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AGNIESZKA ŁOBODZIEC

TONI MORRISON'S DISCREDITED MAGIC – MAGICAL REALISM IN *BELOVED* REVISITED

Abstract

The article is an attempt to estimate the extent to which Toni Morrison's *Be-loved* is representative of magical realism. A number of literary critics and theoreticians contend that the novel is magical realist. Morrison believes that this classification is an overgeneralization of her work. Therefore, the posited interconnectedness between *Be-loved* and magical realism deserves a more complex treatment. In the following, it is argued that *Be-loved*, while indeed manifesting certain features and subject matters typical of that literary mode, on the other hand redefines the concept of the magic by using it as a marker for the characters' extraordinary powers of endurance and resistance, thereby insisting on the uniqueness of the African American experience.

Key words

Magical realism; magic; time; space; identity; slavery; modernity; history

Introduction

Magical realism, a concept coined by German painters and Latin American writers, has made its presence known in literary studies internationally. The theory of literary magical realism is evolving and becoming more complex since it does not only encompass a consideration of supernatural, magical presences in the narrative but it also entails research regarding the intricacy of literary structure, linguistic indeterminacies, ambiguity, characteristic motifs, and postcolonial discourse.¹ Some literary critics have classified Toni Morrison's writing, particularly her novel *Be-loved*, as magical realist.² Certain characteristics of magical realism as defined by a number of scholars appear applicable to *Be-loved*,

although the novelist frequently expresses distance and discomfort towards an overgeneralized attribution of magical realism to her writing. In this regard, classifying *Beloved* as unquestionably magical realist seems problematic. On the one hand, the novel evidences a certain congruity with the currently emerging theories of magical realism in terms of form and content. On the other hand, Morrison seems to subvert and redefine the concept of magic in *Beloved*. Magic seems to stand for the extraordinary capacity of enslaved African Americans to transcend the oppressive reality. This transcendence constitutes an outstanding survival strategy. Moreover, Morrison describes this magic as “discredited, because it was held by discredited people” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 243). In the following, this state of affairs deplored by Morrison is, among others, discussed as the result of the scientific and philosophical concepts of race and racial difference which provided the ideological basis for that particular feature of Euro-American modernity.

Magic Realist Structure, Time, Space, and Identity in *Beloved*

The critic Angel Flores (1995: 116) states, “The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent ‘literature’ from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms. The narrative proceeds in well-prepared, increasingly intense steps, which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion.” In line with this, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* evidences the novelist’s concern with a carefully structured plot characterized with growing intensity. The intensity reveals itself already in the first epigraphic paragraph, referencing a number of episodes and characters that face compelling and striking condition, which seems to be the outcome of an equally unimaginably intense past. The vehemence and condensation of such information as Baby Suggs’ death, Howard’s and Buglar’s escape, Sethe’s and Denver’s isolation and a house haunted by a spiteful ghost calls for clarification, for more stories that will disclose the reasons for the present ‘spiteful’ condition. On the following two pages, the narrator makes more dramatic statements regarding Baby Suggs’ “intolerable” (Morrison, *Beloved* [1987] 1997: 4) past, the “outrageous behavior” (4) of the house, the murder of the baby by “having its throat cut” (5), the mother’s “rutting among the headstone with the engraver” (5) in order to have at least the baby’s seven-letter name engraved on the tombstone, the bitter memory of the place called Sweet Home, the chokecherry tree-shaped scar carved on Sethe’s back inflicted on her by malicious males who forcefully took her milk, and Paul D’s look of a healer. The first chapter thus stimulates the further examination of the connectedness among the aforementioned occurrences. In the following chapters, the stories are gradually and fragmentarily revealed. The characters’ memories move back and forth, unexpectedly recalling a multiplicity of images and associations. One fragment in the novel possesses a kind of metatextual nature because it reflects the overall manner in which the fragments of stories are told throughout the

novel and almost magically emerge as a complete narrative. When Sethe sought to unveil her story to Paul D.

She was spinning. Round and round the room. Past the jelly cupboard, past the window, past the front door, another window, the sideboard, the keeping-room door, the dry sink, the stove – back to the jelly cupboard. Paul D sat at the table watching her drift into view then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel. (159)

While reading the narrated story fragments, the reader can almost identify with the character Paul D who listens to Sethe. While talking, Sethe moves around the room, appearing and disappearing out of Paul D's sight a few times before she tells him the whole story. Throughout the text, the reader finds more and more details regarding the answers to the questions posed in the first twenty-five pages: Why and how did Sethe kill the baby? Why was Baby Suggs pondering colors before she died? Why were Sethe and Denver lonely? What really happened at Sweet Home after schoolteacher came to put things in order? Why did Sixo laugh only "once – at the very end" (23) and why did he stop speaking English? (23). Moreover, the repeating narrative facilitates an increase of intensity as more and more information is added to particular characters' stories.

The fragmented, repeating narrative corresponds with another characteristic of magically realist texts, mainly the questioning of "received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris 1995: 173). First, as critic Wendy B. Faris (1995: 173) states, the "sense of time is shaken throughout" the text and "Repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references" (1995: 177). In *Beloved*, the time shifts help to blur the lines between the present and the past. The present is outlined at the very beginning of the novel by a description of the house at 124, the residence of officially manumitted ex-slaves, more unconsciously than not, haunted by painful and undesirable memories of slavery. Although the characters seek escape from tormenting images of the past through erasure from their consciousness, the images suddenly resurface. They have to confront their "rememory" where the past and present overlap. Sethe's testimony describes the immeasurability of time. She says,

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. (35–36)

Again, Sethe's statement has a metafictional quality, a feature characteristic of magical realism. Faris (1995: 175) contends, "Metafictional dimensions are

common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves, ... – those miniature emblematic textual self-portraits. Thus the magical power of fiction itself, the capacities of mind that make it possible, and the elements out of which it is made” It is Sethe’s and other characters’ uncontrollable rememory that enables the fragmented narrative in *Beloved* and the overlapping of the present and the past. Sethe claims, “Today is always here Tomorrow, never” (60). Also the experience of Baby Suggs underscores the past overarching the present. “Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn’t get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present – intolerable – and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color (3–4). Another character, Ella, is “infuriated” (256) upon finding out that 124 is “occupied by something-or-other beating up on Sethe Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (256).

Interestingly, the characters’ memories appear to be very selective, returning again and again to the most traumatic and paralyzing images. The ignominy of slavery distorts Baby Suggs’ memory of her children. For this reason, she believes Sethe should bear with the situation because in spite of all she has the opportunity to raise most of her children and to experience the spiritual presence of her child. When Sethe suggests moving out of the haunted house, Baby Suggs contends, “You lucky. You got three left Be thankful, why don’t you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. ... My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember” (5). Sethe regards Baby Suggs’ memory as intentionally selective. She says, “That’s all you let yourself remember” (5). At the same time, she realizes that the memory of positive occurrences unconsciously fades with the flow of time in contradistinction to recurring memories of torment and trauma. For some reason, she cannot remember a great deal about her sons who fled the haunted house; “her memory of Buglar was fading fast. Howard at least had a head shape nobody could forget” (5–6). What she really desperately seeks to forget is her life in slavery. No matter how hard she tries, the traumatic images return. “Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind ... and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes” (6). This is the way trauma possesses the tortured psyche with a sense of continuity with the past.

Experience of a distorted sense of time is a condition that originates in the midst of a traumatic experience. In *Beloved*, the ever-present pain inflicted upon the enslaved characters cripples their sense of time. The everlasting rain reflects Paul D’s seemingly constant torture as a prisoner on a chain gang. No matter how things change and how time is measured in the surrounding world, the rain does not cease.

It rained.

Snakes came down from short-leaf pine and hemlock.

It rained.

Cypress, yellow poplar, ash and palmetto drooped under five days of rain without wind. By the eighth day the doves were nowhere in sight, by the ninth even the salamanders were gone. Dogs laid their ears down and stared over their paws. The men could not work. Chain-up was slow, breakfast abandoned, the two-step became a slow drag over soupy grass and unreliable earth. (109)

Paul D's situation on the chain gang is a kind of death-in-life existence. As a slave, he cannot measure and manage his time for himself. The overseers time his life according to his labor. Another character, Sixo, has also a distorted sense of unmanageable time. Symbolically, he does not succeed at cooking potatoes well overnight in spite of his timing attempts. "Time never worked the way Sixo thought, so of course he never got it right" (21).

Unable to measure time, fettered by a traumatic past, and prevented from enjoying the present and from focusing on a constructive future, the characters are trapped by their continuously revolving, "rolling" (6) memory. Sethe, who tells her story to Paul D, knows that "the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one" (163).

Similar to time, spaces also seem barely manageable and measurable in magic realist texts. Rawdon Wilson (1995: 215) writes,

Space, understood in its most primitive sense ... seems omnipresent in literature, but rather hard to place. There doesn't seem to be a vocabulary sufficiently capacious to discuss space. You may talk about deictics, copresence, coordination, distances, surfaces, exteriors, interiors, volume and plasticity, but the units of measurement are lacking: literary space, in being conceptual, cannot be measured, but it *can* be experienced.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison achieves the immeasurability of space through a sense of dislocatedness. The characters frequently make reference to the lack of a place of their own. When Paul D arrives at 124, he says, "I go anywhere these days. Anywhere they let me sit down" (7). When *Beloved* appears in 124, Paul D cannot find a comfortable place in the house. Whenever he changes place and moves, for example, from Sethe's room, to a rocker, then to Baby Suggs' room, and finally to the storeroom, his condition is related by way of a repetitive narrative: "It went on that way and might have stayed that way but one evening, after supper, after Sethe, he came downstairs, sat in the rocker and didn't want to be there" (115). In a similar way, the following paragraph begins with, "It went on that way and might have stayed that way but one evening, after supper, after Sethe, he came downstairs, lay in Baby Suggs' bed and didn't want to be there" (115). Moreover,

the character suddenly moves from one place to another not only physically but also psychologically. For instance, when Sethe speaks of her imprisonment for infanticide, Paul D does not continue the conversation although he wants to know more about Sethe's experience. He refrains because his memory of his imprisonment in Alfred, Georgia, returns. To escape this memory he changes the subject.

The experience of reading *Beloved* evokes also within the reader a sense of dislocatedness, connected with an inability to predict the following paragraphs' setting. This sense of dislocatedness is also the condition of the enslaved, who are moved "around like checkers" (23), not knowing where they are going to be the following hour or day since anyone at anytime can send them away or sell them anywhere. As commodified human beings, they get "rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (23).

The characters, however, seek to overcome their dislocatedness. Sethe refuses to run anymore. She says, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth" (15). The returned spirit, Beloved, finally manages to find Sethe and reside with her at 124, where she feels at home, after sojourning in many places and spaces. Her experiences actually involve overlapping spaces between the living and the dead. When Denver asks Beloved, "What's it like over there, where you were before?" (75), presumably meaning a space of afterlife, Beloved describes a space that is "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in ... Heaps. A lot of people is down there. Some is dead" (75). First, Denver, as well as the reader, envisions some kind of purgatory, an otherworldly place. Later, Beloved describes a specifically detailed image of a slave ship.

Finally, the indeterminacy of the literary space results in the destabilization of the concept of identity. The reader is, for example, forced to speculate about the identity of Beloved. In most sections of the novel, she is manifested as Sethe's baby. At one time this identity is affirmed by Beloved and through Sethe's memory as well as by Denver's perception and sisterly connectedness to Beloved. Yet there are also the passages where Beloved recalls her experience within the hold of the slave ship loaded with the living and the dead, the decomposing bodies, rats, and prayers for death, which suggests that she is also one of the ancestors who were shipped from Africa. Thus she is also an embodiment of collective memory. This feature corresponds with ghostly figures characteristic of magical realism. Lois Parkinson Zamora (1995: 497–498) defines varied types of magically realist spirits, some of which

carry the burden of tradition and collective memory: ancestral apparitions often act as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion.... They dissent, furthermore, from modernity's (and the novel's) psychological assumptions about autonomous consciousness

and self-constituted identity and propose instead a model of the self that is collective: subjectivity is not singular but several, not merely individual and existential but mythic, cumulative, participatory.

As a result of the transition from the individual to collective, “In literature . . ., one space can contain other spaces” (Wilson 1995: 226). In *Beloved*, 124 seems to contain numerous spaces. When Stamp Paid approaches the house, he does not only hear the voices of the three female characters, Sethe, Beloved and Denver, who occupy the house, but also the voices of people dwelling in or coming from other, unidentifiable spaces. “What he heard . . . he didn’t understand. Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices – loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. . . . All he could make out was the word mine. The rest of it stayed outside his mind’s reach” (172). Later, he believes, “the undecipherable language clamoring around the house was the mumbling of the black and angry dead. Very few had died in bed, like Baby Suggs, and none that he knew of, including Baby, had lived a livable life” (198). Therefore, the voices that Paul D hears appear to belong to the “Sixty Million and More” to whom Toni Morrison dedicates the novel. In one of her interviews, the novelist explains the number:

Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo . . . saying, ‘We could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies.’ That’s like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 257)

The possible relatedness between Toni Morrison’s metatextual dedication and the voices heard by a fictional character also exemplifies a magical realist feature, as Wilson observes, “Not only do fictional worlds overlap, in some sense, the actual world, but they also overlap each other, each superimposition being radically divergent from the others” (Wilson 1995: 216).

Another characteristic of magical realism is the particular method of incorporating the supernatural, which “is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. It is a simple matter of the most complicated sort” (Zamora and Faris 1995: 3). Or, as Faris (1995: 163) contends, “magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed.” In effect, the supernatural phenomena become an aspect of everyday reality. Also the characters in *Beloved* take the presence of the ghost and its incarnation for granted. As in other works within the tradition of magical realism, “Natural objects become animate” (Erickson 1995: 434). The characters in *Beloved* do not question shaking floorboards, an embracing white dress, mirrors shattering on their own, and hand prints mys-

teriously appearing on the cake. Sethe and Denver continuously wage “a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light” (4). Moreover, their matter-of-fact conversations about cohabiting with ghosts renders the otherworldly presence as ordinary happenstance. The apparent ordinariness of the irrational phenomena is also presented by the manner in which Sethe and Denver push the sideboard moved by the ghost back to its original place as if it were an ordinary household task. Other women in the community also talk about Beloved’s return from afterlife as if it were the most natural thing in the world before they decide to attempt exorcism.

“Ella. What’s all this I’m hearing about Sethe?”/“Tell me it’s in there with her. That’s all I know”/“The daughter? The killed one?”/“That’s what they tell me.”/“How they know that’s her?”/“It’s sitting there. Sleeps, eats and raises hell. Whipping Sethe every day.”/“I’ll be. A baby?”/“No. Grown. The age it would have been had it lived.”/“You talking about flesh?”/“I’m talking about flesh.”/“whipping her?” (255)

Interestingly, in Morrison’s novel, it is mainly female characters that feel more at home with otherworldly presences. The male characters more often tend to talk warily about them. Paul D recognizes the ghost but cannot come to terms with its incarnation although he discerns Beloved’s unusual appearance and behavior. She sleeps for long hours, but there is “no trace of sleep” (55) in her face after she wakes up. Then, Paul observes, “Acts sick, sounds sick, but she don’t look sick. Good skin, bright eyes and strong as a bull” (56). Later, he describes her to Stamp Paid, “First minute I saw her I didn’t want to be nowhere around her. Something funny about her. Talks funny. Acts funny” (234). Equally surprised Stamp Paid seeks to account rationally for Beloved appearance. He wonders, “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup” (235).

Another characteristic feature of the novel’s magical realism is passages which suggest that certain characters are endowed with some mystical knowledge of future events. Baby Suggs, for instance, experiences a premonition heralding ultimate tragedy when she wakes up to a “scent of disapproval,” (140) which she believes emanates from the black community that turned away from her. Later, however, “Suddenly, behind the disapproving odor, way way back behind it, she smelled another thing. Dark and coming. Something she couldn’t get at because the other odor hid it (138). The premonition comes before “schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff” (148) arrive at 124 to apprehend Sethe and her children, an apprehension Sethe resists by attempting to kill her children.

Defining Toni Morrison's Discredited Magic

In an interview, Toni Morrison stresses the distinction between African American folk culture and Latin American magical realism. She sees the main difference between these two expressions in their different origins. She would rather identify with Black people who had to invent their magic in the midst of a new American reality. The novelist states that their magic “was discredited, because it was held by discredited people” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 243). The nature of the magic Morrison presents is different from that of Latin American writers, who “understood the sources of their magic right away” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 243). Slavery engendered the ultimate discredit of black people, the multidimensionality of which Morrison reimagines in her novel. Moreover, she projects black people’s magical transcendence of their discredited status through a myriad of seemingly extraordinary day to day survival strategies. As a result, while incorporating supernatural occurrences that appear real and ordinary, Morrison at the same time subverts this characteristic of magical realism by rendering the ordinary magical, the real miraculous. This happens, for example, in *Beloved*, when a white girl sees Sethe’s lacerated and swollen feet and compares them to those of a dead man whose body once floated by her while she was fishing. “Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe’s feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears” (34). She warns Sethe of pain, saying, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (34). This epigraphic statement foreshadows several other ‘magical’ moments of resurrection. Sethe calls for Baby Suggs’ fingers that once brought Sethe’s numb body back to life, “Just the fingers, she thought. Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way” (95). Paul D also possesses an invigorating power that causes others to open up and confess. In his presence, “Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot. Windows suddenly had view. And wouldn’t you know he’d be a singing man” (39). At the same time, he seeks the powerful company of Sethe, in whose presence “The closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock” (41). He then offers fruitful cohabitation with her, saying, “We can make a life, girl. A life” (46).

In the same sense, Denver’s birth is portrayed as magical. Literally, Denver’s favorite story is “the magic of her birth” (29). Actually, it is Sethe’s powerful imagination that saves her and her baby. Sethe escapes from Sweet Home pregnant. Hungry and exhausted she feels she cannot survive in the wilderness. In fear of losing her child, she imagines “herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on – an hour? a day? a day and a night? – in her lifeless body [that] grieved her so she made the groan that made the person walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still” (31). Her groan, evoked by her imagination, almost magically summons a white girl, who helps Sethe to deliver the baby. It is worth mentioning that a characteristic of magical realism is an emphasis on the role of imagination, whereby the “use of imagination claims to supplement real-

ity by heightening its distinctive elements through ideal imagination, the essence and not necessarily the vehicle” (Simpkins 1995: 153).

Another magical motif in Toni Morrison’s novel is the characters’ response to the reality of extreme violence. Denver, for instance, contemplates the reason why her mother kills her baby:

what it meant – what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; ... Sethe could make her realize that worse than that – far worse – was ... That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind ... Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore ... she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean. (251)

In Sethe’s case, the readiness to kill her own child in order to preserve her “magical best thing” is presented as the ultimate act of resistance.

The reality the discredited characters face also requires continuous redefinition of their existence and humanity. It is like a never-ending attempt to start everything anew. They confront a new reality in the New World defined by someone else. In this regard, Toni Morrison can be classified as one of the magic realists who “characteristically responded to the harshness of modern history by developing a compensatory vision. They sought to create in their art a ‘peace and tranquility’ that had been destroyed by events” (Foster 1995: 271).

The African American response to Euro-American modernity encompassed black people’s reinterpretation and affirmation of their humanity, which white supremacy questioned, or even denied. Toni Morrison observes that modern life began with slavery and the slave trade because “It made [the Europeans] into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy.... They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true” (Bell 2004: 187). No wonder then that Stamp Paid questions the humanity of white people, “What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?” (180), after he encounters “a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” (180). Paul D, in turn, ponders over the dehumanization of black people. When his body is afflicted by spasms, he does not even know why, wondering if it is due to “bad whiskey, nights in the cellar, pig fever, iron bits, smiling roosters, fired feet, laughing dead men, hissing grass, rain, apple blossoms, neck jewelry, Judy in the slaughterhouse, Halle in the butter, ghost white stairs, chokecherry trees, cameo pins, aspens, Paul A’s face, sausage or the loss of a red, red heart” (235). When he asks Stamp Paid, “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” and the answer is “All he can” (235), the only thing he can utter is “Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?” (235)

Thus, Morrison’s incorporation of ‘magic,’ as has been demonstrated above, varies from the manner in which magical realists employ this concept. However, the

novelist's concern with the discredit of African Americans seems still to be in accordance with important issues also taken up by Latin American magic realists, such as, for instance, the ideological justification of the dehumanization of enslaved Blacks by Western science and philosophy. The critic Amaryll Chanady (1995: 140), analyzing the works of the Guatemalan author Miguel Angel Asturias, states,

magical realism subverts the canons of ethnographic representation. The dichotomization between the nonreflexive primitive society and the Western ethnographer's discourse of knowledge is dissolved by a novelistic discourse in which there is an attempt, albeit imperfect and artificial, to represent an indigenous worldview by means of a non-European focalizer.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the character of schoolteacher epitomizes the western ethnographer and historian. When he writes a book about enslaved black people, measures Sethe's face with a string, and orders his student to describe Sethe by putting "her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (193), his thought processes are based on Euro-American modern science of that time, which classified black people as subhuman. The scientific field that supported the formation of the belief in black inferiority was natural history. Cornel West (1982: 55) writes,

The principal aim of natural history is to observe, compare, measure, and order animals and human bodies (or classes of animals and human bodies) *based on visible, especially physical, characteristics*. These characteristics permit one to discern identity and difference, equality and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies.

The tenets of natural history were compatible with those of phrenology (the study of skulls), physiognomy (the reading of faces), and western aesthetics that considered Caucasian features as the universal reference for the human race. In the same vein, Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire, Hume, and Jefferson postulated black people's intellectual inferiority. Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, went so far as to express doubt regarding black people's humanity. He stated, "It is impossible for us to suppose that these beings should be men; because if we supposed them to be men, one would begin to believe we ourselves were not Christians" (West 1982: 61). In turn, Euro-American slaveholders made use of such ideas as an ideological tool for the subjugation of black people as cheap labor force. In *Beloved*, a striking symbol of black people's dehumanization is a humiliating and mutilating iron horse bit placed in the mouths of "Men, boys, little girls, [and] women" (71). The device had the disabling effect of preventing Paul D from expressing words of consolation to a dispirited Halle. It caused many people to look "wild" (71). Moreover, the conditions in which chained black men were forced to live were on the level of animals, or even worse, as, for example, the following passage describing the cage-like situation of enslaved men penned in during a prolonged torrential rain storm re-

veals: "By the eighth day the doves were nowhere in sight, by the ninth even the salamanders were gone. Dogs laid their ears down and stared over their paws. The men could not work" (109). Paul D also remembers having to steal from pigs and feeling "less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (72). It was the enlightened schoolteacher and his company, who "Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gentle in a lot of ways" (37) that made Paul D and other enslaved people feel like animals.

In Morrison's novel, the characters' response to the harshness of Western modernity also possesses a strong emotional dimension. A particular focus on the 'inner reality' of the characters' lives is another characteristic of magical realism, which seeks to portray "felt history" as opposed to documented or natural history. John Burt Foster (1995: 273) states, "felt history refers to the eloquent gestures and images with which a character or lyric persona registers the direct pressure of events, whether enlarging and buoyant or limiting and harsh." In this manner, Morrison projects the feelings of Sethe after she finds out that schoolteacher has instructed his students to document "her animal characteristics." Sethe remembers, "I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly ... My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp" (193). Sethe responds emotionally to terrors. She reproaches Paul D when he questions Beloved's presence, which arouses in him disturbing feelings, saying, "feel this, why don't you? ... feel how it feels to be a coloredwoman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you. Feel that" (67–68).

Focusing on the intensity of the characters' emotions, Morrison defies the bias of documented history that discredits enslaved black people. An instance of the documented historical sources reconstructed in the novel are the discriminating, disgraceful notes written by schoolteacher. Another instance is a newspaper clipping that reports Sethe's infanticide. Morrison discounts its reliability through the perspective of Paul D.

The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No. At the mouth, you see. And no at whatever it was those black scratches said, and no to whatever it was Stamp Paid wanted him to know. Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary – something whitepeople would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. And it must have been

hard to find news about Negroes worth the breath catch of a white citizen of Cincinnati. (155–156)

The partial clipping cannot be relied on as a credible source of historical information because, as most newspaper articles, its aim is to project black people as immoral, dissolute, and threatening. Moreover, it does not have any bearing on the victimization of the enslaved.

The traumatic experience of slavery engenders a complex conceptualization of life and death. On the one hand, in spite of the barbaric treatment some black characters receive, they magically affirm life and their own uniqueness holding on to thoughts and emotions that uplift. Baby Suggs' self-discovery upon gaining her freedom shows that bondage and exploitation have not deprived her of being 'somebody.' First, she notices her hands and proclaims "These hands belong to me. These *my* hands" (141). Then, she becomes conscious of "her own heartbeat" (141), an awareness that empowers her. Baby Suggs also knows that self-love has a quintessential value as a strategy of survival in brutish circumstances. Therefore, she inspires other people to recognize and love their precious, although abused and tormented bodies. She passes on this inspiring and self-affirming message in her sermon when she says, "Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh" (88). On the other hand, there are also characters that see death as liberation. Beloved remembers people placed as "cargo" in the hold of a slave ship who sought death. She says, "we are all trying to leave our bodies behind" (210). This belief in "crossing over" also empowers Sethe to choose infanticide instead of letting her children suffer the afflictions that enslavement would bring. Sethe also relates Baby Suggs' death as "Soft as cream" (7). When she says, "Being alive was the hard part" (7), she empathizes with Baby Suggs, a mother, who experienced "sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone" (177). Subjected to humiliation, depravity, and torture, some black people saw death as hope, liberation, and a spiritual home.

The theoreticians of magical realism also stress the significant role of community. Magic is "communal" (Faris 1995: 183). Magic realist texts "may encode the strengths of communities even more than the struggle of individuals. Societies, rather than personalities, tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction" (Zamora and Faris 1995: 10). Throughout their experience, black people responded to the cruelty of the modern world not only as individuals but also collectively. Despite the slaveholders' efforts to separate people of similar lineage in order to prevent communication that could lead to rebellion, a spirit of resistance rose, fostering a sense of black community. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison delineates the empowering communal unity during slavery and its aftermath. Baby Suggs' sermons spiritually unify the gathered people, among whom there are "laughing children, dancing men, crying women" (88). Even after the black community withdraws from her, after a few years the memory of her generosity "finally transforms isolation into a quest for help" (Lipinsky 1994: 210). The black women gathered in front of 124 transform themselves by the sound of their singing into a power-

ful black church that liberates Denver and Sethe from the oppressive spiritual presence of Beloved, and Sethe trembles “like the baptized in its wash” (251). Another character Lady Jones also ministers to her community. Due to her light complexion, she was “picked for a colored girls’ normal school in Pennsylvania” (247). Making use of this educational advantage, she devotes her life to “teaching the unpicked. The children who played in dirt until they were old enough for chores” (247). Her welcoming spirit invites Denver to ask her for assistance. In order to help the young girl and her mother, Lady Jones calls upon other black women of the community, who share their food with Denver and Sethe.

Moreover, a distinct value system grew out of the Black American communal experience. One of those values is an “extraordinary faith in the redemptive power of suffering, patience, perseverance, and compassion” (Bell 2004: 49). This faith expresses itself in Black American work songs, and blues, a genre that the character Paul D sang together with other chained men relating to the vicissitudes of life.

They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and master and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the line; cane, rain and rocking chairs. (108)

Their communal singing reflects the black music that in the form of work songs and blues constituted “the kinds of mental adjustments they had to make in order to survive in an alien land” (Cone 1998: 98). The work songs and blues were an empowering black secular music, through which enslaved blacks articulated their feelings about their plight.

Additionally, in order to survive as a chain-gang prisoner Paul needs the help of the other forty-five men. While he is alone in the coffle, even his hands do not obey him. When the overseers “shoved him into the box and dropped the cage door down, his hands quit taking instruction. On their own, they traveled. Nothing could stop them or get their attention” (107). With the other men, although chained, he can rely on communal support. The chain creates a one-for-all-and-all-for-one dependency, as the following fragment relates, “Some lost direction and their neighbors, feeling the confused pull of the chain, snatched them around. For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none ...” (110).

The memories of traumatic experiences also bond the characters. Having an opportunity to share history, they recall and transcend terror. In an interview, Toni Morrison reflects upon the empowering effect of the characters’ collective memory. She states,

no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it, because they are afraid of it – which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and

look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four ... The collective sharing of that information heals the individual – and the collective. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 248)

Correspondingly, in order to recall and face the undesirable past, Sethe needs Paul D's supportive presence. She can possibly "Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?" (18). Paul D, in turn, sees his heart, metaphorically, as a locked tobacco tin into which he put the bitter memory of "Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper" (113). Only in Sethe's presence is he able to disclose the content of his heart. "By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open" (113).

The emphasis on the empowering force of collective memory is underlined by highlighting the isolation of Sethe's daughter Denver, a character that, owing to the particular circumstances of her young life, is cut off from that tradition. Her awareness of the unifying power of memory deepens her sense of alienation. She realizes "That her own father's absence was not hers ... Only those who knew him ("knew him well") could claim his absence for themselves. Just as only those who lived in Sweet Home could remember it, whisper it and glance sideways at one another while they did" (13).

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this article, certain tenets of magical realism theory appear quite applicable in analyzing Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The novel testifies to the author's concern with plot structure. It questions the rational measurability of time, space, and identity. It contains supernatural and metatextual references. Morrison also stresses the significance of African American community and emotional historical experience. Nevertheless, a too easy classification of *Beloved* as just another example of magical realism does not do justice to the particular features of Morrison's work. Morrison redefines the concept of the 'magic' in a way which stresses the uniqueness of the African American experience, thereby countering the history of African American's discredit with a positive vision. In Morrison's understanding, the 'magical' dimensions of that experience is an effective survival strategy which enables black people to physically, psychologically, and spiritually endure. To underscore the essence of this empowering magic, Morrison employs a repetitive narrative structure in which such 'magical' moments recur through the novel through the characters' memories. These magical moments are an essential part of the experience of the discredited, the enslaved, "the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind" (92), whose feelings and thoughts are "unspeakable" (199).³

Another problematic issue concerning magical realism in *Beloved* has an epistemological dimension. In her essay "The Site of Memory," Morrison (2008: 72)

states, “The work that I do frequently falls, in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called fantastic, or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable. I’m not comfortable with these labels. I consider that my single gravest responsibility (in spite of that magic) is not to lie.” She seeks to reimagine and to represent realistically the historical truth based on her own in-depth research. In this manner, the author seems to question overgeneralizing theoretical concepts employed interchangeably, and often somewhat recklessly, by literary critics. It seems indeed that there is a need for an exact definition that would differentiate magic from the fantastic and marvelous. For instance, John Erickson (1995: 428) contends,

The term magical realism must be defined with care, for critics have used it indiscriminately, often confounding it with the marvelous or the fantastic. The “marvelous” narrative depicts a fictitious world totally removed from conventional reality, while the “fantastic” narrative heralds the sudden apparition of the supernatural in the midst of the everyday world. In the former, the supernatural fails to surprise the character; in the latter, it elicits an affective reaction from the character, for the intrusion of the supernatural, as Roger Caillois describes it, results in “a scandal, a laceration, a strange and almost unbearable irruption in the real world.” The fantastic narrative turns on the resolution of the supernatural through rational explanation.⁴

Moreover, labeling *Beloved* as magic realist may also be questionable for cultural reasons, particularly from the perspective of black theology. Although the fusion of African religious traditions and Christian influences birthed African American religion and spirituality, **Black theologians primarily accentuate a Christian dimension** of the experience of black Americans in the modern world.⁵ They regard the Black Church as the historical incubator of Black culture in America. Suffering strengthened not only the enslaved people’s identification with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ but also their hope for liberation. The Bible empowered black people “to counter the white supremacist insistence that they were less than human” (Hooks 2003: 107). In *Beloved*, to some extent, it is black Christian faith that seems to empower Baby Suggs in her role of community spiritual counselor. “In winter and fall she carried [her heart] to AME’s and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. . . . When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman, and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing” (87). When she preaches her sermon of love, she assures people of their “somebodiness,” (Grant 1989: IX) because they are all beloved children of God. When she multiplies food, she resembles Jesus who multiplied food for the assembled. Also Stamp Paid manifests black Christian values, as he helps the enslaved to cross the river over to the other side. When he learns that Paul D sleeps in a cold church’s cellar, he expects someone to “act like a Christian” (186) and offer Paul D shelter. Therefore, *Beloved*, replete with references to Christianity, puts magic into question. For this reason, critics and readers who recognize and identify with a deeply

rooted Christian dimension of religious African American experience may from their point of view reject the classification of *Beloved* as magic realist. Magical realism presents the supernatural, otherworldly phenomena as if they were a part of everyday reality. To the Christian faith, on the contrary, also connected with the otherworldly, they may be seen as the very ingredient of real life. Therefore, since *Beloved* alludes to Christianity, which is crucial for African American experience and the tradition of Black resistance, the novel can be interpreted as realist instead of magic realist. Such a stance, no matter how fundamentalist it may seem from a non-religious perspective, would indeed qualify the characterization of the novel as magical realist.

In conclusion, it can be said that an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in terms of magical realism is more problematic than it appears at first sight. The author's statements discussed in this article evidence a critical distance to the concept which deserves to be taken seriously. Above all, Morrison seeks to underline the uniqueness of African-American cultural expressions, including literature, which entail black people's response to oppressive circumstances. She hopes to produce literature that constitutes a separate literary tradition, refusing overgeneralizing classifications. To Morrison, the genealogy of African-American cultural expression is constituted by a context divergent from that of mainstream magical realism. In regard to *Beloved*, slavery engenders this context. Although the history of slavery reaches back to the ancient times, African American writers, like Morrison, discern American slavery as a particularly oppressive, dehumanizing form of black people's captivity. In the midst of this captivity, any psychologically or physically effective survival strategy can be regarded as an extraordinary achievement. In Morrison's novel, this extraordinariness is delineated by her own incorporation of the concept of magic.

Notes

- 1 In *Lies that Tell the Truth: Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction From Britain*, Anne C. Hegerfeldt discusses both the interrelatedness and incongruities among varied theories of magic realism. She states, "Although there is no shortage of more recent attempts to define magic realism, the results are unsatisfactory. Despite a certain critical consensus as to which works are to be considered magic realist, theoretical definitions fall short for two basic reasons: either they are too broad, making discrimination between texts impossible, or, in an attempt to avoid the former defect, they are unduly rigid and exclude all but a very small number of texts from consideration, thereby prematurely cutting off critical discussion" (2005: 38). In the chapter "A Working Definition" (37–65), Hegerfeldt defines the characteristics of magical realism, presenting a cross-studying recapitulation of key theories of magical realism.
- 2 In *Lies that Tell the Truth*, Anne C. Hegerfeldt observes, "most critics writing today do seem to have a certain group of core texts in mind when they speak of magic realism" (2005: 42). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of these texts. The evidence of the continuous recognition of *Beloved* as magic realist is its role of a referent, against which literary scholars still delineate or seek to define the characteristics of magical realism, even while analyzing literary works other than those by Morrison, for instance, Marta Caminero-Santangelo "'The Pleas of the

- Desperate:’ Collective Agency versus Magical Realism in Ana Castillo’s ‘So Far from God’” (2005: 97); Andrew Hoberek, “Introduction: After Postmodernism” (2007: 236); Laurie Vickroy, “The Traumas of Unbelonging: Reinaldo Arenas’s Recuperations of Cuba” (2005: 115).
- 3 Interestingly, in the novel, there is one magical performance that seems insignificant to the black characters as it only brings about temporary entertainment. This magic is performed by white people, “doing magic, clowning, without heads or with two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton, completely tattooed, eating glass, swallowing fire, spitting ribbons, twisted into knots, forming pyramids, playing with snakes and beating each other up” (48). The black characters finally leave behind the white people’s magic on the way to express and discover their own.
- 4 Erickson’s statement seems to allude to earlier scholarly attempts to differentiate between the fantastic and the supernatural as exemplified in Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975). Todorov defines the fantastic as a “hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1975: 25).
- 5 For instance, a section of a statement made at a meeting of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (1969) presents a succinct definition of black liberation theology and its Christian dimension: “Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of ‘blackness.’ It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression. The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom IS the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator!” (qtd. in Wilmore and Cone 1988: 101).

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