

The Dialogic Sphere and Grotesque Body of *Beloved*:

Establishing Bakhtin's Folkloric Carnival in Afrocentric Feminism

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But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life.

M. M. Bakhtin

Noted Iranian academic Kamran Tatloff suggests that the subversive relationship between the “female writer and her themes and characters” and the “female writer and the dominant literary discourse” has long been engaged with subversive dialogue within and without whatever dominant patriarchal structure was in power (533). In using the late Russian scholar Mikhail M. Bakhtin's notion of dialogue¹ as a means to explore the way in which women convey rebellious meaning, meaning meant to disrupt the “discursive context within which they are produced” (534), Tatloff is able to explore the history of rebellion present throughout the undercurrents of women's literature, no matter what patriarchally-imposed socio-historic gags have stifled the feminine utterance. Tatloff accomplishes this through her identification of the female utterance being continually marginalized and Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue as having a continuous borderline existence. Tatloff is not the first feminist to discover the ability of Bakhtin's theories of language and discourse to be of use when examining the subversive nature of many feminist texts, nor will she probably be the last. Like Tatloff, this essay seeks to utilize Bakhtinian principles in an examination of a feminist text—Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This essay will argue that, because *Beloved* is a text that challenges a dominant literary discourse that has historically sought to stifle the feminine utterance, the first way in which we might view *Beloved* is with the idea of dialogic struggle at the forefront of our

¹ Bakhtin's notion of dialogue should be understood as a series of linguistic systems performing a continuous socio-historic struggle.

thought. While establishing the ways in which Bakhtinian dialogue exists within Morrison's text, this essay will also argue for the ways in which various Afro-centric feminist ideals present in *Beloved* may be fused with the theories of Bakhtin. To understand the construction of *Beloved*, it is important that we examine the linguistic relationships within Morrison's use of folkloric history and the ways in which this history interacts with African American feminist ideologies, the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogue, and, by extension, the folk carnival. After we have understood how these complimentary conceptual theories work together and within a text, we will then discover how they subvert relationships and consequently allow for a window through which to view Morrison's forgotten, but universal, history.

Mikhail Bakhtin's work is primarily focused on the essence of dialogue and its function.² At its very base, Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue posits that dialogue has the basic function of meaning-making. Interestingly, the function of dialogue continues to be important within the realm of Afro centric feminism. In her assertion of dialogue as a subversive realm important to African-American culture, Bell Hooks states "dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object" (45). However, Hooks does not stop her description of African-American dialogue as recognizing the mutually dependent and interactive nature of dialogue; she continues, stating that dialogue "is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (45). It is the identification of dialogue as interactive, socially dependent, and a source of resistance that links these understandings of the dialogic sphere to the African-American history of what is a socially disruptive linguistic system. In understanding Bakhtin's dialogical sphere as a network of individuals linked through the socially constructed living web of language wherein the speaker and the listener are actively engaged,³ we are creating another understanding of Patricia Collins' notion of "call-and-

² For an introduction to Bakhtin's life and philosophy, see Michael Holquist's *Dialogism*.

³ "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's directions. Forming itself in an atmosphere of

response,” which she views as illustrative of the importance of dialogue within African-American culture (203). It is through this understanding of dialogue as a sort of connective web reliant upon both a speaker and a listener, or a caller and a responder, which allows us to navigate through individual communities capable of subversion and rebellion.

We can see the physical manifestation of this dialogic source of social rebellion against patriarchal oppression and domination in Hooks’ explanation of the “homplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle,” wherein the “homeplace” becomes a physical space in which a community and family is allowed to flourish and create an identity that exists separately from the social sphere of the patriarchy (43). The African-American homeplace is a subversive dialogic sphere and in *Beloved*, Morrison highlights this communal, subversive space in the descriptions of 124 Bluestone that marked its existence prior to the arrival of Sethe’s former slave master: “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed chastised and soothed... Talk was low and to the point” (86-7). 124 Bluestone is a dialogic sphere of the homeplace, a physical location wherein people become educated and loved through language, a place where talk is subversive to the dominate social construct and may be “to the point.” The dialogue of the homeplace, or folk, has always been located outside the patriarchy, and by the very nature of its existence outside of a patriarchal structure, it is subversive. Thus, we are able to understand the Afro centric feminist concept of homeplace—a dialogic sphere—as the physical site of interactive, dissident dialogue.

The concept of dissident dialogue, dialogue that exists outside of the whatever sanctioned power structure is entrenched, is rooted in the ancient world of folk. In his book, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies the folk as a continuously marginalized existence. Essentially, the inherent separation of folk culture from the sanctioned power structure is itself a

the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue” (Discourse in the Novel 280).

sort of subversion. It is during periods of carnival that the folk is allowed to engage in dialogue with the sanctioned power structure and challenge the dominance of this power structure by continually subverting official and sanctioned authoritative discourse through its use of *unofficial, unsanctioned, folkloric* language. The birthplace of this folk language is in the body and bodily functions and, most importantly, in a place existing outside sanctioned discourse. The basic ideas of what creates the “folk” are naturally linked with Afro centric feminism as what is traditionally “folk” has been marginalized and shoved to a marginalized borderland.

In her descriptions of the extremely matriarchal 124 Bluestone that existed prior to the arrival of the slave master, Morrison creates an account of a possible ancient world of folk existing with many details reconcilable with both Bakhtin’s idea of folk and African-American feminist Alice Walker’s description of “womanist.” Where Walker finds that a womanist “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself” (xii, original emphasis), Bakhtin finds in folk culture that the “cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious” and is contained within “a people who are continually growing and renewed” (*Rabelais* 19). Within both definitions, we are confronted with reconcilability of folk and black femininity—each definition having hints of the other, both acknowledging a larger spirit and an elevation of the corporeal body that African-American feminists, such as Collins, would identify with the oral tradition of the African worldview as holistic and desirous of social, spiritual, and physical harmony (202). Perhaps their relation might be more easily seen within *Beloved*, where Morrison allows us a glimpse into the life of 124 Bluestone prior to the arrival of the white slave master.

Before the white slave master arrives, we are told that Baby Suggs would journey to a natural clearing and situate herself on a “huge flat-sided rock” and bow her head in prayer

before calling the children of the community toward her so that their mothers might hear them laugh (87). The men are encouraged to dance and the women to cry. This is how the ceremony—far away from patriarchal structures or the influence of the dominant culture—began. Then, women, men, and children exchange roles, each laughing, dancing, or crying until everyone becomes exhausted (88). In her description of this folk ceremony, Morrison gives us something complexly similar to Bakhtin’s description of the origination of carnival laughter, which Bakhtin identifies as the following:

...first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “comic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (*Rabelais* 11-12)

The laughter of folkloric carnival is multifaceted as it is both self-contained in its own dialogic sphere, yet it retains the ability to move beyond its own borders to be directed at everyone and everything in order to create a social commentary concerning the “entire world,” wherein everything and everyone may be seen in its own illuminated relativity. Although carnival laughter is temporally isolated, like Morrison’s folkloric ceremony in the wooded clearing, it is not individuated or atomized. Carnival laughter is dualistic: sad and happy. It is a death and a birth, an expiration and renewal. Carnival laughter has its roots in the acknowledgment of a cosmic and social whole, and, perhaps more importantly, a love for Walker’s music, dance, food, struggle, love, and folk.

However Bakhtin’s carnival is limited—usually confined in both time and space—and traditionally sanctified by the patriarchal power of the Church or State, the argument can be made that it is a temporary rebellion, dependent on patriarchal authorization. However, its temporal limitation and patriarchal sanctification can also be argued as a complex system of deference. Michael Holquist notes that carnival is not simply a commodified holiday or festi-

val. In fact, he finds carnival diametrically opposed to “festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic” (xviii). Holquist argues that carnival derives its sanction from “a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival” (*ibid*).

The idea of carnival stemming from pre-history is an idea that has been adapted by many feminists in their explorations of the ways in which the traditionally suppressed culture of the feminine may be glimpsed. Feminists have drawn parallels of Bakhtin’s folk culture with other repressed cultures and feminisms,⁴ thus creating an understanding of the means through which the repressed cultures, identified through the literary use of carnival, become, by definition, representative of the repressed feminine and the carnival. Though the carnival through which the repressed feminine may be seen is liminal, it also exists across borders of time, place, social rank, and gender—refusing to submit to any divisive or dichotomous relationship.

The recognition of the bodily elements significance is extremely important in understanding the ways in which the holistic ideals of folk are represented through Bakhtin’s carnival. The physical manifestation of the folk has been in the grotesque body. In an essay arguing for existence of Bakhtinian theories within the popular *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series, Yael Sherman identifies Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body as being present in this particular realm of feminist discourse. Sherman argues that Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival reconfigures the “political dimensions of space” around the centered grotesque body (89). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body “is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements” (*Rabelais* 27). Thus, when viewed from the aesthetic mindset of the dominant, patriarchal

⁴ In her essay, “The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic,” Diane Herndl relates the “polyphony within the discourse of feminism—between formalist, reader-response, psychoanalytic, socialist, post-structuralist, lesbian, black, chicana, third-world, and working-class feminists” with the “polyphony of the oppressed” at work in the dialogism of Bakhtin’s carnival.

culture, the grotesque body is grotesque because of its roots in folk culture—it is “...ambivalent and contradictory... ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of classic aesthetics, that is the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed” (*Rabelais* 25). For Bakhtin, the grotesque image is a transcendental image, crossing borders of life and death.

An instance of the transcendental, simultaneous existence of death and life of carnival occurs within *Beloved* while Sethe, Paul D, and Denver walk to the carnival taking place in town. Paul D calls everyone’s attention to the scent of dying roses: “The closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent, and everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of the rotten roses” (47). The organicity of roses, their historical literary and aesthetic association with bountiful gardens and blossoming of life, and their subsequent, natural putrefaction—in other words, their identification with the circularity of life—is associated with the carnival, which we have identified as signifying the unity of seemingly dichotic states of existence⁵. Bakhtin finds grotesque imagery “most frequently represented in immediate proximity to birth or death, to infancy or old age, to the womb or the grave, to the bosom that gives life or swallows it up,” and at its very extreme, Bakhtin finds grotesque imagery unifying the two bodies representing death and life into a singular body (*Rabelais* 26). Thus, we may see *Beloved* as such an extremity of grotesque imagery.

Beloved is a singular body that is “dying and as yet unfinished” (*ibid*). She stands on the “threshold of the grave and the crib” and although her body is singular, it is incomplete, lacking (*ibid*). She is both new and old. It is from the carnival that *Beloved* is metaphorically born, physically appearing in the story just after Paul D, Sethe, and Denver have returned from this local carnival and the heavy smell of putrefying roses. *Beloved* arrives in the story

⁵ Another example of a transcendental concept Morrison has provided us with is “rememory.” In essence, Morrison’s notion of “rememory” is a process through which several histories may converge, forming something that is “always fresh, in spite of the fact that the object being remembered is done and past” (Morrison qtd. Osagie 423). In her notion of rememory, Morrison has provided us with another instance wherein two seemingly oppositional states—the past and present—are allowed to exist simultaneously.

to serve as the uncompleted grotesque metaphor for the continuance of the carnival and the remembrance of the folkloric that had existed outside the realm of dominant society and had been lost with the passing of Grandma Baby Suggs.

In describing the dualistic nature of the grotesque image, Bakhtin recognizes that, as we have previously identified, the singular body of the grotesque is incomplete as it is attempting to live in the hemispheres of life and death; thus, “Two heartbeats are heard; one is the mother’s, which is slowed down” (*Rabelais* 26). The *mother’s* heart slows down, approaching death, while the heartbeat of her presumed child quickens. The latter attempts to consume the life of the former, but if this consumption occurs, the death of the mother will effect the death of the child. We see this attempted consumption occur after Beloved tries to physically overcome her mother in strangling Sethe (Sethe mistakenly believes that it was Grandma Baby’s ghost that attempts to strangle her). Sethe glimpses the forgotten world of folk as Beloved crosses a physical border to caress Sethe’s throat. She feels that Beloved’s fingers are divine; “Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her” (97). Of course, the peace Sethe had sought was a “happiness she caught in the shadows swinging hands on the road to the carnival...” (*ibid*). Beloved continues intellectually and emotionally feeding from her mother until the end of the novel, but before the end, we are allowed to see other ways in which Beloved is represented as incomplete, but it is the last representation that is perhaps the most complex as it is multifaceted in its possibilities—each possible truth being no more true than another.

At the end of the novel, Morrison pulls Beloved from the house and stands her on the porch for the whole female community to see in her full grotesque beauty:

The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (261)

Here, Beloved is an “it” or a “devil-child,” something infinitely more than mere child or

ghost. She is a combination thereof and pictured through some common grotesque representative symbols: her thick, “vines of hair” and “dazzling” smile. But more importantly, Beloved is “beautiful” and as a figure of death reborn she has “taken the shape of a pregnant woman.” Beloved is Bakhtin’s “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (*Rabelais* 25). Beloved becomes the physical representation of carnival.

Morrison strengthens the argument of the carnival and ends her novel with a scene between Paul D and Sethe. In this scene, they sit near each other—Sethe, a metaphor of African-American history, is covered by the “quilt patched in carnival colors” (272) and Paul D is staring at this carnivalesque quilt, thinking about the history beneath it, primarily Sethe’s “wrought-iron back” (273). History—specifically, the marginalized history of the feminine African-American experience—has been effectively covered up through the carnival, as it was earlier with its relation to the grotesque, new-born Beloved while Beloved was attempting to establish her physical health and Denver cared for her, putting “the quilt with two squares of color over her feet” (53). While carnival provides cover for this historically alternative history, it is a cover that is able to be pulled back so that this history may be revealed.

The liminality of the carnival and its opposition to severing the mind from the body and the body from the earth is at home in the desire to create an Afrocentric feminist epistemology as an oppositional force to traditional, patriarchally-constructed society. In *Beloved*, Morrison has created a text from the folk, primarily represented through the grotesque imagery, that embodies these values. She uses the grotesque to highlight the ways in which mind and body, body and earth, history and present, are all interconnected and inseparable. The quintessential grotesque image Morrison continually describes in her novel is the character Beloved. Beloved is Morrison’s physical manifestation of the disappeared folk that has been described in the existence of 124 Bluestone prior to the arrival of the Sethe’s former slave master. As we finish the novel, we realize the relation of Beloved, the character, to *Be-*

loved, the novel, in the way the grotesque representation of the former illuminates the forgotten folk existing in the latter. Morrison continually utilizes the character Beloved as a grotesque image, providing the reader with a window with which to view the previously discussed, overtly feminine folk culture that has historically been marginalized. To highlight this ability and function of carnival, the final image Morrison leaves us with is of Sethe and Paul D's intertwined fingers under the quilt, plunging us one last time beneath the colorful cover of the carnivalesque to allow us a brief look of when and where bodies and minds, genders and histories, are and were inseparable—giving us an abbreviated, lingering glimpse of Morrison's interconnected utopian vision.

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