Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Other Unspeakable Texts from Different Margins by Keri Hulme and Lindiwe Mabuza

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Summary

Some of the debates around counter-hegemonic strategies employed in postcolonial fictional discourses, are used to explore how the "unspeakable" experiences of marginalized people are translated into "speakable" texts. The purpose of a comparative study of texts from North America, New Zealand and South Africa is to "connect" attempts to textualize suppressed histories in different postcolonial contexts – with a special emphasis on minorities within these countries and the discursive production of "post-essentialist" identities. It is argued that reading these works through attempts to theorize "Third World" literature provides a useful method to circumvent the pitfalls of reproducing imperialist practice such as associated with European postmodernism.

Opsomming

Sommige debatte wat rondom die teen-hegemoniese strategieë in die postkoloniale letterkundige diskoerse gevoer word, word gebruik om te verken hoe die "onuitspreeklike" ervaring van gemarginaliseerde persone omgesit word in "uitspreekbare" tekste. Die oogmerk van 'n vergelykende studie van tekste uit Noord-Amerika, Nieu-Seeland en Suid-Afrika is om die pogings om die onderdrukte geskiedenisse in verskillende postkoloniale kontekste te tekstualiseer, in verband met mekaar te bring – met spesiale beklemtoning van die minderhede in hierdie lande en die beredeneerde voortbring van "post-essensialistiese" identiteite. Daar word geredeneer dat die lees van hierdie werke in pogings om "Derde Wêreld"-letterkunde te teoretiseer, 'n bruikbare metode verskaf om die slaggate van die reprodusering van die imperalistiese praktyk soos dié waarmee die Europese postmodernisme geassosieer word, te omseil.

Although North America, New Zealand and South Africa are not commonly referred to as belonging to the "Third World" or "developing nations" one could argue that marginalized communities within these countries exist in a Third World relation to the dominant hegemonies. The term "Third World", as Georg Gugelberger points out, is problematic and more usefully employed "operationally than analytically" (1991: 510).[1] Of interest here will be the "operational" application of theories of minority or Third World literature to texts by Toni Morrison, Keri Hulme and Lindiwe Mabuza, in order to determine how they attempt to construct counter-hegemonic discourses, albeit in very different socio/political contexts. The strategies developed to give voice to native/other or subaltern experience, and to present "unofficial" histories which subvert the master narratives of dominant discourses, will be discussed in the context of the contradictions thrown up by such a project.

The announcement that Toni Morrison had won the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature described her as the first African American and the eighth woman (though the tenth American), to have achieved the award. This says something about the position from which, as the Swedish Academy puts it, she "gives life to an essential aspect of American reality".[2] Just how the

history of a slave mother who kills her child to "save" it from slave-catchers – which is the subject of *Beloved* (1987) – can be seen as representative of some "essential aspect of American reality" begs questions about Morrison's attempt to "speak the unspeakable". It is interesting to compare the way Morrison deals with this subject with other texts by women from very different margins, which are also concerned with child murder, namely, *The Bone People* (1983) by Keri Hulme, who is one-eight Maori but identifies herself as "all Maori", and a short story by Lindiwe Mabuza, who at the time of writing "Wake" (1989) was in exile as ANC representative in Washington D.C.

Attempting to "speak the unspeakable" – which is what the narratives to be discussed here, do – is problematized by the following questions: how does one give utterance to experience locked in pre-literate slave memory? How does one find words that approximate the horrific deeds committed and their effects on the individual and communal psyche without trivializing or sensationalizing them? In the texts' preoccupation with memory and experimental discourses of time and historical consciousness, they employ methods that have been associated with postmodernism – this raises the issue of the relationship between postmodernism and postcolonialism. One needs to ask: are the silent and silenced child-victims, when translated into texts, not in danger of becoming re-appropriated by dominant discourses?

As minors within minorities children are the most vulnerable members of that society, yet also representative of its potential future. At the most obvious level, these texts provide a critique of the legacy of the colonial enterprise, ranging from the slave-trade in North America which results in "motherlove being a killer", to the suppression of Maori history and culture in New Zealand which is replicated in the silence surrounding the physical assaults written on the child's body, and finally, the violence resulting from an enforced school's language policy in Apartheid South Africa. Morrison's *Beloved* is inspired by an historical account of a slave called Margaret Garner who killed her "crawling already" baby in the mid-nineteenth century.[3] (Morrison's latest novel, *Jazz* (1992), though set in the 1920's, follows traces of this suppressed history in the form of Wild, who appears as another "manifestation" of the mysterious Beloved). In Hulme's *The Bone People,* Simon, the mute Pakeha (European) child is beaten almost to death by his (loving) Maori foster parent, and in Lindiwe Mabuza's "Wake" two sisters are shot by police during the Soweto uprising, one hit by "stray bullets" while skipping. In the first two works the violence is contained within the family but can be read as a re-production of, and a response to, the dominant ideologies in which these families are situated. In "Wake", however, the family's grief at the state's murder of the two children becomes translated into a revolutionary vision of resistance to the racial and political ideologies that resulted in the shooting of the children, and should be seen in the context of the liberation discourse in which it is (literally) situated.

Like Morrison, Hulme is an established writer; *The Bone People* won the Booker prize in 1985, whereas Morrison's *Beloved* won the Pulitzer prize in 1988. On the other hand, "Wake" is the final story in a collection edited by

Mabuza *One Never Knows* (1989), featuring black South African women writers in exile. Significantly, the subject of child murder and state violence against children is a common motif in the anthology, though Mabuza's story is the only one not written in the realist mode associated with the Black Consciousness-inspired "protest fiction" of the 1970's and 80's – which explains its inclusion here despite the fact that Mabuza does not enjoy the same status as Morrison or Hulme. Clearly, it will be necessary to speculate about the different ways we are invited to "read" these unspeakable and unofficial histories in the contexts represented by these texts.

It has been claimed that attempts by theorists and writers to "speak (for) the unspeakable" in postcolonialist discourses is a dubious endeavour. In an article that has elicited much critical debate, "Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Spivak says: "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (1988: 287).[4] (What then of the subaltern child, one might ask). Spivak distinguishes – from Marx's *Vertretung* as opposed to *Darstellung* – between speaking for, and speaking as, the colonized subject. She insists that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous (1988: 282), and stresses the "mechanics" rather than the "authenticity" of representations of the Other:

> What I find useful is the sustained and developing work on the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other; we can use it to much greater analytic and interventionist advantage than invocations of the *authenticity* of the Other.
>
> (1988: 294)

Such an emphasis on "mechanics" does, of course, seem useful for an exploration of the fictional strategies employed in these texts. However, as Annamaria Carusi points out, such an enterprise would seem to involve trying "to reconcile anti-imperialist practice with structuralist critique", thereby discovering "damaging consequences for the coherence and tenability of the theory, as well as for the very possibility of reconstitutive action" (1991: 229).[5] While accepting the dilemma outlined by Carusi, I hope to show that the strategies used by these writers to disrupt dominant master narratives force a re-reading of suppressed histories, even if this fails as a theory of reconstitutive or political action in the terms suggested by Carusi. In fact, this dilemma is acknowledged when at the end of *Beloved* Sethe the slave mother recognizes her complicity in Schoolteacher's categorization into, and inscription of, her "animal" as well as "human" characteristics as an object of his study: "I made the ink. . ..He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (p. 271).[6] My concern here is with the processes that are initiated by these narratives, rather than the solutions (if any) offered.

In countries like South Africa and New Zealand, says Helen Tiffin, the indigenous peoples can oppose imported systems with their own metaphysical systems, while the non-indigenous subjects such as those of the African diaspora often have no such "formulated systems which may be recuperated to challenge the imported or imposed European ones", and must, as Michael Dash puts it, act subversively, "through the counter-culture of the imagina-

tion" (quoted by Tiffin, 1988: 173). Tiffin argues that for the non-indigenous subjects there will be a greater stress on subversive manoeuvres *within* European positions. Needless to say, the particular fictional strategies employed in *Beloved, The Bone People* and "Wake" are not concerned with the "crisis of authority" associated with European postmodernism, and have a very different agenda: Tiffin warns that the appropriation of these texts under the umbrella of European post-structuralism "invokes a neo-universalism" (1988: 171). One of my projects will be to explore the way in which the strategies used here resist European hegemonies from "within" these discourses, paradoxical as that may sound.

It will be argued that *Beloved* is one such example of a non-indigenous counter-discourse which employs subversive strategies from within European discourses and has, much to Morrison's annoyance, been said to use fictional strategies commonly associated with European postmodernism, or even magical realism: "Just as long as they don't call me a Magicam Realist – as though I don't have a culture to write out of", she says in an interview with Paul Gilroy (1988: 11). As Tiffin points out, in this case, the "post-modern label should...be resisted" (1988: 171). Identifying strategies such as "the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attack on binary structuration of concept and language" (1988: 172) as both representative of the postcolonial novel, and as sharing characteristics with the European postmodern novel, Tiffin emphasizes that "they are energised by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations" (1988: 172). For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the different kinds of postcolonial societies represented in these three works which, although not strictly speaking Third World texts, nevertheless manifest the characteristics outlined above.

Hulme's *The Bone People* is also subversive from within European discourse, for the well-read and garrulous narrator, who is (like Hulme) one-eighth Maori, straddles both Pakeha and Maori experience and creates a veritable cultural-linguistic pastiche by code-switching between regional New Zealand bar-talk, poetic Irish and Scottish as well as Pakeha English, and of course Maori. Interestingly, Keri Hulme's perceived ambivalent status as part-Maori is indicated by early reviews of the novel which were sharply divided: while there were some commentators who read it as a welcome Maorification (or Maoritanga) of the New Zealand novel, more were critical of its verbosity, eclecticism, lack of "structure", length, distasteful subject matter (child battering), and immorality in failing to present the batterer as a remorseless villain. Angela Huth's scathing (but amusing) review in *The Listener* sums up many of the Pakeha objections to the novel:

> Kerewin, the middle-aged heroine, is a frosty painter who befriends a sad mute little boy, who is beaten up by his father Joe, who loves Frosty – God knows why, she is 'neuter', 'dead inside' and given to much boring soul-searching. This simple tale is inflated to nearly 500 pages with endless descriptions of vomit, violence, drink, dreams, plus Maori words and embarrassing poems.
>
> (1985: 161)

Moreover, according to C.K. Stead: "Her uses of Maori language and mythology strike me as willed, self-conscious, not inevitable, not entirely authentic" (1985: 159)[7] – the implication being that this was because she was (only) one eighth native?

In order to explore how the texts give voice to the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison 1987: 275), it will be necessary to look at the way cultural identities are (en)gendered and how the master's language is appropriated in order to construct alternative discourses of self and community as part of a process towards emancipation – if not political liberation. The relationship between memory and history as explored in these texts will highlight some of the debates around "post-essentialist" theories of cultural and racial identity, showing how these problematic "identities" are discursively produced and re-produced. As Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. point out in a recent issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to these debates:

> The calls for a 'post-essentialist' reconception of notions of identity have become increasingly common. The powerful resurgence of nationalisms in Eastern Europe provides just one example of the catalysts for such theorizing.
>
> (1992: 625)

Beloved ends with an incantatory refrain: "It was not a story to be passed on". Yet this is precisely what the novel attempts to do, to pass on, to retell the stories locked in racial slave memory. In doing this, it is following the long tradition of African American writers who have attempted to set the record straight by countering the stereotypical and often sentimental depictions of slavery in the vein of Harriet Beecher Stowe's immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Like Beecher Stowe, Morrison concentrates on the enforced separation of slave mothers from their children, the impotence of sympathetic white women to intervene in this unnatural practice in the face of paternalist arguments based on political economy, the influence of nineteenth-century racial theories underpinning the economic justification for this "peculiar institution", the iniquities of the new Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the paradoxical vulnerability of the slaves of liberal masters and the continuing exploitation of freed slaves by abolitionists. However, Morrison avoids the stereotypes of victims and victimizers, of suffering slaves and villainous slave-catchers so common to plantation literature of the period. Instead, she transforms these into a lyrical exploration of how an enslaved people survives and attempts to transform these experiences into communal history.

The question of survival in an unliveable situation is an abiding concern for Morrison. In an interview with Nellie McKay she says:

> I'm interested in survival – who survives and who does not, and why – and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be.
>
> (McKay 1983: 420)

To do this, she relies not so much on oral narrative, where stories of the past are retold by successive generations – in fact, with the dislocation of slave communities this was often not possible – instead, she concentrates on shifts

between an "authorless' narrative in the present (1875) focalized through various consciousnesses, mainly the escaped slaves Sethe and Paul D, and Sethe's daughter Denver, and the "rememory" of events that happened in the past dating from 1855 and even earlier. Finally, there are pictures of an undifferentiated past located in a mode of dream-time, a fluid commingling of memories of life in Africa, on board the slave ship, and in America. This is represented in the pictorial consciousness of the mysterious Beloved, Sethe's slain daughter from the "other world" of African cosmology.

One of the methods used by Morrison to recover the pattern of life in oral or pre-literate memory, is to focus on an event, or a place, which has particular subjective significance for an individual and showing how, in time, this event or place comes to signify "the past" for the perceiver. Morrison describes her sense of the relationship between place and history in an interview with Diana Cooper-Clarke:

> [Place] is a feeling, it is a perception about the past, a matrix out of which one either does come or perceives one's beginnings, or one's place from long distances.
>
> (Cooper-Clarke 1986: 192–3)

In the novel, time shifts occur when an often unconscious sensory association plunges the individual back into a vividly recalled previous time. Frequently, the sudden confrontation with the past happens in spite of willed attempts not to allow memory to intervene in the present; in fact, conscious efforts at "beating back the past" (Morrison 1987: 73) occupy Paul D and Sethe for much of the earlier parts of the novel. Sethe's sense of time and history reveals her fear that one is never "safe" from the past. As she explains to her daughter Denver, time only appears to pass, but places where significant events happened remain, awaiting one's "rememory" of them:

> 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. 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.
>
> (1986: 35–36)

Instead of robbing the novel of historical perspective, the interchanging levels of time, place and consciousness can be seen to provide a historical dimension that is both synchronic and diachronic. A comment made by Susan Willis seems relevant here; comparing Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1973) to the "great modernist novels of the Latin American 'Boom'" (although, as mentioned earlier, Morrison would have problems with this terminology), Willis argues:

> The synchronic relationship defined in geographic space stands for a diachronic relationship. The most interesting feature about these modernist texts is that, in reading them, the reader. . .restores diachrony to the text; and in so doing, realizes the historical dialectic which the text presents as inaccessible.
>
> (1984: 272)

In *Beloved,* while particular areas of geographic space are associated with specific and usually painful events, (such as Alfred, Georgia for Paul D), the protagonists' conscious – though in this case often reluctant – recollection or rememory of the place or event forces an awareness that can be seen as "restoring diachrony", and so establishing a historical dialectic. Structurally the narrative "spins and circles" around the subject: "Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (1987: 132), just as Sethe herself spins and circles around Paul D in the kitchen when he confronts her with her past: "It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject" (p. 161). Later he realizes that his dizziness is a result of an inability to comprehend what she has done.

The structure of *The Bone People* evokes a similar spiral – reproduced in the pendant worn by Kerewin – with memory acting as an agent that "activates" different levels of time and experience. Here too, the characters attempt to keep memory at bay; for Kerewin memory is the family she has become estranged from together with her ability to paint; for Joe memory is his dead wife and child, while for Simon, memory is a terrifying nightmare voice associated with a life of physical abuse resulting from the nefarious doings of his drug-dealing parents before he is "rescued" by his foster father, Joe. Kerewin's lonely tower at Whangaroa, built as a fortress isolating her from the world, is, in the course of the novel, destroyed and rebuilt as a spiral structure that has rooms, articulating with one another, yet also allowing for separation. This process becomes one whereby, as Diane Jacobs (1985: 165) puts it: "Hulme's earthily evoked present seamlessly intersects with a rawer and more exhilarating ancestral past". Similar to *Beloved,* the text is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic in the way suggested by Susan Willis. In this case the present is associated with Whangaroa and the stages of rebuilding Kerewin's tower, whereas Moerangi, the family seaside retreat, "embodies" her familial and historical past: the first time the Maori ancestors manifest themselves is during the holiday spent by the three at Moerangi; Simon "wonders if Kerewin knows about the little brown man with blue lines across his face who seems to sleep in the floor" (p. 176). The blue lines also appear on the Kaumatua (elder), the old man described by the locals as "the last of the cannibals",[8] who heals Joe after his attempted suicide – although this meeting takes place four hundred miles away from Moerangi.

In "Wake", the narrative is structured around the polysemic interpretation of the word "Wake" itself, which, while its most obvious meaning refers to the funeral wake held for the murdered children, provides various interpretations of their deaths. Here memory is both individual and communal, as the narrative is focalized through the consciousness of Thoko, the sister who witnessed one of the killings, the mother, who is unable to utter her grief and can speak only fragmented words, and the father, Kumalo. The inclusion of word games that are a hybrid of both Western and African literary and oral traditions, as well as the vernacular funeral songs and the *izibongo*-style evocation of Johannesburg as simultaneously Child/Mother and Mother/Child of Soweto, deconstructs the hegemonic "white" domination model by inversion, emphasizing the relational rather than the hierarchical interaction

between the two cities. Unlike *Beloved* and *The Bone People,* where memory is resisted before it is acknowledged, memory here is seen as recalling, in its broadest sense, the lives and deaths of the two children, but also restoring their significance in a broader familial and communal history.

The different functions of memory and time in these three texts can then be seen to illustrate the ways in which metaphysical systems can be appropriated or opposed in postcolonial discourses. Walter Benn Michael comments on the debates surrounding claims for "continuous cultural descent" which have been challenged by anthropologists like James Clifford:

> [Such theories do not] tolerate radical breaks in historical continuity. . .[and] cannot account for the discovery of new ways to be different, [for] complex historical processes of appropriation, compromise, subversion, masking, and revival.
>
> (Clifford, quoted by Michael 1992: 680)

Clearly, "new ways to be different" are evident in the way memory operates here and the reader is invited to see memory not simply as a repository of African and Maori history and culture but as a vehicle for accommodating a multicultural, modern, (postcolonial) present without these differences being assimilated (or neutralized).

The reader in *Beloved* is positioned in a situation similar to that of Paul D, as the narrative spins and circles around the horrific act of child slaying, so that we too are dizzy, yet all the time feel that we are closely following traces – like the whispered words that Paul D hears but can't make out because they are too close to his ear. This seems also to be Beloved's function in the narrative; she seems to present the clue to the novel's questions – but we have to strain to read her lips, for her word-pictures are sometimes too private to be accessible to the reader. In adopting this narrative strategy, Morrison not only captures the quality of oral narrative, dance and music as bearers of cultural history, but also succeeds in involving readers in an appropriately participatory way. In an interview with Claudia Tate she comments:

> My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. . ..My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it.
>
> (Tate 1983: 125)

Morrison frequently stresses that her works should be read, or rather "heard" within the context of an oral communal culture: speaking to Thomas Le Clair in 1981, she describes her writing as "village literature":

> I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They ought to clarify roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment. . .peasants don't write novels because they don't need them. They have a portrait of themselves from gossip, tales, music, and some celebrations. That is enough.
>
> (quoted by Wegs 1982: 211)

Unlike Sethe and Paul D, the rebellious male slave Sixo (who dies laughing in the lynch fire), has a strong sense of his cultural traditions which enables

him to express himself in ways denied to other "Sweet Home" slaves. More importantly, he has a language other than English. Sethe, however, can only recall her previous life before Sweet Home through dance and song. When Beloved asks her about "your woman", namely Sethe's own mother, Sethe is confronted with a rememory of her own childhood – and begins almost compulsively to fold sheets in a typical effort to "beat back the past". She becomes acutely aware of a lost language she once understood, the language of her mother and foster mother, Nan, who used "different words":

> Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message – that was and had been there all along. Holding the damp white sheets against her chest, she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood.
>
> (1987: 62)

Not only does this reveal the significance of language in Sethe's conception of herself, it also highlights the simultaneously painful and healing process effected by the recollection of the past. While the memory is traumatic for Sethe, Denver notices of Beloved, "how greedy she was to hear Sethe talk" (p. 63); she herself however, "hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself" (p. 62). Yet, in re-telling the story of her own birth, it is as if she herself comes to life. The narrative act, then, is part of the transformative process which appears to be the novel's primary concern, just as, for example, the runaway white girl Amy translates the ugly suppurating wounds on Sethe's back (the marks of slavery literally written onto her body), into the intricately detailed chokecherry tree, complete with blossoms. As Denver tells the ever-hungry Beloved the story, the tale of suffering is transformed into an artistic shape; the "monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved" (p. 78). This again suggests that despite the "breaks with historical continuity" referred to earlier, there is an emphasis in these narratives on a complex process of "appropriation, subversion. . .invention and revival" (in Michael p. 680). Nevertheless, this should not be read as a substitute for reconstitutive action beyond, as will be demonstrated, the stress on reclaiming "selfhood".

Hulme, like Morrison, invites participatory reading, emphasizing that the reader has to establish coherence: "sometimes it's the spaces between that convey the full impact of emotions and things like that" (Hulme, quoted in Dever 1989: 27). In polyphonic or multivocal texts like *The Bone People* and "Wake", the "voices" mentioned refer to "not just matters linguistic but also [to] matters relating to ideology and power in society" (Hawthorn 1992: 134).[9] According to Maryanne Dever, in Hulme's novel "language becomes the site of resistance and a way of decentring the narrative" (1989: 24). Hulme's awareness of "the crisis of post-colonialism and of biculturalism" forces her "to approach the English language as a site of conflict between post-colonising and post-colonised discourses" (Dever 1989: 23). In other

words, the interplay between Pakeha and Maori languages does not imply synthesis, but rather encodes difference. The structure of Kerewin's new tower, which she intends to inhabit together with Simon and Joe, can be said to represent "the privileging of separation over assimilation, while signalling the undoing of uni-directional linguistic systems" (Dever 1989: 33).

A similar undoing of "uni-directional linguistic systems" can be found in "Wake". An example is Thoko's recollection of the word games played with the slain Lwazi: the narrative voice enters into the game by remarking: "Now again, eager to return to her point, not disappointed, pointing" (Mabuza 1989: 107), the last word triggering a new train of thought as attention is drawn to the rain outside. The description of the raindrops is suggestive of protean change indicated by the linguistic transformation: "Before their eyes, the strokes seemed to take positions, each vying for the most advantageous space. For an advent. Venturing" (p. 108). Their father, Kumalo, interprets the school-children's opposition to the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction as an alternative reading of the state(d) intention: "They saw what they were not supposed to see" (p. 98). At the same time, it should be borne in mind that English has had to be appropriated here to describe this resistance to ruling linguistic hegemonies – again recalling the paradox mentioned earlier about "voicing the unspeakable".

The (en)gendering of cultural identities in the different postcolonial societies represented here can be approached by looking at the way these identities are inscribed within family relationships (or the lack thereof). Judith Kegan Gardiner has commented on the diversity of feminist revisions of psychological theories of mothering – but claims that there is nevertheless agreement on "not only that the infant's relationship with its mother determines much of its sense of self but also that this relationship is inevitably gendered from the very beginning" (1985: 133). An examination of the way in which "selfhood" is achieved by Sethe and Paul D reveals how indistinguishable their sense of individual identity is from their perceptions of "motherhood" in the case of Sethe, and "manhood" in the case of Paul D. In *Beloved,* the severance of families through the slave system, more particularly Sethe's separation from her mother, and her feeling of having been denied her own mother's milk, becomes crucial to the way she sees her relationship to her own children. When she tells Paul D about her beating at the hands of Schoolteacher's mossy-toothed nephews, it is evident that her real sense of violation is not so much at the way they beat her in her advanced stage of pregnancy, but that "they took [her] milk" (1987: 17). The milk she was keeping for her "best thing", the "crawling already" baby safe in Ohio. The symbiotic nature of the relationship between Sethe and her daughters, a relationship characterized by the possessive "mine" (p. 214), is partly the result of a need to re-create the intimacy of the early mother-daughter bond, though for obviously different reasons. Denver is afraid of losing the only members of her family who are left, Sethe is atoning for and justifying her act in killing her baby Beloved, who is herself reclaiming the motherlove Sethe deprived her of. Simultaneously, Beloved embodies all those unnaturally separated from their mothers, as she searches in vain for "the face that is

mine" (p. 211), and longs for a pre-oedipal merging with the mother and with home.

In a recently published collection of essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Morrison comments on the silence of four hundred years which manifests itself in the "void of historical discourse on slave parent-child relationships" (1992: 22). Referring to this relationship in *Beloved,* Lorraine Liscio says that the essential meaning of slavery for the black woman concerned her gendered, reproductive value:

> As Hazel V Carby points out, the female slave's 'reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves'. Slave narratives attest to the fact that while black men's quest for freedom took the shape of reclaiming their manhood, women's preponderant concern was to save their children and retain control over their reproductive power.
>
> (1992: 23)

When Beloved finally vanishes and Sethe retires to her bed in grief, telling Paul D that she has lost her "best thing", Paul D says: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (1987: 273). In reply, Sethe asks: "Me? Me?" signifying for the first time her reversal from object – of slave-catchers, as well as mother of children – to subject of her own life.

Just as Sethe's perception of self seems limited to her conception of motherhood, so is Paul D's dictated by his conception of "manhood". Throughout the novel we are aware of the conflict between the way the victims of slavery attempt to achieve selfhood in the face (literally) of the white slaveowners' definitions of them, and their alienation from a viable form of cultural expression. Paul D questions his manhood as he becomes aware that just because the liberal Mr Garner takes personal pride in insisting that his Sweet Home male slaves are "men" and not "boys", this does not "mean" anything in the world beyond Sweet Home: "Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know?" (p. 125). The trembling that takes control of him when he is left alone in the earth prison box in Alfred, Georgia can only be controlled through physical activity, reminiscent of Sethe's efforts at "beating back the past" (p. 73). And yet, unlike Sethe's solitary attempts to do it on her own, Paul D's literal and figural chain link to fellow prisoners, and the fact that the activity is accompanied by a kind of dance and song, points to an assertion of the spirit embodied in Sixo, the trickster who outwits his captors, and again asserts the importance of the enactment of communal rituals as a form of personal survival: "They chain-danced over the fields. . ..They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings" (p. 108). Song and music play a similarly emancipatory role in *The Bone People* and "Wake". When Simon builds music hutches on the beach this enables him to discover that while unable to speak, he can sing harmoniously – not only scream in inarticulate fear and rage. In "Wake" the funeral dirges become rallying songs of liberation in what has become commonplace to the South

African political experience while also suggestive of a "residual aesthetic".

Ultimately, it is through the relationship with their community that Paul D, Sethe and Denver achieve a measure of "selfhood", this selfhood being constituted within the community, in opposition to the slave-owning "namers". However, for much of their lives all three not only consciously shut out the past, but also attempt for different reasons to avoid contact with the community. The "saving" of Sethe occurs when the community of women led by the pragmatic Ella arrive at 124 Bluestone Road determined to drive away the malevolent baby ghost that is torturing her mother. Denver undertakes her own project of saving her mother by forcing herself to go back into the community that they have so thoroughly shut themselves off from. By doing this she mends the tie with the community that was broken not just by Sethe's infanticide (a cultural taboo), but more especially by Sethe's refusal to ask for help, something the community interpreted as symptomatic of overweening pride, of trying to "do it on her own" – her individualism here transgressing the communal ethos.

The articulation of gender and cultural identity in *The Bone People* should be read in the light of the novel's emphasis on "commensalism" rather than traditional marriage. Susan Ash is critical of the notion of commensalism posited here, arguing that while the commensal vision depends upon accepting Maori spirituality, the commensal "we" associated with Maori culture becomes a camouflage for the narrating 'I' which pursues the self:

> Hulme's writing reflected her ambivalence between the "learned response", the socially acceptable vision of community, and a more fundamental belief in the isolate self – a belief which I believe goes beyond Hulme's desire to subvert gender roles.
>
> (Ash 1989: 134)

A similar point is made by Susan Broidy who says: "Beneath all this togetherness, and the notion of a racial or cultural solidarity which accompanies it, there seems to be a dangerous exclusiveness' (1985: 164). A rather different interpretation of commensalism is offered by Dever, who claims that far from attempting to forge a merged identity of "solidarity", or privileging a Maori "we" that is textually overridden by the hegemonic Pakeha "I", there is an attempt to "recover the marginalised or displaced linguistic selves without reproducing the conventional divisive hierarchies or dichotomies" (1989: 34). In other words, "modes of discourse need not be held in opposition, need not be exclusive" (p. 34). In fact, I will suggest that a similar conclusion can be drawn for a reading of "Wake". Dever refers to Hulme's interest in "living on the edge of two languages" as well as "on the edge of two selves named and constructed through language", a condition which she sees as freeing that self from the oppression of a "monologic existence" (Kamboureli, quoted in Dever, 1989: 33). Significantly Kerewin, who prides herself on her "multiculturalism" defines herself as a "sexual neuter". Susan Ash quotes some of the critical commentary on this aspect of the work: "The novel succeeds as a model for post-colonial harmony because Kerewin's 'sexual neutrality' suggests that bonds need not be biological" (Prentice, in Ash 1989:

123). It is suggested that one of the unconscious motives that "compel" Joe to hit Simon – "I don't know why I hit [him]" (p. 171) – is Joe's suppression of a youthful homosexual experience, and a fear that his relationship with Simon is a repetition of this homoerotic one – hence his beating of Simon after the taunting remark by Luce, himself homosexual, about the way Joe and Simon kiss. There are, of course, other reasons for the beatings such as the fact that Simon survived while Joe's wife and child succumbed to the fatal influenza. Joe's inability to understand Simon's unspoken though screamed fears, and the (mistaken) suspicion that Simon is in the way of his relationship with Kerewin – not to mention Joe's own paternally inflicted abuse suffered on account of his "dark" Maoriness. Nevertheless, I think that an interesting parallel is drawn between the suppressed erotic and cultural experience here.

In "Wake" the emphasis on family and community acts as a counter-history to the official version of the Soweto riots. The subversion of patriarchal gender hierarchies and the possibility of a non-hierarchically gendered existence could be read into Kumalo's comment about his daughter Naledi: "she was a woman, but she was a man too" (1989: 98). A latent recognition of the social construction of racial and gendered identities is suggested when the children plan the names they will give their aunt's baby, whose social gender will be given by their naming: placed against this is the children's refusal to accept the significance imposed by the dominant hegemony as implied in the quotation from Frederick Douglass: "only dogs and slaves are defined by their masters" (p. 93). (One recalls that Kerewin learns that while she and Joe refer to the "speechless" boy as Simon or Himi, he has all the time referred to himself as "Clare").

When Kumalo experiences grief as emanating from a "womb" within his own body he recognizes this foreign feeling as appropriate to the occasion of the death of his daughter, which results in the "birth of feeling". Kumalo draws a parallel between a man possessing a womb and himself as "messenger boy" who is also a "man" (1989: 97). These examples are not intended to blur gender difference or suggest the move to an "ungendered" existence (like Kerewin perhaps claims to), but rather, indicate the possibility of a non-hierarchical accommodation of gender difference, where genders are not seen in terms of binary oppositions. The articulation of gender, race and class in the South African context points to a discourse in which non-hierarchical accommodation of difference could serve as a point of departure for a re-structured society, though this is, of course, not offered as an option in the text: at the end of "Wake" the children's coffins are transformed and resurrected into an army of liberation, however, the actual process of revolution (and reconstitutive action) is not dealt with here.

The argument outlined by Tiffin about postmodernism and the postcolonialist text is placed in a rather different context by exiled South African Kenneth Parker: far from avoiding the term "modernism" (or, by implication, postmodernism), Parker argues that in the South African situation the rejection of modernism and the promotion of "traditionalism" (here he includes realist liberal humanist discourses as well as "protest fiction") "neutralises", as Antje Hagena puts it, "the challenge from a residual

aesthetic based, in part, on the re-discovery of oral tradition, by incorporation" (quoted by Parker 1990: 9). Modernist techniques, claims Parker, perform a necessary "destabilizing of commonsense mentalities" (p. 26); however, one should of course distinguish between the postmodernist fiction of an established writer like J.M. Coetzee or the new wave of Afrikaans women writers, and the work of Lindiwe Mabuza.[10] The problem with this argument is that, as has been demonstrated, the term "modernism"' (or postmodernist for that matter) is not really helpful when applied to texts like Mabuza's, even given Hagena's observations about the challenge from a residual aesthetic. Rather, as an example of a text that employs indigenous counter-cultural strategies, "Wake" not only opposes indigenous metaphysical systems against the imposed ones, but, as seen in the linguistic appropriations, offers a syncretism of indigenous and imposed systems which can be read as problematizing received notions of tradition in the process, while at the same time pointing to a discourse of emancipation, if, however, not yet transformation.

Having looked at "who survives" and how an "alternative" personhood is painfully achieved in different postcolonial contexts, often through separation and loss but always through relationship to community and rejection of hegemonic naming systems, one must nevertheless ask: what then of the Beloved's, the Simon's, the Naledi's and Lwazi's, for whom others must speak and write, who survive only as a memory of what must not be forgotten, whose stories have not been passed on? Perhaps what is needed is a cultural practice which will, as Hal Foster puts it:

> *Connect* the buried (the nonsynchronous), the disqualified (the minor)and the yet-to-come (the utopian, or better, the desired)....For finally it is the association which can most fully resist major culture, its semiotic appropriations, normative categories and official history.
>
> (In Waugh 1989: 33)

The purpose here has been to effect such "connections" between various attempts to textualise the safely "buried, disqualified and minor". The danger of reproducing imperialist practice in these attempts has been noted but should be read against the counter-hegemonic strategies employed here. Beloved, after all, exists only in the place and time of others' recollections of her, and this is why she keeps insisting: "This is the place I am. I don't want that place. This is the place I am" (1987: 123).

Notes

1. Gugelberger traces the history as well as the application of the term, and comments on the problems of defining the "Third World" in relation to the "First" and "Second World": "What exists depends largely on contexts and perspective, depends on foregrounding similarity or difference....For definition must depend on who defines" (1991: 507).
2. Cape Times 8 October 1993: 3.
3. In an interview with Paul Gilroy, Morrison says "the questions about community and individuality were certainly inherent in that incident, as I imagined it. When

you are the community, when you are your children, when that is your individuality, there is no division". Gilroy continues: "The Garner story encapsulates the confrontation between two opposed philosophical and ideological systems and their attendant conception of reason, history, property, and kinship. One is the product of Africa; the other is the expression of Western modernity" (*City Limits* 1988: Mar 31-Apr 7).

4. Some of these debates, particularly Benita Parry's claims for an "authentic" other, are summed up by Anne Maxwell in "The Debate on Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" (1991).
5. Carusi summarizes the dilemma concerning the issue of heterogeneity: "theories of postcolonialism find themselves in a dilemma: a negatively defined other leads to the inevitable (theoretical) passivity of those who have been constituted as others, and thus the perpetuation of imperialism". On the other hand, "the positively defined other on which ethnocentric anti-imperialist action is based defines itself in reaction to imperialist discourse and ultimately perpetuates its structure" (1991: 236).
6. In an interesting discussion on *Beloved* in which she uses Kristeva and feminist theories of mothering, Lorraine Liscio comments on Morrison's focus on the pre-oedipal mother/infant bond which "disrupts the symbolic schoolteacherly language". Commenting on some of the hazards of this literary strategy, Liscio says: "Her use of this trope (and my reading her strategy as such) risks reinstating essentialist beliefs about maternal discourse: association with the mother means to be denied the status of a speaking subject and therefore to be always objectified in Other's narratives" (1992: 35).
7. The edited collection of reviews of *The Bone People*, published in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1985), make interesting reading because of the diversity of critical "positions" they make apparent. The most influential of these is probably C.K. Stead's "establishment" piece.
8. Local (mis)conceptions of some Maori customs can be read in the context of colonial discourses such as those on cannibalism. Gananath Obeyesekere observes that British colonial discourse on cannibalism tells us more about the British pre-occupation with cannibalism than about Maori cannibalism. According to Obeyesekere, these should be seen in the context of a "larger pervasive fantasy of cannibalism resulting from European socialization of the period" (1992: 641).
9. Hawthorn (1992) is referring to Bakhtin's description of the polyphonic novel.
10. Commenting on the intersection of the "national" and the gendered, Parker says that the choice of modernist techniques by Afrikaans women writers has "as one consequence, a continuing separation from the production of their much more oppressed black sisters. . .[nevertheless] that their choice is predicated upon the awareness of how "traditionalism" enslaves and unvoices, should be recognized" (1990: 27).

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