse*, where *ab-* is equivalent to *to be away from*.

Pure essence then is unattainable. It is something in between, a constant relational process of building up one's self through others' selves. We can apply this reasoning to the concept of Time. We will grasp *Time's self* only if we accept it as other, only if we comprehend its self as a *differential* self, what remains once the difference between past and present is *dis-covered*. Its *essence* echoes Bakhtin's two stages in building up one's creative self and the similar linguistic behaviour of both *alterity* and *otherness*. And so, Time's being resides in admitting the differential relation between past and present, since differences are relations, neither true entities or essences nor selves.

Time as other is simultaneously presence and absence, empathy and exotopy, alterity and otherness. One must look for the space in between, so to speak. The intersection of remembering and forgetting, the transcendental threshold deriving from the disjunction past/present encoded by the dynamic recollection/oblivion, is further emphasized by Ella towards the end of the novel.

The daughter [Denver], however, appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed and wanted work [...]. *Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present* [...]. She could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; *the past something to leave behind, well, you might stomp it out. Slave life; freed life —every day was a test and a trial* [...]. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" [...]. As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place —shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such— Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came

in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion. (my emphasis, 315)

As can be seen from the above, Sethe and Beloved do not take the aforementioned relational difference ("a little communication between the two worlds") into account. Denver, however, will learn this special type of difference, while Paul D ends in a somewhat ambiguous position. We will see these characters' reactions and attitudes below.

*Rememory* means to transcend one's past without ignoring it. It involves an acknowledgement of one's past (empathy) without allowing it to invade one's present. One must regard one's past as other in order to be conscious of the fact that its individual self is not our own self, that we must return to the *starting-point* (exotopy). Only by seeing this difference can we consider ourselves really free. Notice that Sethe keeps on being a slave; not physically, of course, but figuratively, a mono-maniacal slave of her past.

Sethe is not only victimized by her past. She is also the victim of her *memory*, another word worth commenting on, since it adds interesting data that may help us to decipher the concept of Time as other. *Memory*, as it is conceived in the novel, stands for *nostalgia*. This feeling prevents the characters from interpreting their past through the *rememory process*. And so, we read how Sethe misses her earlier life with her children. This causes deep suffering ("her terrible memory", 7). We are also told that she smiles at the *memory* of Beloved crawling up the inner stairs of Bluestone 124 (196). Moreover, Sethe *misses*, Baby Suggs in the Clearing praying for the black people's unity (209).<sup>5</sup>

Beloved's resurrection coerces Sethe and the others involved to return to and reenact the past, again like tragic figures doomed to reenact it in memory and deed. Looking back, they begin to understand themselves and to reassess where they have been. They know the ironically named Sweet Home to be the most illusory of Edens. Before Mr. Garner's death and schoolteacher's arrival, it camouflaged the evil enterprise it represented [...]. The Garners were kindhearted people but also participants in the system — nice Nazis, but Nazis nonetheless. By their accommodation of slavery, they made possible the prototypal evil of Schoolteacher. (Otten 1989: 85-86)

Otten's commentaries on the characters' discovery of Sweet Home's true nature illustrate that the characters realize that Sweet Home was actually a *whited sepulchre*. They allow this discovery from the past to control their present. Baby Suggs collapses when she realizes that her "insistence on self-love cannot counter the enormity of evil that [...] destroys Beloved, and Baby Suggs has to accept this failure [...]. But she also accuses herself" (Otten 88). We must not forget her neighbours' anger at her elaborate feast the day before Sethe kills her little daughter. Both Baby Suggs and Sethe go to bed to think about colors, which have a flat, even surface with neither *depth* nor history. In the novel, colors lack time. No past can be found in them. Both Sethe and her mother-in-law allow past events to take root in their present. They lack the knowledge of past as other. Consequently, they cannot freely return to their *present-day* selves. No exotopy can be found in their behaviour. Paul D and Denver's attitudes are somehow different as we will see in the following section.

## 2. BELOVED AS AN ALTERATING OTHERNESS-OTHERING ALTERITY

Though frequently used interchangeably in English, the terms *alterity* and *otherness* are slightly different from a semantic perspective. On the one hand, *alterity* can be described, morphologically, as a deverbal noun whose etymological root is Late Latin *alterare*, meaning to change; hence our *to alter*, to make different in some particular, as size, style, course, or the like; to modify. Both *change* and *alter* mean to make a difference in the state or condition of a thing or to substitute another state or condition. *Change*, however, is to make a (usually material) difference so that the thing is distinctly different from what it was, while *alter* is to make some partial change, as in appearance, but usually *to preserve the identity*. Therefore, *alter* implies that the thing itself is not exchanged for another. On the other hand, *other* can be described as an adjective meaning different or distinct from the ones mentioned or implied, the remaining of two or more (Webster).

Theories on the other usually combine both aspects. They make reference to the similarities and differences between my self and the others. Despite the outer modification of my self, I preserve my identity, and viceversa, I can change the other's identity, but, substantially, it remains the same. The other is, in some way or another, a true friend of our selves, since only someone else's self can give me the feeling that I constitute an individual. It is difficult to "conceive of any being outside of the relations that link it to the

other" (Todorov 94). I need the other (and the other needs me) to form our own subjectivity. We are really inseparable.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *alterity* and *otherness* imply a subjective viewpoint regarding what I am not, by underlying one's particular and personal interpretation of the other, one's own modification and individual reaction towards what is not my self, the characters' past. At the same time, both terms emphasize a collective, universal, social and common approach to what we are not, society's attitude with regard to the other, the community's past re-presented by, made incarnate in, *Beloved*.

Levinas's *responsibility* or *responsiveness* and Bakhtin's *answerability* are directly connected with "the response the subject owes to the other in the dialogue of sociality" (Nealon 1997: 131). Let it suffice to say that *Beloved* does not respect the others' selves. And Sethe's response-answer to *Beloved* may be regarded as obsessive. While *Beloved* ignores "the ethics of dialogue" (Nealon 129), by making the most of her mother's physical, mental and spiritual weakening without (unintentionally?) caring for her, Sethe is deeply concerned in making amends for her past, fatal decision and in looking for moral and ethical justifications.

The relation to the other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed [...]. It is impossible to free myself by saying 'It's not my concern'. There's no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern. This is a unique 'no choice', one that is *not slavery*. (my emphasis, Hand 1989: 247-248)

Sethe's present depends on her past in an extremely dangerous way. Once again, we must not forget that she does not *rememory*. She *memories*, and so, she is unable to free her self from the other, her past.

### 3. INDIVIDUAL ANSWER TO THE OTHER

Towards the end of the novel we read: "Anything she [*Beloved*] wanted, she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, *Beloved* invented desire" (295). Levinas explains that there are two types of desire, metaphysical desire and common desire. Both types might be applied to *Beloved* only if we regard her self in the present as that of a human being, as long as we interpret this character as being of flesh and blood.

Common desire is explained as *need*: "En el fondo del deseo comunmente interpretado, se encontraría la *necesidad*; el deseo señalaría un ser indigente e

incompleto o despojado de su grandeza pasada" (my emphasis, Levinas 1977: 57-58). Metaphysical desire is quite different:

Deseo que no se podría satisfacer [...]. Desea el más allá de todo lo que puede simplemente colmarlo [...]. El deseo es absoluto, si el ser que desea es mortal y lo deseado, invisible. La invisibilidad no indica una ausencia de relación; implica relaciones con lo que no está dado, de lo cual no hay idea [...]. Deseo sin satisfacción. (Levinas 1977: 58)

Furthermore, common desire parallels metaphysical desire if and only if both types involve disappointment, disenchantment. Stated thus, *Beloved* illustrates a combination of both metaphysical and common desire. She has not been given the chance of becoming a true self through the process of socialization with the others, who re-present her past, hence her rebirth. And so, from her present, she desires to recover her past, to rebuild her subjectivity, which is symbolically represented as a fragmented self (152; 164-165), a puzzle whose separate parts must be gathered, put together. She even desires to create her past, since she has literally been denied the possibility of having a personal history, though the text does convert her into a vehicle for the collective past of the blacks.

Levinas considers infinite desire to be invisible (1977: 58). Invisibility implies absence of the other, one's past as not present. The *essence* of selves is the tension between past and present, to be presence and absence at the same time, to achieve the so-called differential relation. The essence of selves is *de-essentialization* in the sense that they are constantly creating subjectivity in an endless process through the other, one's past in this case. In fact, true essence is unreachable. What is more, Levinas explains that invisibility, absence, one's past, implies relations with the other. These relations must be moderated, controlled. This is what *Beloved* fails to understand. She is not conscious of the difference. *Beloved's* desire devours the other. Hers is an infantile, obsessive and unrestrained desire that does not recognize an other distinct from the self.

Desire is sharply distinguished from need. Whereas the latter might reveal a lack or an absence which can be filled, desire is insatiable [...]. Levinas's desire does not seek to restore something [...] lost. What desire desires is transcendence, alterity, the exteriority of the Other [...]. This is desire for the Other, which cannot be satisfied, rather than need for the other, which can. (Davis 1996: 45-46)

Like Sethe, Beloved seems not to believe in Time. "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it", Sethe says when she deals with the question of rememory (44). In fact, both mother and daughter are dangerously enough preoccupied with one polarity of the *rememory process*, their past: What about the return to one's self in the present (exotopy)?

Levinas's ideas enable us to account for this character's unquenchable thirst and excessive hunger. These are the consequences of her unbounded ambition: " 'She said she was thirsty', said Paul D. He took off his cap. 'Mighty thirsty look like' [...]. The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert" (64); "124 WAS QUIET. Denver [...] was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out [...]. Beloved [...] whined for sweets although she was getting bigger, plumper by the day" (293).

Beloved's peculiar gaze hints also at her limitless, disproportionate and unhealthy desire: "Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe [...]. Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (71); "When her mother is anywhere around, Beloved has eyes only for Sethe" (149). Tzvetan Todorov's commentaries on Bakhtin's fitting remarks concerning the other's gaze remind us of this character's vampire-like way of looking at the (m)other, her past.

Bakhtin starts from the simplest ground: We can never see our selves as a whole; the *other* is necessary to accomplish, even if temporarily, a perception of the self that the individual can achieve only partially with respect to himself [...]. Only someone else's gaze can give me the feeling that I form a totality [...]. It is not only the external apprehension of the body that needs the other's gaze; our apprehension of our internal selves is also seamlessly bound to someone else's perception. (Todorov 95-96)

Levinas and Bakhtin's subjective agency does not want or seek a monologic unity. The humanistic, bourgeois subject's motto was *I desire (to appropriate), therefore I am*. But "the self is never merely an appropriation machine—but always open, responding or answering—to the other" (Nealon 130; 133). This is not Beloved's attitude. Hers is an apparent intersubjectivity. Her self is, in reality, an extremely dangerous I (eye) that does not take into account the other's answers, questions and reactions. In fact, for Bakhtin, to be means to communicate. This is why storytelling is

felt warm satisfaction [...] when she listened to her mother talk about the old days" (91). Storytelling then becomes a way to feed her.

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable [...]. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (72-73)

The point is that Beloved's main activity is listening. She hardly offers explanations or answers to the others' questions. She does not distinguish "between using a conversation partner in order to upbuild one's own self, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, finding oneself changed as the result of listening to the other in a conversation" (Scharlemann 1991: 5). This is why dialogue fails. Beloved then neither *rememories* nor dialogues. Actually, "ethics depends on storytelling, just as storytelling depends on personification: If I cannot name and give a figure to or represent an other, I cannot determine my ethical relation to that person" (Handley 1995: 691). Beloved does not respect the differential relation to the others, the past. As a consequence, she eventually comes to nothing. She also re-presents the other characters' former history by a thwarting of their lives. Her speechlessness parallels and is an analogy for the unspeakableness of the others' past.

Sethe's past really enslaves her present. Paul D does not understand such a radical submission: "I just don't understand what the hold is [...] I just can't see why you holding on to her" (83). For Sethe, the past "comes back whether we want it or not" (17). Sethe's *indifferent* behaviour leads her to be assimilated by her past, by the other.

Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child [...]. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became [...]. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while *Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur.* (my emphasis, 307)

This empathy, this total identification with Beloved, constitutes the first

step. Her voice is a "timeless present" (226): "Would there be a little space she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two [...]" (22). Past and present are the same for her. She regards them as a unity, an entity, not as a relation based on differences.

The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom [...]. The novel wrestles with this central problem of recognizing and claiming one's own subjectivity, and it shows how this cannot be achieved independently of the social environment. (Schapiro 1991: 194)

What about Paul D? He is the character who explicitly illustrates the idea that individuals are alien to themselves. In fact, as endless, infinite and eternal combinations of different others, we undergo alterity within our own self. This is the reason why Paul D's subjectivity is a mixture of others, of the others' past. He wonders: "But what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise?" (156). That is, what if Beloved *re-presents* his ghostly past? "I scare myself", he says (288).<sup>6</sup>

Denver undergoes two different stages. At the beginning, she rejects the others, her past. Paul D and Sweet Home constitute the best examples: "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it is was so Sweet you would have stayed" [...]. 'Leave her be', said Paul D. 'I am a stranger to her'" (16-17). As far as her past is concerned, she is only interested in the way she was born: "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it" (78). She could not cope with the idea that social injustice led her mother to kill Beloved, hence her wilful isolation. Little by little, she feels that she needs her past (Beloved) in order to complete her individuality. When Beloved disappears in the cold house, we are told: "Now she [Denver] is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing" (151). But she realizes that one must not be enslaved by one's past: "She had her own questions which had nothing to do with the past. The

present alone interested Denver" (147). She is the only character who transcends past events without ignoring them. She does return to her self in the present.

Sethe and Paul D's ending, however, is somewhat ambiguous. His is a fragmented self, like Beloved's: "Paul D sits down in the rocking chair and examines the quilt patched in carnival colors [...]. 'The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order' [...]. He wants to put his story next to her" (335). He wants to share his future with someone suffering from (moral) paralysis. Sethe's past as other anchors her. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are'" (335). He is alluding to the return to one's self. We do not know for sure whether Sethe will recover from her illness. Paul D himself is depicted as sitting on a rocking chair, traditionally a symbol standing for passivity and wavering.

Sethe is not only a part of Morrison's text but also a figure representing the mother-self who generates the "text" (the baby, the story of its murder, and the inscription on the headstone) which becomes the figure of "Beloved". Hence the importance she places on this reduction of her identity through a process of reading and writing reveals the novel's own occupation with textual concerns. Ironically, it is Sethe's fear of Beloved's being violated that leads to Beloved's being made into a written image —Sethe's image in the sense that Beloved is her own imagined self-reflection, and her written image in the sense that *this image can be seen and read by others within and outside the story.* (my emphasis, Stryz 1991: 423)

This is to say, could the ending be anything else but open? The novel has to maintain its otherness even in its conclusion. After all, "by keeping us in touch with other worlds, literature brings us back to ourselves, albeit changed and different [...]. This encounter constitutes an experience that transforms the very boundaries of self and other" (Schwab 1996: xii).

#### 4. SOCIAL ANSWER TO THE OTHER

Beloved is connected not only with certain individuals but also with a whole society's past, which must be *socially remembered*, as well. Beloved's monologue is a clear example. It *rememories* the number of black Africans who did not become slaves, those who died either as captives in Africa or on the slave ships.

Clearly she [Beloved] is a composite symbol, not just Sethe's dead child come to exact judgement, but also the representative of the "Sixty Million and More" to whom Morrison alludes in her headnote [...]. Water serves not only to symbolize rebirth but the tortuous passage of a slave ship en route to America [...]—the ship as grave. (Otten 83-84)

The blues is another element that illustrates the community's judgement regarding Beloved, their common past. Actually, the term *blues* is a shortening for *Blue Devils* meaning, i) low spirits, depression, and ii) *delirium tremens*. In fact, Beloved, alluded to on several occasions as evil (314-315), is a true devil: Greek *diá-* + *-áboulos*, irreflexive, non-sensible, indifferent, careless. These adjectives match what I have explained about her so far. Besides, given her infinite and unsatisfied self, she might be said to be constantly depressed in spirits. The term *devil* may also be said to have its etymological origin in another Greek word, namely, *diábolos*, from *diá-* + *bòlos*, where *bòlos* means whoever traps, throws a net to hunt or catch something or someone. In this sense, Beloved entraps the weakest individuals of the community; hence the latter's final reaction, that *delirium tremens* (blues) in virtue of which they try to rescue Sethe. At the same time, they are liberating themselves as a community from Beloved's (the other, their past) thwarting power.

Rather than a personalized form, "the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a non-linear [...] nonsequential mediation— of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole" (Baker 1984: 5). This social, freely associative artistic movement suggests History's circular dynamic. The novel seems to follow this structural pattern.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it reflects the unchanging status of African people, a continual cycle of oppression. Solidarity seems to be hinted at as solution (Mbalia 1991: 87). And so, after the community's mean reaction to Baby Suggs's elaborate feast and Sethe's pride, they first group, at Denver's request, "murmuring and whispering" (319), and then they sing in front of 124 Bluestone (*blues tone*) in order to exorcise the ghost, their past.

The celebration of suffering as a means of gaining full subjectivity may provide a palatable means of acknowledging the seemingly inevitable agony of the human condition. But the significant transition from acknowledging pain to depending on it for our own validation is dramatic and by no means inevitable [...]. *The blues*

*articulation [...] expands into a public realm what had hitherto been a private experience of suffering, taking the individual outside of himself and his private pains, which might otherwise make the self so achingly present that the world disappears. (my emphasis, Boudreau 1995: 448-449)*

The only practical solution for African people in America is a *remembering* collective struggle; hence Morrison's historical novel about the most oppressive period of African Americans.

It is a mark of Toni Morrison's heightened consciousness that she depicts the life that Paul D struggles to build with Sethe as one based on common history and a common struggle that both shared in Sweet Home [...]. Together, Paul D and Sethe must struggle to forge a positive life under the most oppressing conditions. And, of course, since the novel is to serve as a lesson for her people, the same struggle must be waged between African men and women today. (Mbalia 194)

Unbiased, altruistic love helps the characters to survive. African people must *remember*. They must not *cry over spilt milk*, as Sethe does, both literally and symbolically. In other words, they have to learn to *disremember* (Latin < *dis-*, *bis*); they must *remember twice* (re-memory). Indeed, "all the memories repressed and silenced [...] need somehow to be released from their bonds of guilt and shame, need somehow to be given a purpose that ensures renewal and re-creation" (Bjork 1994: 158). The ending, through repetition, strengthens the thematic and structural significance of the epilogue. African people must re-create their past. They must not feel haunted by it. The negative must be dealt with and turned away, and the positive, solidarity through (artistic) communication (storytelling and the blues), must be collectively remembered and accomplished again (Mbalia 194).

Morrison's novel makes clear the message that Art can be used as an *expressing* device through which past events can be distanced from black people's present. *Beloved* is and was a story *not to pass on*, neither to be utterly transmitted and repeated generation after generation nor wholly forgotten. We must not ignore it (empathy). We must come to the present, to our selves (exotopy). We must *remember* and regard History as other.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable research assistance extended to me by Professors José Liste Noya, Cristina Blanco Outón and Patricia V. Fra López.

<sup>2</sup> Though Bakhtin is thinking in artistic (literary) terms, his theories can be applied to different fields of the empirical world. Likewise, Levinas's philosophical ideas, mainly devoted to social dimensions, can be used to exemplify other aspects of life.

<sup>3</sup> In all the quotations, the emphasis (italics) is mine.

<sup>4</sup> Page numbers hereafter in parentheses in the text.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that *nostalgia* is a Greek word which has been introduced in the language through Latin. It is formed by morphological compounding of Gk. *nóstos*, a return home, and *álgos*, pain; the pain that is incurred when the characters go back to their past, to Sweet Home.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D's dilemma can be further analyzed by considering his face-to-face sexual encounter with Beloved (the other, his past) and the role of Mister Rooster the cock: "Mister Rooster, he looked so ... free. Better than me [...] Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was (my emphasis, 89).

<sup>7</sup> There are several instances that exemplify the main characteristics of this style of music, to wit, repetitions, syntactic parallelisms and circular structures: Sethe's periphrasis when she tries to explain to Paul D her past, fatal decision (197); "Nobody saw them falling". This clausal structure is repeated four times (213-214); "It went on that way, except / but one evening, after supper, after Sethe [...]." (140-141); "His coming is the reverse route of his going" (323-331); "I want you to touch me in the inside part and call my name" (143; Paul D and Beloved's sexual encounter).

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