

Cultural Coding and Decoding Practices in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*

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***Abstract:** This paper falls into history and memory studies in the post-colonial tradition, particularly the controversy over the pastness of the past and its relevance, irrelevance or partial relevance in the present. The paper marks out moments of reallocation of the resources of history and memory in two Morrison texts: *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981). In addition to the concepts of racial injustice, economic exploitation of the subaltern, commitment to black history and cultural heritage, all common themes in the critical canon on Toni Morrison, the novels also represent a conflict between several discourses of value coding within the black community itself. The divergence between these discourses opens a space in which members of the black community can look beyond a cruel past and a stagnant present to rethink the way the black society organizes itself, a move which, to a significant extent, determines its social, economic, and political condition in the present. By introducing alternative social meanings, Morrison engages in a multi-layered cultural coding which questions hegemonic practices beyond which it becomes hard for members of the black community to move freely. It is these deconstructive moments that the paper brings into focus through an examination of the emergent cultural formations in the two texts.*

1. Introduction

This paper falls into history and memory studies in the post-colonial tradition, particularly the controversy over the pastness of the past and its relevance, irrelevance or partial relevance in the present. The question of what to do with the past is frequently raised by post-modern and post-colonial novelists and politicians alike. The way we perceive the past and its various goods and evils shapes and in many cases even determines the way we live in the present, Edward Said says in the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*. Our heroes and villains, our shame and pride, are often drawn from years bygone (Said 1993:1-3). Benedict Anderson, on the other hand, calls attention to the unruptured past narratives in his seminal work *Imagined Communities*. Allegiances to these narratives, summoned from ancient times, often lead people to commit heinous acts of violence against men and women who share not these loyalties or depart from them. The line stretching from the glorious past to a honey soaked future is horizontally drawn (Anderson 1991: 11-12).

Inner debates over the relevance and applicability of the fixed community history erupt when such continuity, not questioned thus far, is

disrupted as opportunities for a different, but not necessarily better, life for the group or community present themselves. The debates are commonly polarized and they frequently pose serious threats to the group unity. Two kinds of attitudes emerge in the attempt to define who 'we' are and what 'we' want to be: an attitude towards the self (what kind of life the individual or the group should lead in the present?) and another towards the other (what kind of relationship the individual or the group ought to have with their oppressor?). Four responses to the questions may be distinguished: 1. the nostalgic-in-order-not-to-forget response which views the past as monumental and sacred and either dwells in the past (whether it be remarkably glorious or incredibly painful) or pulls the wheels back to the point of origin every time they start rolling forward. Value lies there and only there, so what needs be done is to recapture the past and reside in it. 2. the give-me-a-break-from-your-tears-and-moans amnesiac response that wants the nightmare of the past to disappear, to wake up one morning and not find it: "Do not keep reminding me of who I was because I want to forget my shameful past." The past is empty of any value. 3. the let-sleeping-dogs-lie reconciliatory position that wishes to keep itself away from the clashing camps often to protect its own economic interests by smiling to and at both camps. 4. the transformative, deconstructive response that resides on the edge of history without allowing itself to be drawn to the center: The eye that is critical of malpractices and misjudgments of the prophets of the nation or the group. The revisionist eye never worships and is never disgusted or viled, but is willing to transform the past to a more relevant experience by means of modernizing, reinterpreting or coding and decoding of messages and prophecies from the past. This self-examination of history's grand narratives is likely to take place when the group rests from collective marches towards justice or independence and turns inwards to examine its own choices or the individual choices of its own members.

This paper marks out moments of reallocation of the resources of history and memory in two Morrison texts. In addition to the concepts of racial injustice, economic exploitation of the subaltern, commitment to black history and cultural heritage, all common themes in the critical canon on Toni Morrison, the novels also represent a conflict between several discourses of value coding within the black community itself. The divergence between these discourses opens a space in which members of the black community can look beyond a cruel past and a stagnant present to rethink the way the black society organizes itself, a move which to a significant extent determines its social, economic, and political condition. Thus, besides its emphasis on maintaining continuity with the past, Morrison's text contributes to the formation of a black consciousness that embraces its past while retaining a degree of mobility in order to stay responsive to the political, economic, and educational transformations, a consciousness that breaks free of historical determinism and actively takes part in the coding of a new, less confining culture.

Morrison makes revisions of the African American experience as an insider engaged in self- and cultural evaluation: "... Can't I love what I

criticize?" Her genius lies in her ability to subtly criticize certain class, gender, and communal practices within the black communities while at the same time remaining essentially committed to the black population's right to a normal life free of categorization and racial prejudice. She exposes the contradictions, alternatives, and possibilities of change and thus poses as many, to use Raymond Williams' phrase, epochal questions as she does historical ones. These vital social dynamics in the texts are to varying degrees overshadowed in the critical fervor in favor of the concern with reconciling historical traumas. *Beloved*, the novel Morrison dedicates to this subject and the most widely taught and read work in her canon, dictates this concern with slavery history in the critical canon.

Morrison declares in no unclear terms the political significance of her literary writing: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels [...] isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. ... The best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Kolmerten, Stephen, & Wittenberg 1997: 32). Morrison also recognizes the heterogeneity within the black community. In one interview she says: "It seems to me that one of the most fetching qualities of black people is the variety in which they come, and the enormous layers of the lives they live" (Aithal 1996: 81). Black cultural homogeneity is not even hinted at. Within this social and economic diversity that features distinctly in her novels, the challenge is to relocate common denominators without placing heavy limitations on the individual potentials wherever and whenever they show promise.

The analysis below shifts critical interest from the concern with the black people's coming to terms with their historical memory as a race to a consideration of the emerging forces within the Black community that make recoding the African American heritage a necessity. Social formations and cultural codes are constantly challenged and, to a certain extent, modified by new generations of African Americans. By introducing alternative social meanings, Morrison engages in a multi-layered cultural coding which questions hegemonic practices beyond which it becomes hard for individual members to move freely. It is these deconstructive moments in the Morrison text that I will bring to focus in my analysis of the emerging cultural formations in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981).

There is more than one center of coding in the novels: Pilate, Guitar, Milkman, Corinthians, and the ring of singing children in SOS, and Ondine, Jadine, and Son in TB. The readers are not supposed to whole-heartedly embrace or completely reject any of the characters' responses because none in itself constitutes a complete social system; rather, the system is the result of the fusion of more than one identity and more than one position. Ultimately, however, from the conflicting voices emerges an alternative cultural discourse that frees the individual from a suffocating collective historical memory that anchors the individual in one time, one place, and/or one incident. Milkman provides an alternative to Guitar. Pilate to Macon. Corinthians to Milkman. Jadine to Son.

Son to Jadine. Ondine to Jadine. This contingent dynamic, which rejects historical determinism in favor of a pragmatic commitment to the past, is necessary to providing alternative spaces to mainstream cultural mythologies.

2. Messy Minus Me, Milkman.

The past and the present converge at the moment of Milkman's birth, the central character in *SOS* who will have to negotiate its consequences on the black collective and individual ego at that moment in history. The novel opens with Robert Smith taking a leap off Mercy hospital to which Blacks are not admitted. His leap is a reminder of both the ancestors' flight home after being fed up with the brutal practices of slavery, an act of courage and resistance, and of the fact that in 1936, years after emancipation, black men were still flying away from the hellish life of being black in the US. Ironically enough, the leap causes the first incident in which a black is admitted to Mercy. Having witnessed Smith's suicidal leap, Ruth is rushed to the delivery room; Milkman comes to life.

The narrator notes that Milkman, a little kid riding in his father's car, will have to negotiate the past, which will prove to be incredibly confusing. Because his father objects to his sitting in his mother's lap, he has to kneel on the dove seat and look out of the rear window: "But riding backward made him feel uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going-just where he had been- troubled him" (32). He is looking back at the past and the future seems to be not only uncertain but also unsettling because of that. Part of the historical determinism of being born into the African American community is to look compulsively backward, an act of extending the past into the present and the future. Milkman's mission is to work through the past, so it becomes a liberating force rather than a source of confusion, shame, and uncertainty. Along the way, he forms new attitudes towards his family, community, and his own self.

Growing up in a black middle-class family, Milkman develops a completely selfish, carefree, and individualistic attitude towards the life of his family and the conditions of his people. He is happy to enjoy the privileges of being a black, middle-class male, not only turning his back to the suffering of his family and community members, but taking part in inflicting the pain. His personal and racial heritage appears to threaten his present self-indulgences, and in an attitude similar to that of his father he wants nothing to do with it. "There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for," he thinks at a moment of self examination after his conversation with Guitar on what and who a Negro should be (107). His position is to be compared with that of Guitar who is completely faithful to the black collective memory and totally dedicated to serving his people's cause in his own way. Brutality has touched Guitar up close and left him feeling angry and bitter, having to grow up without a father and being fully aware of who sliced him up. Guitar is convinced that the Seven Days business of killing a white victim chosen at random for every black death is all about loving black people and will change their neo-slave status.

The difference between Guitar's attitude and that of Milkman is one between the too committed to be free and the too free to be responsible. Guitar is all gloom and politics while Milkman is all women and Honore parties. Morrison makes sure to disqualify both attitudes. Neither does, in and of itself, constitute an answer to black predicament. Guitar's way is not going to change how his people live. His bullet goes through Pilate's neck, murdering the only positive representation of the past in the book (loyal to the past yet free of its constraints). The narrator also makes sure to point out Milkman's misdirection and to blame him for Hagar's psychological breakdown. He will have to learn to share both the happiness and the pain.

Morrison complicates the representation of black present reality even more by bringing to light the status of black women. Milkman takes female objectification for granted until Lena opens his eyes to the unnaturalness of his ways in a very moving scene when she confronts him for the one and only time about how much neglect of their physical and emotional needs and of their very existence the men in the family have been showing: "You have been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us ... You don't know a single thing about either one of us- we made roses; that's all you know" (215). He shows a similar attitude to the needs of his cousin/mistress/sex object, whom he uses for sexual gratification and hurts so badly emotionally. In the chapter she devotes to Hagar's death, Morrison contrasts Milkman's phallic privileges with Hagar's shell of a self. Her mad obsession with her self-image comes as a result of his shattering her confidence in her physical attractiveness. She engages in self-mutilation to meet the standards of beauty he has internalized: shampoo for her Negro hair, perfume to cover her smell, makeup to change her complexion, new clothes for her looks. Pilate sets the balance back where it should be: "... He don't know what he loves, but he'll come around one of these days. How can he love himself and hate your hair" (315). And again the narrator makes sure to open his eyes to the inhumanity of black gender myths in relation to feminine subjectivity. These myths are brought into question when Milkman becomes conscious and starts to be critical of the sexual deprivation his mother has been unjustly made to put up with and the absolute control over black female body he himself has been exercising over his two sisters and Hagar. "Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own," the narrator disapprovingly interprets the kind of gender attitudes he has held thus far (75). The words summon a history of black phallocentrism. The message echoes deafeningly loud: it's messy minus me, Milkman.

In *Race, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, W. Hogue, in consistency with his thesis that "race has become one of the many factors that comprise a racial individual's social identity," and in an attempt to probe Morrison's response to the individualism, technology, and the city life of postmodern American society, reads *SOS*'s protagonist as rejecting modernity in favor of a collective homogeneous racial history (Pilate). Hogue (1996:32) writes: "For Milkman to fly like a bird ... is to become completely modern: to escape commitment,

family, and history, to give his material possession and to become totally free and modern". Hogue thinks in binary terms: Milkman is either modern and free or part of his racial history and restricted. The problem with this categorization is that it assumes a racism-free postmodern social and economic American milieu. It down plays racism in favor of progressivism, diversity, and heterogeneity. To cite just one example of how this race-free reading plays out, Hogue looks at Pilate's house and sees lack of postmodern technology, in place of which the house is 'full of life, spontaneity, [and] spirit'. He takes what Pilate represents as the dominant ideology in the book and as Morrison's response to modernity. Hogue ignores the fact that there are many women like Pilate in the subordinate groups who have been the victims of systematic suppression for centuries. They are poor and illiterate, and thus closer to the natural/spontaneous/ primitive/ spiritual as the binary opposites of the industrial/ civilized/ modern/ material. Morrison acknowledges and is certainly aware of those latter elements in the postmodern condition. However, she poses the more culturally and historically problematic question: What possibilities do African Americans have as they become part of the persistently pathologically racist postmodern culture? She no doubt sees the chances and openings the postmodern life has to offer yet her work constitutes an ideological response which refuses to dissociate the race element from the postmodern space. Describing the new space in an interview, Morrison says: "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean" (Peterson 2001: 4). Commitment to an African American history constitutes a protection against exploitative assimilationist promises.

Among the things Milkman should learn is to abandon his selfish, male-centered, and collectivity oblivious ways. During his visit to the South, Milkman achieves self- and racial- awareness. The moment of self-examination in the woods of Shalimar, Virginia brings forth stream of thought about how indifferent towards his people and exploitative of black women his ways have been. He has come a full cycle, a whole man who knows the history of his people, a history of physical (Jake) and mythical (Solomon) resistance to the violence and violation of the slavery system. He has already transformed and is willing to change and accept responsibility. In the closing pages, upon a request from the dying Pilate, he sings the song that Pilate, her daughter, and granddaughter were humming in their house early on. Only this time he sings for sugar girls instead: "O sugargirl, don't leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me."

3. The Racial Cyborg in *Tar Baby*

Mari Evans (1985:22) declares in her conclusion to the chapter on Toni Morrison that her writing does not solve the racial and cultural marginalization of the African Americans, nor does it heal the black collective and personal wounds, but it stresses the importance of finding the means to continue in the present. As a means of continuing in the present, once again in *Tar Baby*, Morrison actively participates in the deconstruction of black cultural systems

through Jadine's and Son's conflictual social, historical, and economic attitudes. Critics tend to view Jadine's approach in negative terms. Julia Emberley (1999: 407) sees assimilation and incorporation as mechanisms of containment and exclusion: "Jadine is poised at the beginning of the novel to become a member of the bourgeoisie, in a way that fulfils Fanon's mordant prognosis that 'for the black [woman] there is only one destiny. And it is to become white'". John Duvall (1997:336) argues that she represents an identity crisis, a subjectivity split between a desire to the values of white middle-class and the voices that urge them to acknowledge a black racial identity". Jadine is abandoning her people. A careful evaluation of textual evidence, however, may show that Jadine's progressive attitudes are not to be totally condemned as irresponsibly assimilationist. They certainly stand a better chance than Son's non-engagement politics. And the narrative voice seems to wish for a pragmatic commitment to history by merging the two as an alternative dynamic social system that leaves space for changes and evolutions.

Jadine is a Sorbone graduate in Art History and enjoys a successful modeling career. Her face appears in every magazine. Being black she cannot make it through the ways of success without a sense of shame accompanying her all the way. This sense of shame at the possibility of succeeding as a black model comes when the Black 'mother/ sister/African woman spits at her in one Paris supermarket. The second time she experiences similar repulsive feelings at the life choices she made comes when Son, upon their first encounter and after looking at her pictures in the fancy clothes and jewelry, accuses her of compromising her blackness and wearing a white mask. The narrator reports how she felt afterwards: "He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him but in her" (123). He manages to make her feel guilty at her own success. Though it is not clear who is to blame for the feelings of shame and guilt, there is enough textual evidence elsewhere to support the conclusion that her success does not necessarily mean that she is painting her skin white; on the contrary, she could be participating in the tearing down of cultural colonization.

Son later attributes his accusations to his own self-loathing. Though whether he seriously means it or is just trying to win her over cannot be safely textually established, in their second encounter in the New York apartment Jadine's exploration of the possibilities of capitalism is directly set against Son's flagrantly passive attitudes. Transgression is placed against the limit it crosses, each testing the limits of the other. They argue about education, work, and black history. He rejects her proposal to attend college; refuses to work, holding nostalgically to the original dime he won working for a black fellow; and accuses her of infidelity to her history by going to white colleges and receiving white education.

Son's accusatory discourse can be read against itself. Education provides Jadine with the means for social and economic mobility. If we put different pieces of the text together, it becomes fairly clear that education is what takes her away from the generic black women who become the nannies and

cooks at white people's houses, and who include amongst them Jadine's aunt, Ondine. Knowing Jadine's character, we certainly expect her to retain a degree of independence whether she ends up living with a black or a white man. She even reflects at some point on the possibility of living alone, without a male companion, if her freedom is to be jeopardized. By contrast, uneducated and thus without a source of self-sustenance, the island women will basically have no choice but to take care of the babies of white folks. Ondine and Sydney accept humiliation because they do not have any other place to go to. Jadine has enough access to power to ultimately challenge the status of black males and females. She is a racial cyborg who seized the tools of success and independence, to borrow Donna Haraway's metaphor on gender politics.

Her positions certainly stand a better chance than Son's non-engagement politics. White people pump the water and hook up the telephone lines in Eloë, Son's all-black, native town. The original dime that he won working for another black has a history of humiliation and death behind it. One more often than not needs both knowledge and economic stability to be in a position to forge a cultural discourse. It is the lack of mobility that contributes more to the perpetuation of the status quo.

In a much quoted passage the narrator seems to wish for the marriage of Son's loyalty to his people's cause and Jadine's education, economic success, and independence; his romantic fantasies about the south and her remarkably successful pragmatism: "Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell-its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands ..." (269). Speaking of Jadine and Son in an interview, Morrison notes: "I may have some attitude about which one is more right than the other, but in a funny sense that book was very unsettling to me because everybody was sort of wrong. (Laughter) some more wrong than others" (Duvall 1997: 335). Instead of the perfect union of success and commitment, Son fervently resists education as a white mask though he is perfectly capable of doing it. Jadine ends up leaving him behind to pursue her own future prospects. They are both wrong there.

4. Conclusion

Between Jadine and Milkman, the novel raises questions on the degree and nature of black involvement with the potentials of the present. Such questions have always been at the core of the internal dialogue of the marginalized, where the line between individual success and loyalty to the master is the issue at stake. This is the case Son has against Jadine in *Tar Baby* and, for that matter, Guitar against Milkman in *Song of Solomon*. The charge of acculturation and assimilation into the white ranks is always available to be dispersed on those characters. Toni Morrison reinscribes the limiting oppositional discourse which defines culture and civilization against the nexus of color by promoting the right of blacks to succeed without being labeled as white puppets. Blacks can acquire the means of power and still keep their cultural difference.

The juxtaposition and evaluation of character and narrator attitudes have signaled moments of cultural coding and decoding in *SOS* and *TB*. The elements Morrison endorses in forging a more mobile, more female inclusive African American culture are: first, an encounter with the past is the prerequisite to cultural initiation. A journey into the past recurs as a motif in the Morrison canon. Son and Jadine travel to Eloe, Florida. Milkman to Shalimar, Virginia. The moment of confrontation has to happen for a whole self to be formed (memory activation is the prerequisite to self-knowledge). Trying to avoid the past as if it never has happened constitutes an unsustainable illusion. Second, dwelling completely in the past amounts to self-imposed imprisonment. Son is canoed to the mythical island at the end of *Tar Baby* after failing to meet the requirements of social change. Third, black women are not treated fairly by their own kin. They slave labor to serve the males on whom they are totally dependent for their own existence. Fourth, black is beautiful, a deconstruction of hierarchizing beauty along color lines. Fifth, class domination permeates the social formations across color lines. It is practiced internally within the black communities when black men and women are categorized according to their material wealth. Sixth, it is crucial to disengage from a collectivity which cripples individual agency and hinders the emergence of deconstructive practices necessary to break the stagnation in the social scene. The relationship between the older generation and their offspring does not come in the form of a simple and direct extension of the formers' lives and their loyalty to the past. The choices the new generations of black men and women have to make might entail a redefinition of the demands of collectivity and the dues the African Americans are still paying to their racial heritage.

Finally, Morrison problematizes the issue of black assimilation into the white middle-class culture by rejecting white culture claims to civilized ways as the opposite of the natural/primitive/uneducated/ inferior blacks and by questioning the naturalness of social myths which condemn success as non-black. The social and economic mobility for the new generations constitutes a liberating force from the historical determinism in which they were placed and which, to a great extent, they have internalized: a decolonization of culturally colonized minds. It exposes the circulation of historical misconceptions that have been going on for a long time and which contribute to a heavily imbalanced distribution of power across racial boundaries and provide the anchor to various racist practices. Engagement is the way to disrupt white cultural hegemony.

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