

○ LIBERATION STORY OR APOCALYPSE?

READING BIBLICAL ALLUSION AND BAKHTIN THEORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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This paper discusses the workings of biblical allusion in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in the context of Bakhtin's thought. Principal aims are to show something of how the literary device of allusion fits into Bakhtin theory and, at the same time, to show how Morrison has incorporated the Bible into her work. The paper proposes that she writes and rewrites the Bible in interaction with other language-worlds of the novel – most notably, the historical slave narrative and the African spirit-world. It develops the notion of a hybrid chronotope in the novel based on the intersection of the biblical apocalypse with the 'rememory' of African cosmology. The paper represents an extension of Bakhtin theory in proposing allusion as a device for dialogisation.

What does it mean, in a novel rich in biblical allusion, when a 'Grandma' – who has some marks of a progenitor, including a twisted hip – dies of a broken heart? Or when a monstrous, devouring spirit is exorcised – at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon? Or when a man who ferries freed and escaping slaves across the Ohio River rejects the name Joshua – and later wonders if that was the right thing to do?

ALLUSION AND BAKHTIN'S THEORY: *DOUBLE-VOICED DISCOURSE*

To read *Beloved* with attention to biblical allusion and Bakhtin's theory is to apprehend the workings of the dialogism so foundational to his thought: from what he calls the *internal dialogism of the word* to what he considers to be the profoundly *dialogical* nature of language and truth. Bedrock for Bakhtin is the internal dialogism of the word. The word does not come from the dictionary, Bakhtin holds, but from the mouths of others (Bakhtin 1981: 294). It comes saturated with its history, laden with the 'intentions of others'. Its meaning is shaped on the fly, so to speak, not only by its source but by its destination: 'Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is... anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue' (1981, 280). Because meaning is continually being reshaped in this way, words do not have fixed boundaries. To use Bakhtin's language, 'words do not coincide with themselves' (Todorov 1984: 52).

What Bakhtin calls *double-voiced discourse* is language that can be seen to play with the word's internal dialogism, language in which a speaker intentionally and visibly uses another's words, language in which quotation marks can be heard (Morson and Emerson 1990: 146). Double-voiced discourse can be found in ordinary, 'extraliterary' language – in double entendre, for example, or in the speaker who makes ironic use of another's words. Such speech can be heard to contain a small conversation between two voices in a single utterance, the speaker both recapitulating and commenting on the other's words as she or he revoices them.

Bakhtin never takes up the topic of literary allusion. Yet allusion is precisely one voice heard to speak in another, language in which quotation marks can be heard. The Bible joins *Beloved*

in a character who takes slaves across a river, and the reader expects him to be like the biblical Joshua in some way; an ancestor who has a twisted hip will somehow be like Jacob. Somewhat as in ironic speech, an allusion stages a conversation between two voices: what will (and will not) be the likeness? Morrison's allusions are perhaps more than usually 'dialogical' in that often they function to problematise the very likeness they establish. If an ancestor in a novel is like the biblical Jacob, the man who became a nation, what might the novel's future hold if the ancestor dies of a broken heart? If a man Joshua who ferries slaves across the river unnames himself, what does that mean about the crossing? If a monster 'dies' at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon, does that mean she's coming back?

One theorist of allusion describes literary allusion as a 'marker' in a text pointing to an antecedent text and thereby invoking 'intertextual patterning' between the two texts as the reader ponders the meaning(s) implied in the relationship (Ben-Porat 1976: 107–108). This notion of intertextual patterning aligns well with Bakhtin's notion of the inherent dialogism in the word itself: the word without fixed semantic boundaries, the word that does not coincide with itself – the Jacob or the Joshua who is and is not Jacob or Joshua.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN LANGUAGES: *DIALOGISED HETEROGLOSSIA*

Dialogism is writ large in Bakhtin's vision of the universe of language as a cacophony of endless conversation between languages or language-worlds, of contention among belief systems. This Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia*, and he considers it to be the fundamental condition of language.

At any given moment of its historical existence, language... represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth... (Bakhtin 1981: 291)

The job of the novel is to *represent* the vitality, the many-voicedness, the contention inherent in everyday language, what Bakhtin calls 'extraliterary' or 'living' language. 'The prose artist elevates the social heteroglossia... into an image that has finished contours...; he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of... heteroglossia' (Bakhtin 1981: 278–279). Bakhtin sums up the move from nature to art in these words:

As distinct from the opaque mixing of languages in living utterances, [the novel] is *an artistically organised system for bringing different languages in contact with one another*, a system for having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another (Bakhtin 1981: 361).

While the double-voicing in literary allusion exhibits the internal dialogism of the word, dialogism in heteroglossia – *dialogised heteroglossia* is Bakhtin's term – occurs when languages are brought to '*interanimate*': when the perspectives and values in one language world must contend with the perspectives and values of another (Bakhtin 1981: 295–296).

Beloved exhibits this 'interanimation', this 'illumination of one language by means of another', in novelistic language I would describe as a *hybrid* of language worlds. Just as the allusions in the language of the novel stage a conversation with an antecedent biblical text, so too does the

language-world of the novel orchestrate a conversation in which, I propose, four or more languages or *belief systems* are revised and shaped and reshaped as they contend. In Bakhtinian terms, it would be appropriate to describe these languages or belief systems as *genres* – genre being not only a shape in which a language is ordered but the lens through which that language views the world (Bakhtin 1981: 288–289).

The novel's intertextuality with the African-American slave narrative is widely recognised in the critical literature (e.g., Christian 1997a: 43–44). The pivotal event in the novel is the murder of a 'crawling-already' baby by her mother, Sethe, an escaped slave, in order to save the child from capture and return to slavery. Morrison drew that story from the sensational historical narrative of a runaway slave named Margaret Garner, who tried to kill both herself and her children in order to prevent their return to slavery (39). Likewise, the critical literature widely acknowledges the importance in the novel of the spirit world of African cosmology (e.g., Christian 1997a: 43–44). The ghost-character Beloved is unsurprising in that world – whether as a baby-haunt of the house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati or as transformed into a very corporeal young woman, a ghost who eats and sleeps, even gets pregnant. I would add a constituent genre that is not remarked on in the literature, perhaps because it is so obvious. That is the love story conventional in the modern novel: here, in the story of ex-slaves Sethe and Paul D, a woman and a man meet, make love, encounter obstacles and overcome them in order to be reunited at last in the end.

The central source in my reading of the novel is the Bible as it is appropriated by African America (see Peach 2000: 115, 116). The central text in that Bible is what I would describe as an African-American mythic origin story in the biblical Exodus and Conquest (see Gilroy 1993: 207). African-American Christianity writes the story of blacks' freedom from slavery in America onto the biblical story of the escape from slavery in Egypt and the journey to freedom in the land that had been promised, generations before, to Abraham and his progeny. The story continues in the New Testament, where God's family is refigured in the followers of Jesus, and freedom as eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Intersecting with the biblical Exodus/Conquest, and also important in the novel, is what I call the watery creation story, the typological story of Christian baptism, in which the person (or the nation, or the cosmos) is (re)born from the water. Following on the novel's epigraph in Romans, allusions in the novel establish multiple points of contact with the Bible, with the effect of drawing it into the novel as one among its constituent genres¹. I propose that by means of biblical allusions and the conversation between the Bible and other constituent genres, the novel orchestrates a question about the Exodus/Conquest: Is it a liberation story – or an apocalypse?

THE EXODUS/CONQUEST IN AFRICAN AMERICA

The African-American liberation story is movingly told in the poetry of spirituals and gospel song, where the Promised Land is sometimes freedom from captivity, in the North, other times freedom from toil, in Heaven, oftentimes ambiguous (Ramey 2002: 351). Songs like 'Go Down, Moses' celebrate Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh, 'way down in Egypt land', and Moses' ringing ultimatum, 'Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go'. 'Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost' recalls Pharaoh's army vanquished at the Red Sea. 'Roll, Jordan, Roll' extols the power of the mighty river of imagination where the crossing is to eternal life: 'I want to go to Heaven when I die to

see old Jordan roll.’ Perhaps most haunting in the American imagination, and immortalised by Marian Anderson, is the yearning for rest in ‘Deep River’: ‘I want to go to that gospel place, that promised land, where all is peace...’ The conflation of the journey story of the ancestors with the story of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross is made vivid in ‘Ride on, Moses’: ‘Ride on Moses, ride on King Jesus, I want to go to heaven in the morning.’

The African-American imagination maps the story onto the U.S. landscape, the Jordan re-figured in the Ohio River, which separated slave states from free. In *Beloved*, Morrison establishes a number of points of contact with that reading of the biblical story. Among major characters I might describe as biblical hybrids, I have already mentioned Grandma Baby Suggs, the first of this family to cross the river from slavery, who recalls Jacob with her twisted hip, and also the man Stamp Paid, who ferries freed or escaping slaves across the Ohio, who used to be named Joshua. I would add here the shy girl Denver, who offers the hint of a new Moses: she is safely born to a runaway slave woman from a leaky old boat in the river, and thanks to the help of a white girl. But something is missing from the lineup of the landscapes:

Ancestors (Jacob)	Grandma’ Baby Suggs (twisted hip)
Moses	Denver (born from the water)
Red Sea	[_____]
Joshua	Stamp Paid (ferries across the Ohio; formerly named Joshua)
Jordan	Ohio (freedom on the other side)

Spiritual and gospel song loves to celebrate Moses’ victory at the Red Sea. But what has been forgotten in the poetry of the song is the American sea crossing. In the African-American story, while the Ohio River aligns nicely with the Jordan and the crossing into the Promised Land, the American sea crossing is the Atlantic, the Middle Passage. That journey ends in slavery, not freedom; the dead at the bottom of the sea are not the enslaving Egyptians but the enslaved Africans who died in the crossing. These are the ‘Sixty Million and more’ to whom Morrison dedicates her novel.

In *Beloved*, Morrison mobilises the power of the biblical imagery to turn the story back on itself. She insists on the horror of the Middle Passage, where the Africans’ crossing reverses the journey from slavery to freedom. This journey ends with Africans made captive and sold captive in the new land at the cost not only of their personal freedom but of their human identity as it was constituted in both language and connections to family and ancestors. Morrison accedes to locating the river-crossing at the Ohio, the boundary between slave and free states, but uses that topos to assert her proposal that neither escape nor emancipation brought freedom to African Americans; they remain captive in their identity as the objects of white subjectivity and remain oppressed by their repressed cultural memory of the Middle Passage (e.g. see Krumholz 1999: 108).

The late scholar Barbara Christian (1994) has said it wasn’t until the novel *Beloved* that Morrison brought herself to deal with the Middle Passage. *Beloved* is about the Middle Passage, Christian says:

That event is the dividing line between being African and being African American... It is [a] four-hundred-year holocaust... Yet for reasons having as much

to do with the inability on the part of America to acknowledge that it is capable of having generated such a holocaust, as well as with the horror that such a memory calls up for African Americans themselves, the Middle Passage has practically disappeared from American cultural memory... What did, what does that wrenching mean, not only then, but now? That is the question quivering throughout this novel. Have African American, How could African Americans, How are African Americans recovering from this monumental collective psychic rupture? (Christian 1997b: 366)

Christian asserts, 'No one in my family... ever talked about that transition from Africa to the New World. Some elders even tried to deny that we came from Africa and had been slaves' (1997b: 367). Christian describes *Beloved* as a healing ceremony for the African-American people, a process of recovering ancestors so that they can be put to rest:

Ancestral spirits must be nurtured and fed, or they will be angry or, at the least, sad... If ancestors are not consistently fed or have not resolved a major conflict, especially the manner of their death, they are tormented and may return to the realm we characterize as that of the living, sometimes in the form of an apparently new born baby. So often I have heard someone in the Caribbean say, 'This one is an old one and has come back because she needs to clear up something big' (Christian 1997b: 366).

Christian reads the novel as leading the African-American reader to confront that most deeply repressed of cultural memories, what she calls the American holocaust.

THE EXODUS/CONQUEST *DIALOGISED* IN THE NOVEL

Given the prevalence of river imagery in the African-American imagination, the allusion to the Jordan seems clear when several characters – first Baby Suggs, then Sethe's three older children, then Sethe herself with the newborn baby – complete their escape from the plantation Sweet Home when they are ferried across the river to the 'free' state of Ohio. There is a glancing textual marker as well in the man whose name used to be Joshua. The biblical Joshua was originally named Hoshea, 'salvation'. Moses changed Hoshea's name to Joshua, 'The Lord saves' (Num 13.16). Morrison's Joshua reverses that renaming in 'unnaming himself'

when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything' (Morrison 1987: 184–185).

In other words, the novel appears to suggest, he did not owe his salvation to the Lord; he was paid up in his own coin. With Joshua's unnamings, the novel asks a question about the river crossing as rebirth to freedom. Part Two of the novel suggests an answer to that question when it casts the spirit-character *Beloved* as a slave master who cruelly rules over her mother, Sethe,

and sister, Denver, on the 'free' side of the river, in the house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati (Harris 1993: 337).

The Ohio is starkly contrasted with the Jordan in a sort of anti-talisman Stamp Paid carries in his pocket, a scrap of red ribbon he has worried to a rag (Morrison 1987: 184). It came from the river:

He caught sight of something red on [the river's] bottom. Reaching for it, he thought it was a cardinal feather stuck to his boat. He tugged and what came loose in his hand was a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. He untied the ribbon and put it in his pocket, dropped the curl in the weeds... (180).

The water monster, the beast, lives in this river: 'Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will' (66).

The river fails as boundary between slavery and freedom on an apocalyptic morning when 'four horsemen' ride up to 124: men from Sweet Home come to reclaim Sethe and her children under the terms of the Fugitive Slave Act. Sethe is just reassembling her children in the house of her mother-in-law, beginning to make a life. This world comes to an abrupt end when Sethe spies the horsemen, then gathers her children and rushes to the tool shed. Before Stamp Paid can intervene, she has cut the throat of her 'crawling-already' baby with a hand saw to save her from capture.

Eighteen years later, when the novel opens, the house is haunted by the angry baby-spirit of that child, who never got named until the word 'Beloved' was chiselled on her tombstone. When the baby spirit is banished from the house, she returns personified as an enigmatic young woman who seems to have been born from the water: the chapter where her mysterious appearance begins to be sketched opens with the words, 'A fully dressed woman walked out of the water' (Morrison 1987: 50). When Sethe first lays eyes on this whatever-it-is, her bladder fills to bursting: 'She never made it to the outhouse... The water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought... But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb...' (51).

This is the daughter Sethe killed, the baby-ghost grown up, as the reader and Sethe and the younger daughter, Denver, slowly and painfully discover. The ghost possesses the new, struggling little family with a death-grip. But other possibilities emerge for the origins of this Beloved as well, and they are never resolved. She is the baby-ghost, certainly, but a passage late in the novel also situates her consciousness in the hold of a slave ship:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat... (Morrison 1987: 210)

In this way, the spirit-child named on a tombstone and on the spine of a book gives a name to lost ancestry whose names are unknown or forgotten, the 'Sixty Million and more' of the novel's dedication. The ancestor-ghost Beloved, 'the fully dressed woman [who] walked out of the water', is born from the water of the Middle Passage.

I cannot say that the alignment of the Middle Passage with the Red Sea is specifically marked in the novel – unless one would want to trace the relation of the unJoshua to Moses and follow Moses back to the Red Sea. Or, perhaps one might cite the novel’s resetting of the infant Moses’ rebirth in the Nile, discussed below, as a signpost that points to the Red Sea crossing, the event prefigured in the little rebirth story. But these associations seem notable in their indirection. Nor is the Middle Passage ever explicitly named in the novel. Perhaps it is suitable to Morrison’s healing purposes that the reader must construct the Middle Passage from the highly impressionistic views in the hold of the slave ship, as in the passage I quoted above. Then the horrible reversal in the alignment with the Red Sea grows slowly, imperceptibly – irrefusably – in the imagination. That process leads the reader to confront the American sea crossing and recognise in the character Beloved the restless anger of its unnamed, unmourned sixty million dead.

The hope for this family also was born from the water, born *in* the water. Sethe is pregnant with the girl Denver when she escapes from Sweet Home, and when the baby starts to come she is starving and has lain down to die, her bare feet swollen beyond walking, beyond recognition. A white girl finds her, a runaway from debt slavery, nearly starving herself. Together the two women accomplish the birthing, which takes place in a leaky old boat with one oar on the shore of the Ohio. ‘The strong hands went to work... none too soon, for river water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe’s hips’ (Morrison 1987: 84). The scene recalls the rebirthing of the infant Moses from the Nile by the collaboration between slave and free women, the Hebrew mother and daughter and Pharaoh’s daughter and her servant girl (Exod 2:1-11). In the end, Pharaoh’s daughter ‘called his name Moses ... Because I drew him out of the water’ (2:10). In Morrison’s story, the white girl goes on her way, leaving mother and infant daughter by the shore of the river and saying in her goodbye, ‘She’s never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?’ ... You better tell her... Say Miss Amy Denver...’ (85). Sethe gives the new daughter an American name, Denver, for the stranger, the white girl, as a testament to one woman helping another.

When the novel begins to draw toward its conclusion, it is the shy girl Denver who ventures out of the house of horrors 124 has become, where Sethe and Denver are enslaved, even devoured, by the monster Beloved:

The flesh between [Sethe’s] forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk [while Beloved] whined for sweets although she was getting bigger, plumper by the day. Everything was gone now except two laying hens, and somebody would soon have to decide whether an egg every now and then was worth more than two fried chickens (Morrison 1987: 239).

Denver knows that if they are not to starve, she must do something. ‘It was she who had to step off the edge of the world,’ ‘leave the yard’ (Morrison 1987: 239, 241). Baby Suggs is long dead now, but Denver hears her Grandma Baby laugh, ‘clear as anything’, and tell her, ‘Go on out the yard. Go on’ (244). The community that was lost in the aftermath of the murder of the crawling-already baby is slowly restored now (e.g. see Higgins 2001: 103). When Denver asks for help, food begins to pour in from the community: she finds a sack of beans one day on a stump near the edge of the yard, ‘another time a plate of cold rabbit meat. One morning a basket of eggs sat there. As she lifted it, a slip of paper fluttered down... “M. Lucille Williams’ was

written in big crooked letters” (249). And in the end, it will be the community of women who invade the yard to exorcise the ‘devil-child’, *Beloved* (256 ff, 261).

TIME AND SPACE IN THE NOVEL: *DIALOGISED CHRONOTOPE*

The effect of the hybrid genre of the novel can be well apprehended in the way time is represented. Barbara Christian (1997a) comments that ‘Morrison’s use of the folk concept of ‘rememory’ [is] common to many African and African diasporic peoples’, recalling that it was a term her own mother used (42). Rememory is best understood ‘in the context of a cosmology in which time is not linear’, Christian explains. Rather, ‘the future, in the Western sense, is absent, because the present is always an unfolding of the past. Thus every “future” is already contained in what Westerners call the “past”’ (45). By way of illustration, Christian cites a passage from the novel in which the girl Denver ‘reminds us of the dangerous effects of disremembering: “I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again... Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to”’ (45). Christian does not remark on it, but a further observation can be made from Denver’s language of rememory: that is the spatialisation of time in her notion that ‘it [the thing that could happen again] comes from outside this house, outside this yard...’ In the cosmology Denver describes, time and space are inextricable.

Alongside Bakhtin’s work in discourse theory, encompassed in the previous discussion here about double-voicing in language and genre, rests his theory of *chronotope* (chronos/topos), an approach to understanding the representation of the interrelationships of time and space. He considered that ‘chronotopes... provide the basis for distinguishing generic types; they lie at the heart of specific varieties of the novel genre’ (Bakhtin 1981: 250–251). Of course situations and events of extraliterary life also can be understood chronotopically: one might call to mind the very different space/times in such ‘living life’ situations as agricultural labour, sexual intercourse, or the assembly line (Morson and Emerson 1990: 368). Similarly Bakhtin catalogues typical literary chronotopes: the chronotope ‘on the road’, where ‘time flows into space’, for example, and the chronotope of ‘the provincial town’, where ‘time... has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles... of the day, of the week’ (243–248). From a perspective in Bakhtin’s theory, the African time of ‘rememory’ constitutes a chronotope in the novel.

Lynne Pearce, writing about chronotope in the novel, calls attention to the following long passage early in the novel where Sethe talks with Denver about rememory:

‘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. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.’

‘Can other people see it?’ asked Denver.

‘Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you will be walking down that 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. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and blade of grass of it does. 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 be there always waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what.'

Denver picked at her finger nails. 'If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.'

Sethe looked right in Denver's face. 'Nothing ever does,' she said. (Pearce 1994: 186.)

Hence, as Pearce observes, at any moment, 'time... can... reach out and grab you'. And the events that threaten in this past that can present itself again are 'for the most part unspeakable' (186).

Just as Bakhtin sees double-voicing in language and genre, so too can chronotope be hybrid; a novel brings chronotopes into interaction that is dialogical:

Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships... The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical* (Bakhtin 1981: 252).

Bakhtin offers an example in the novel *Don Quixote*, which he describes as a 'hybridisation of the "alien, miraculous world" chronotope of chivalric romances with the "high road winding through one's native land" chronotope that is typical of the picaresque novel' (Bakhtin 1981: 165).

In bringing together the constituent genres of *Beloved*, Morrison sets the cyclical time of African and African-American 'rememory' alongside a more conventional (or Western) chronological notion of time that marches forward as the clock ticks and the calendar pages turn, a notion of time that the other three sources share. Such is the time of the love story of Sethe and Paul D, who meet, make love, encounter obstacles, overcome the obstacles and are reunited in the end. Such is the time of the Bible as it is conventionally understood. The story moves forward as the promise unfolds, from creation to the ancestor stories with the promise to Abraham, to the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land, to the exile and re-entry into the land, and on into New Testament, where time is expected to continue ticking forward for as long as it takes until the Second Coming. (Albeit a promise that the storyline endlessly defers.) And such is the time of the slave narrative, which appropriates the biblical Exodus story with its anticipation of freedom in the end. All three of these sources participate in what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls 'the politics of fulfillment: the notion that a future society will be able to realise the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished, [a politics that] reflect[s] the foundational semantic position of the Bible' (36–37).

In the genres participating in ‘the politics of fulfillment’, the promise is fulfilled in space: west of the Jordan in the Bible’s Promised Land, in the North of the slave narratives, across the Ohio in Cincinnati in the novel’s love story. In these Western chronotopes, time moves forward toward a future space where hope is fulfilled. Slavery stays behind, in Egypt, in the South, closed off from the future in a time that is past. But in the novel’s African chronotope of rememory, time and space are stuck together in an endless present where the unspeakable past can happen again, where the plantation Sweet Home is ‘never going away’. The two chronotopes contend in the novel.

Morrison twines two of the constituent genres together in the novel’s pivotal event, when the four horsemen ride up to 124. With the figure of the horsemen, Morrison renders the story she retells from the historical slave narrative of Margaret Garner a biblical apocalypse when Sethe cuts the throat of the baby. But from a third perspective, that of the novel’s African spirit world, it is an apocalypse that can happen again, as Denver’s reflection has shown: although Denver does not know this, it was in fact the arrival of the four horsemen that ‘made it all right’ for her mother to kill her sister, the event Denver fears might happen again.

Josef Pesch (1999) has proposed *Beloved* to be a ‘post-apocalyptic novel’: ‘Post-apocalyptic literature tells us that [the final] catastrophe might not have been really final... The apocalypse has happened before the narration sets in’ (141). Such is the case in *Beloved*, as Pesch observes: ‘The specific apocalypse of *Beloved* has happened eighteen years before the novel begins, when the four horsemen arrive’ (145). When the time of African cosmology is aligned with the biblical apocalypse, the story goes on even after the final disaster. You can run smack into Sweet Home at any time; you never know when the four horsemen might ride up to your yard. Pesch is persuasive, but I would modify his proposal to suggest that post-apocalyptic is one of two contending representations of time, one of two chronotopes in the novel. The other is the conventional chronotope of the modern novel – common to the Bible as conventionally read, the slave narrative and the stereotypical modern love story – all characterised by what Paul Gilroy calls the politics of fulfillment. The novel represents that contending possibility in what appears to be the lived-happily-after ending of the love story – and among the ambiguities of the novel’s conclusion as well.

CONCLUSION IN *POLYPHONY*

If a novel is fully to accomplish what Bakhtin regards to be its mimetic work, it must represent the dialogical nature of truth itself. Consonant with the dialogism internal to the word and the dialogical contention in the universe of language, the truth cannot be held in a single perspective for Bakhtin but only can be apprehended in competing points of view. He likens such a novelistic consciousness to the consciousness of Galileo:

The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language – that is, it refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic centre of the ideological world (Bakhtin 1981: 366).

This Bakhtin considers to be the *form-shaping ideology* of the novel. He calls it *polyphony*.

The novel's contending chronotopes align with contending possibilities for the conclusion of the Exodus/Conquest story as it is appropriated in African America. I have suggested above that Morrison has designed the architecture of her novel to confront that story and to insist on the Middle Passage as the American analogue to the biblical Red Sea. The American sea crossing ended in slavery and death. Nor does the subsequent river crossing yield freedom in this novel, where Sethe and Beloved are shown to remain enslaved in Ohio, on the 'free' side of the river. There they are haunted by repressed memories of the unspeakable and unspoken past, especially the past of the Middle Passage as it is represented in the monster Beloved has become. Yet with Denver, Morrison has given us a new, American Moses. Is there a role for Moses in this story after all? And near the novel's conclusion, Morrison gives water-imagery of baptism in Sethe's experience of the exorcism: she 'trembled like the baptised' in the women's wave of sound (1987: 261). Is there the possibility for Sethe's rebirth to freedom at last? In this context, one recalls the interior speech with which Stamp Paid reveals his former name to be Joshua: he is *wondering* whether he had been right to reject the biblical name. So, could the Exodus/Conquest story be the right story after all? Could it be that freedom can be found on the 'free' side of the river?

The corporeal Beloved, the ghost slave master who has been fattening herself at the expense of her mother and her sister, mysteriously vanishes in the exorcism. Nobody seems to know exactly what happened. 'One point of agreement is: first they saw [her] and then they didn't.' (Morrison 1987: 267) Any appearance of closure is immediately mitigated, however: 'Later, a little boy put it out how he had been looking for bait back of 124, down by the stream, and saw, cutting through the woods, a naked woman with fish for hair' (267). Does the typological baptism story include the possibility for the monster's rebirth from the water? Like the death of Jesus, the exorcism takes place at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon (Mark 15:33-39 and parallels). Does this imply the possibility for the monster's resurrection after three days? And in the time of remembrance as it shapes the genre of post-apocalyptic, when/where would 'three days' be?

The novel reflects the conflicting possibilities in the ambiguous language twice repeated on the closing page: 'It was not a story to pass on' and 'This is not a story to pass on.' The expression plays on the meaning of 'pass on' (e.g. see Hove 2002: 260). On the surface of the language, one reads 'It was not a story to pass *on*'; not a story to retell but a story to forget. Yet the novel has been about the importance of remembering. Underneath 'it was not a story to pass *on*,' one might detect the opposite: 'It was not a story to *pass on*'; it is not a story to pass [by], but a story to tell. In this way, the novel's conclusion holds open the tension between the desire to forget and the need to remember. The novel's dialogisation – from the double-voiced language of allusion to the contention among genres and chronotopes – ends in polyphony. The conversation instigated by the novel continues off the last page, held open – dialogised – by two meanings in one utterance, 'not a story to pass on'. Will Beloved's story be forgotten, or will it be remembered? In this crux rests a larger question of the novel: Is there a freedom story for blacks in America?

All of these questions take me back to the novel's epigraph: 'I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved' (Rom 9:25). Given the novel's dedication to the 'sixty million and more' and the novel's irresolution, one reading of the epigraph yields this question: Can black Americans recover and name their 60 million dead? That is, can they acknowledge the painful truth of their past and thereby free themselves from it at last? To take into account the context of the epigraph in Romans and the context of its source text in Hosea – each concerned with the possibility for building or rebuilding community between two

peoples – yields a different question: Can black *and white* Americans acknowledge the horrors of our common past, the unspeakables that the novel has finally spoken – and thus be reconciled at last? Can the novel itself – now an established part of the American literary canon and a staple of the undergraduate curriculum – begin to constitute in the American imagination the museum of the American holocaust, the museum that America has failed to build? From a perspective in Bakhtin’s thought, one might say that the novel holds open the hope for a long and painful conversation that black America and white America must have if we are to recover from the unspeakable past we share.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The discussion here is largely limited to the Exodus/Conquest, but the novel’s allusions encompass the gospels and include the Song of Solomon as well. For a fuller treatment, see Maddison (2005: 73–104).

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