

## Rewriting the History in Toni Morrison's Trilogy of *Beloved, Jazz and Paradise*

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### I. Introduction

Toni Morrison's trilogy, consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, characterizes her intention of incorporating the presence of African Americans in American history and literature. The first novel of the trilogy, *Beloved*, traces American history back to slavery in the antebellum South and the free state, Ohio. The second story portrays ordinary black people in the City during the Harlem Renaissance. The third novel elaborates on the establishment of a black community, Ruby in Oklahoma. Together, these three novels coalesce into a large-scale, powerful saga of African Americans from the beginning of slavery to the late 20th century. In order to complete the epic in the trilogy, Morrison conducted a tremendous amount of research on American history, which she intertwines with her extraordinary creativity and imagination. In so doing, she schemes for retrieving the distinctive voices of her ancestors forgotten by mainstream American society. This paper will explore how Morrison tacitly plans the composition of the trilogy to reconstruct American history and to expand the American literary canon.

In order to challenge white dominant history, Morrison undermines the authenticity of institutionalized slavery in American society. In her collection of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*, she demonstrates how devastating and intimidating the fear of white people who immigrated to America was. They were oppressed in their native countries due to religious or political reasons and escaped to the States, the new world, to find refuge and to set themselves free. Ironically, however, they enslaved African Americans to be assured of and enjoy that freedom. That is, the African-American slaves were used as the yardstick to assess the freedom of white people. Morrison contends that white slave owners projected their fear of

losing freedom onto slaves under dehumanized restraint as follows:

The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness. This black population was available for meditations on terror—the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflection on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man. (*Playing in the Dark* 37–38).

That is, white people were reassured of their freedom by transferring their fear of failure, powerlessness, loneliness and sin to the black people who had been deprived of human rights. They were neglected, as if they did not exist, and were relegated to the dark periphery of American society. Yet Morrison argues that their darkness does not mean absence. Rather, they signify their existence and experiences in darkness to be coded. Accordingly, a paramount theme for Morrison is to decipher the hidden message and to recover the presence of the enslaved.

## II. The ex-slave woman's voice in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, the resistance of African-American people under slavery is intricately woven in the novel. Although Morrison does not specify the time when the novel was set, except Sethe's infanticide in 1855, the novel can be traced back to 1850, when the fugitive slave act was enforced, which led to numerous insurrections: it is reported that 46 slaves were executed on a charge of murdering slave masters and/or overseers in the 1850's. Nevertheless, most Americans, both blacks and whites, wish to forget the traumatic tragedy, because it is too painful a topic to discuss. Morrison, who finds it problematic to forget the past, decides to raise the issues about slavery in *Beloved*. The novel is based on a newspaper article about a fugitive slave, Margaret Garner, which Morrison found in the *American Baptist* when she was working as an editor at Random House. Margaret Garner killed her own child when she was to be captured by slave catchers: slavery was worse than death for the ex-slave mother, who was deprived of the right of motherhood. Infanticide, as horrifying

an act as it may be, was the only way to claim her baby for herself. Inspired by this particular incident, Morrison decides to write a novel to recover the voice and the subjectivity of the slave woman, which was totally ignored in the newspaper article.

Morrison dedicates this novel to "Sixty Million or more" people. According to Morrison, 60 million is the least estimated number of African Americans who were victimized during slavery; yet neither their names nor their lives are officially recorded. Hence, Morrison creates *Beloved* to remember those who have been forgotten in American history, dedicating the story to nameless slaves, including Margaret Garner.

As the dedication to the anonymous slaves implies, Morrison's *Beloved* serves as a counter text to the officially recorded history of whites, such as the newspaper article about Margaret Garner, which neglects the identity of the black woman. Morrison places Sethe, who represents Margaret Garner, in the center of the novel. Sethe and her family have been ostracized by the community for 18 years because of her detestable act of infanticide. The house they inhabit is mysteriously haunted by the baby ghost, the reincarnation of the baby Sethe has killed. The baby ghost gradually attempts to devour Sethe, demanding her love and the compensation for the infanticide: however, the community women who have once shunned Sethe come to the rescue when they learn that her life is at stake. They ardently pray and sing together to repel the baby venom. Thus, while she depicts the pain and suffering of a black woman, Morrison also shows the healing power of the black community and the possibility of survival of Sethe, who has been victimized by slavery. *Beloved* chronicles the troubled life and the redemption of a black woman and the courageous community of women who fight against evil, which has not been mentioned in mainstream history.

### **III. The recovery of black experiences and the inscription of the race riots in *Jazz***

*Jazz* shows another attempt by Morrison to incorporate the black lives into American history. The novel, which is set in the City in the 1920's, starts with a funeral of a teenager, Dorcas. Morrison remarks that she received the inspiration of this novel when she saw a collection of funeral pictures of the 1920s taken by a famous African-American photographer, James Van der Zee. The setting of *Jazz* coincides with the Harlem Renaissance, the black cultural movement in the 1920's, during which numerous talented black artists and writers

gained great praise and recognition from white audience and readers. Yet Morrison does not refer to the prominent movement in *Jazz* perhaps because she finds it problematic that most of those black intellectuals were affiliated with white patronage and did not reach out to ordinary black people. Moreover, Barbara Christian explains why Morrison uses photographs and music as a keynote in *Jazz* without any reference to the great literary movement:

[I]t is fascinating that Morrison does not mention the iconic literary achievements of the period, perhaps because, as Langston Hughes and any number of chroniclers of that period have noted, many ordinary people in Harlem did not know a literary black Renaissance was occurring. So Morrison represents the period by popular art forms to which most people would be deeply connected: jazz music and yoeman photographs of departed beloveds. (417)

Her employment of the popular art forms such as jazz and a photograph underlines Morrison's intention of shedding light on African-American culture and lives hidden under the glorious period of the Harlem Renaissance.

*Jazz* develops around Joe and Violet who migrated from Virginia to the City and Joe's illicit teen-aged girlfriend. Through their recollections and the mysterious third-person omnipotent narrator's comments, their complex past along with their ancestors' is gradually revealed. In the process of narrating their accounts, the characters string together the forgotten fragments of their past.

Dorcas is an orphan. Her father was brutally killed in the race riot which occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917, while her mother was killed in the fire following the riot. Although Morrison does not provide the readers with any specific information about the riot, the reference to it which broke out at a government-owned munitions factory in East St. Louis, Illinois, is obvious.<sup>1)</sup> This riot was triggered by frustrated white factory workers who were fired on the grounds of conducting a strike. Their frustration along with racial prejudice was directed toward black people as the factory employed black laborers after they had dismissed white workers. The white mob attacked black people and their residences: as a result, more than 6000 black people had to evacuate their houses. What is worse, it is known that 39 blacks and 8 whites were killed in this violent racial conflict.

Besides a race riot, African Americans confronted another kind of violence during this

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1) For the further information about the race riot in East St. Louis, see "The East St. Louis Race Riot of 1917."

period. In 1916, a year prior to the race riot in East St. Louis, 54 lynchings were reported. In order to protest against violence rooted in racism, NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) carried out a silent parade on Fifth Avenue in New York on July 28, 1917. In *Jazz*, Alice, Dorcas' aunt, witnesses a voiceless parade accompanied only by the sounds of drums. It is this historic parade of protest and resistance against injustice, prejudice and racism that Morrison subtly employs in the background of her novel.

In *Jazz*, Morrison alludes to another race riot in addition to the one in East St. Louis. Dorcas's aunt, Alice, is from Springfield, Illinois, which is the birth place of Abraham Lincoln. Compared to the legendary President, who declared the emancipation of slaves in 1863, little has been known about the race riot which happened in Springfield in 1908.<sup>2)</sup> In those days, Springfield was known as a prosperous industrial city with factory and coal mining jobs. Yet the population of Springfield had grown too rapidly. The numbers of people moving into Springfield increased faster than the positions of new jobs. The influx of new workers made the job hunting more competitive and difficult, and their frustration and worries climaxed in the race riot in 1908. In the summer of that year, two black men were arrested on suspicion of sexual assault. Triggered by this incident, the outraged white crowd, armed with guns, ammunition and ropes, destroyed the black residential and business areas. As a result, more than 2000 black residents had to evacuate their houses. The riot was eventually put down by national guard troops. After the riot, the concerned citizens gathered in New York City to seek a solution to the growing problems between the blacks and the whites in America. This gathering was the birth of NAACP in 1910, and it was their silent parade that Morrison refers to in *Jazz*.

In addition to racial riots, the parade of the 369th infantry that Joe sees in the City also alludes to racism hidden in American history.<sup>3)</sup> During World War II, racism was prevalent in the army, and most black soldiers were assigned to segregated units, one of which was the 369th infantry that was sent to Europe. The black soldiers courageously fought under the command of the French army and stopped the surprise German attack. Their bravery was highly praised in France. Nevertheless, what awaited them in their mother land, US, was severe racism although they risked their lives to defend their country. Many black soldiers were exposed to the constant threat of race riots and lynching. Their anger, frustration, and

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2) "The Springfield Race Riot of 1908" gives further information.

3) See Lindsey for the combat of the 369th infantry.

helplessness toward unreasonable discrimination was woven into the background of *Jazz*.

Although Morrison's way of criticizing racism is neither direct nor emotional, she weaves the history of racial riots, which were seldom mentioned in American history. Embedding African-American experiences in her story and disrupting the integrity of dominant history, Morrison breaks down the white supremacist point of view so as to restructure American history.

#### IV. Remembering the black community in *Paradise*

*Paradise* starts with a violent assault, conducted by nine men who live in Ruby, a black community.<sup>4)</sup> Those chauvinistic men blamed the failure of their lives to the women, who live in the Convent free from any male influence, and attempt to kill them as a scapegoat.

Then the novel traces back the pasts of the ancestors of the attackers who founded Ruby and Haven. Before they move to Ruby, the ancestors in exile, who experienced discrimination from white people as well as affluent light-skinned black people, create an Edenic black town, Haven, free from discrimination. Its founding fathers' pain and effort have been passed down as a heroic legend through the generations. One of the episodes in the legend concerns a tour of Zechariah, who goes on a trip to survey thriving black communities with his children and brothers in 1910:

Big Daddy, Uncle Pryor and Elder spoke endless of that trip, how they matched wits with and debated preachers, pharmacists, dry-goods store owners, doctors, newspaper publishers, schoolteachers, bankers. They discussed malaria, the booze bill, the threat of white immigrants, the problems with Creek freedmen, the trustworthiness of boosters, the practicality of high book learning, the need for technical training, the consequences of statehood, lodges and the violence of whites, random and organized, that swirled around them.

(*Paradise* 108)

Black leaders, businessmen and intellectuals of the black towns seriously and passionately have a discussion about improving their living conditions and standards for the better future of black people. One of the most important and imminent issues they have to deal with, however, is the violence directed toward black people. Although some black towns such as

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4) Morrison learned about black communities in *Black Towns and Profit* by Hamilton.

Haven were prospering after the Reconstruction era, they were never safe, because the fear of lynching and race riots, as observed previously, always haunts black people.

Morrison subtly mentions a black town burned down by a race riot in *Paradise*. In 1921, eleven years after Zechariah's trip to survey black towns, Tulsa, Oklahoma, is bombed. Morrison simply states without any sign of her emotion or judgement: "Eleven years later, Tulsa was bombed." This description is based on a historical fact.<sup>5)</sup> On May 31, 1921, a race riot erupted in Tulsa: 26 black people and 10 whites are said to have been killed. The riot was triggered by a questionable arrest of a black man who was accused of sexually harassing a white woman. There was a rumor that white people would lynch the suspect, and many armed whites began gathering at a courthouse, where the black man was kept. Infuriated by racism and injustice imposed on black people, a black man fired toward the white crowd, which led to a tragic, deadly two-day riot.

On October 26, 1996, seventy-five years after the riot, *The New York Times* reports the case won by a descendant of J.B. Stradford, a prominent black businessman in Tulsa, who was found guilty on a charge of inflicting the riot in 1921. J.B. Stradford jumped bail after his arrest and escaped to Chicago, where he successfully made another career as a lawyer. Yet until his death in 1935, he regretted the false accusation. Cornelius Toole, Stradford's great-grandson, determined to remove the disgrace that had been attached to his great grandfather's name and filed a lawsuit in 1996. Thus, the case was reexamined by Bill LaFortune, the Tulsa County district attorney, who found the case against Stradford dubious after he investigated the remaining evidence and the court files. As a result, the black businessman of Tulsa was cleared of wrongdoing, and his honor was finally redeemed 60 years after his death.

Bill LaFortune, at the age of 39, admitted that he did not know anything about the race riot although he was originally from Tulsa. Morrison's reference to the riot in Tulsa clearly shows her intention of recovering the buried history of African Americans, such as J.B. Stradford, who were forced to suffer similar forms of disgrace. Morrison, however, never feeds the readers with specific information. She simply shows a glimpse of the horrible fact and leaves the readers to explore the background of the incident. By doing so, Morrison encourages the readers to participate in the novel, respecting their intuition and sensitivity.

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5) See Beckett for the further information about the race riot in Tulsa.

## V. The epigraphs and the recovery of the nameless people

The epigraphs to *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* contain Morrison's ingenious strategy to rewrite white dominant history. *Beloved* starts with the epigraph from Roman 9:25:

I will call them my people,  
which were not my people;  
and her beloved,  
*which was not beloved.*

The quotation above indicates that even the outcast heresy will receive a blessing and love from God. Likewise, in *Beloved*, the baby who is killed by her own mother and suffers from a lack of maternal love, will reclaim her mother's love and become beloved. This can be interpreted as Morrison's assertion that black people will not remain in darkness. In the epigraph from the Romans, Morrison epitomizes the possibility of recovery and survival for African Americans who have gone through a tormented past.

Although she employs, in *Beloved*, the biblical allusions, which are the basis of Western thought and culture, in the ensuing novels, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, Morrison transcends the limits of depending on white dominant values to create her literary world, free from Euro-centric influences, by adopting the epigraphs from *The Nag Hammadi*, the Gnostic text found in the caves near the modern city of Nag Hammadi, Egypt.<sup>6)</sup> The document exemplifies the philosophical and religious movement prominent in the 2nd century AD. It consists of 12 books plus a single tractate, each containing different forms of literature such as philosophical essays and religious writings. Their doctrine to challenge the conventional ideas and the authority attracted some Christians who were dissatisfied with the hierarchical order in the church. Accordingly, those clergymen who were afraid of the revolutionary and turbulent attitudes of Gnosticism considered them heretics and eventually banned them around the 4th century.

Morrison's epigraphs to *Jazz* and *Paradise* are taken from "Thunder, Perfect Mind" in *The Nag Hammadi*. *Jazz* starts with the following epigraph:

I am the name of the sound

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6) For the historical account of Gnosticism, see Arthur, O'Keefe and Pagels.

and the sound of the name.

I am the sign of the letter

and the designation of the division.

("Thunder, Perfect Mind," *The Nag Hammadi*)

In this passage, the importance of naming power, which slaves were deprived of, is emphasized. Under slavery, it was extremely difficult for the slaves to attain their original names. Considered as a commodity sold and bought at the master's expediency, slaves were conventionally given an unfamiliar name by a slave trader or a new master. Therefore, the female narrator in the epigraph, who declares the power of naming and describes herself as a subjective signifier, serves for recovering the slaves without names.

Gnosticism and African Americans share common ground of marginality. Vincent A. O'Keefe, who observes the influences of Gnosticism in *Jazz*, comments:

*Jazz* functions both as a reactive heresy against the Western tradition of realist fiction and its oppressive epistemology and as a proactive African-American affirmation of new types of epistemology. (331)

Morrison's *Jazz* and Gnosticism similarly show the resistance to the existing ruling power and demand the revision of oppressive, conventional ideas.

Elaine Pagels further describes the relegated situation of Gnosticism followers who challenged the Western scientific values as follows: "a suppressed current, like a river driven underground" (150). Those slaves who escaped to the North, led by the underground, were placed in the same marginality as the Gnostic followers. Yet as the discovery of *The Nag Hammadi* implies, the experiences of African Americans will receive recognition from mainstream society.

*Paradise* also starts with an epigraph from the *Nag Hammadi* as Ron David points out, though Morrison does not reveal the source:

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in  
 numerous sins,  
 and incontinencies,  
 and disgraceful passion  
 and fleeting pleasures,  
 which (men) embrace until they become  
 sober

and go up to their resting place.

And they will find me there,

and they will live,

and they will not die again.

(“Thunder: Perfect Mind,” *The Nag Hammadi*)

The narrator, who recognizes “the pleasant forms which exist in numerous sins,” evokes the women in the Convent. The men in Ruby consider the women evil because of their unrestrained, scandalous and immoral acts. Yet the epigraph indicates that men will also embrace sins. And when men are able to accept women not as a subjugate but as an equal partner, both will obtain perpetual life, which envisions Morrison’s concept of “paradise.”

It is noteworthy that the narrator of “Thunder: Perfect Mind” is a goddess, who proclaims:

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the

virgin. I am <the mother>

and the daughter. (“Thunder: Perfect Mind,” *The Nag Hammadi*)

According to Rose Horman Arthur, the goddess derives from Isis, the goddess of wisdom in ancient Egyptian mythology. “Thunder: Perfect Mind” written from the female perspective challenges the chauvinistic, almighty God, the Father in Christianity, while it also exceeds the limit of Western culture, focusing on a female deity in non-Western myths of Egypt. Thus, Morrison adeptly counters the Euro-centric myth and explores the literary space to accommodate the excluded to enrich the American literary canon.

## VI. Conclusion

Through the trilogy of *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, Morrison reveals the neglected voices of African Americans. She documents the lives of ordinary black people. Her introduction to *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, the collection of photographs by James Van der Zee and poems by Owen Dodson, conceived by an artist, Camille Billops, endorses her intention of recording the daily lives of nameless people. Morrison writes:

That this remarkable concert of Black subject, Black poet, Black photographer and Black artist focuses on the dead is significant for it is true what Africans say: “The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember.” (Morrison, “Foreward” to *The Harlem*)

*Book of the Dead*)

The concept of “rememory” or “remembering the dead” empowers and enriches Morrison’s writings. In writing the trilogy, Morrison recovers memorabilia of black people and cherishes them as a resource of black wisdom and knowledge. Through her acknowledgment of the ancestry, Morrison reclaims the sensibility and subjectivity of the subjugated. By so doing, she has definitely brought new dimensions to American history and literature.

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