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Healing Catharsis in the Fiction of Toni Morrison and the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche

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For my family

Preface

I first read Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* in a seminar about neo-slave narratives that I took at Georgia State University in Atlanta in 2011. I remember that I started several attempts to move beyond the first ten pages, but they were all in vain. The novel was too alienating and eerie. It took me several weeks to work up the courage and continue to read the book. But for a long time, I have deeply regretted this decision. In the epilogue of *Beloved*, Morrison writes that it "is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 324). She does not back up her conclusion, but I think that she knows that the story is too overpowering and utterly invasive. Unfortunately, Morrison's warning came too late. When I arrived at the last page of the novel, I was already tumbling down a deep abyss and it took me years to climb back up. The book left me deeply confused and disturbed about my identity as a white male in western society. *Beloved* had robbed me of all my vital forces. It was entirely unbearable to understand that the conditions of slavery were so gruesome that a loving mother would kill her beloved child to spare it from a life as a slave. How hopeless must the circumstances be that a parent extinguishes the future of a child? What kind of mindset had been responsible for these conditions and who executed them? Does the spirit of schoolteacher still roam our western culture? How can we counter and resist? How can *Beloved* function as a reminder to find alternative ways of being?

To find answers to these questions it was beneficial that I engaged in the same semester at Georgia State University with one of the key texts of Friedrich Nietzsche in a seminar about foundations of modern critical theory. I strangely sensed a connection between Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* and Morrison's the novel *Beloved* and this feeling started a long and salutary research journey which culminated in this thesis, in which I intend to demonstrate the spiritual affinity between Morrison's trilogy of *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* and a theory of the therapeutic capacities of tragedy which – among others – Friedrich Nietzsche developed. Through a cataclysmic catharsis, a tragedy initiates an open and participatory culture. Encouraged by Alfred Hornung, I

began to investigate Morrison's project to trace the formation of Black culture in the United States, which she developed in the course of the trilogy. I found out that Morrison identifies one important constitutive marker of Black female culture as the ability to be physicians of culture, who exercise a double consciousness and heal a society from instrumentality. Employing the medium tragedy, Black female therapists expose the suffering that is connected to its instrumentality and animate the community to critically reflect reifying and one-dimensional practices.

I wish to express my gratitude to the many good spirits that have accompanied my academic journey. Without them, I would have never finished. My Doktorvater Professor Dr. Alfred Hornung has been a great educator. He has supported my transnational education and his constructive feedback helped me to shape my focus. His annotations and his friendly encouragement have developed my ideas into this coherent manuscript in the last six years. Professor Dr. Nicole Waller has also been a strong supporter of my intellectual development. From the beginning on, she encouraged my wanderings into philosophy. I also wish to thank Professor Dr. Winfried Herget, whose colloquia about American literary history were true eye-openers. The initiatives of Professor SunHee Kim Gertz enabled me to study at Clark University in Worcester, MA, and I will always treasure the kindness I experienced. The late Professor Winston Napier had great influence on my confidence to engage with primary texts of continental philosophy and has roused my interest in Friedrich Nietzsche as well as in African American philosophy. Professor Calvin Thomas and Professor Ian Almond have further encouraged me to read continental philosophy, and their enthusiasm for Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan, Butler and Žižek have decisively developed my capacities as a critical reader. I also wish to thank Dr. Gunther Schmidt, who continues to have vital influence on my intellectual development by introducing me to the healing thoughts of Milton H. Erickson as well as his own. In the last three years, Gerhard Budde has proven to be an important mentor for my professional development and I am thankful for his patient advice at eye level. I also wish to thank my former colleagues at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Dr. habil. Dorothea Gail, Dr. Britta Feyerabend, Dr. Xiuming He, Melanie Hanslik, Silvia Appeltrath, Dr. Bärbel Höttges, Joy Katzmarzik, Damien Schlarb, Ph.D., and Dr. Pia Wiegmink. They have all been amazing fellows, and I am truly thankful for their advice and their friendly support over the years. I also want to thank Professor Ray Canoy and Timothy Walker, who have expertly

proofread my manuscript and offered very valuable feedback that enabled eloquence and sophistication. All remaining mistakes are mine.

Finally, I wish to thank my family. My parents have always supported me and believed in the completion of this project. The same is true for my parents in law. I thank all of them for their optimism and support. My wife Vera, who will also finish her doctoral thesis this spring, has supported me greatly over the last decade and without her sensibilities, I would have never finished this manuscript, nor my other degrees. Thank you for also being with me at times when the sun refuses to shine. I also wish to thank our beloved son Levi Alexander, who was born in 2015. Since then, he has taught me to engage with my emotions, be patient and to never stall.

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1 Introduction: Physicians of Culture

My thesis engages with the novels *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* which the celebrated Nobel laureate Toni Morrison wrote from 1987 to 1998. The three novels are interrelated and narrate the history of African Americans in the United States from the time of Reconstruction to roughly the 1980s. All three process the formative experience of slavery and the connected racism that African Americans are particularly facing in the South as well as in other parts of the country. The experiences of bigotry, its effects and strategies for its negotiation are central themes of the three novels. Morrison traces in her trilogy how different generations of African Americans responded to the harsh exclusions they faced. *Beloved* is set in 1873, and centers around the haunting memories of Sethe Suggs, Paul D and other members of a Black community near Cincinnati, Ohio, who survived slavery on hostile plantations of the South. *Jazz* features the culture of the Harlem Renaissance, which developed when thousands of African Americans migrated from the South to New York as well as other Northern cities to escape ongoing want and violence in the early 20th century. *Paradise*, the last novel of the trilogy, also focuses on Black communities that have fled from the South. However, this time, Morrison concentrates on Black communities which developed in rural areas of the Oklahoma. The novel starts around 1890, and covers a timespan of over eighty-five years. In her trilogy, Morrison thus presents a unique perspective on formative moments of a specific post-Civil War Black culture in the United States. A constitutive element of this Black culture are strategies of negotiating the murderous and humiliating experiences of slavery and racism. All novels explicitly or implicitly trace how African American culture negotiates this initial trauma and derives ethical consequences for their own culture from these experiences.

Deirdre Raynor observes that Toni Morrison's fiction "shares" important insights "about American culture, larger society, and the experience of African Americans" in the United States (Raynor 176). Morrison's novels are thus central to understanding important aspects of Black culture. For this reason, her fiction has received much scholarly

attention and called forth numerous academic responses. While most of this scholarship is valuable, reviewing and reporting on all arguments made about Morrison's texts would be impractical. Instead, I will identify seven broad areas that have formed around Morrison's fiction. I will then examine some specific studies that engage with my own arguments about her trilogy as well as general key elements of Black culture as presented by Morrison.

The scholar Elizabeth Ely Tolman highlights that many researchers have used approaches from ecocriticism to read Morrison's novels. According to Tolman, Morrison's work investigates the "interrelation of nature and culture" and "weaves" a "psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of nature" that has been "largely ignored by white society" (Tolman 7). The scholar Johnnie M. Stover argues that "Morrison's novels especially lend themselves to feminist readings because of the ways they challenge the cultural 'norms' of gender, race, and class" (Stover 12). Stover specifically draws attention to Morrison's portrayal of "subversive communicative techniques" and "alternative means of communication" that Black women had to developed in "a [white and] male-dominated society" (Stover 13).

David E. Magill argues that Morrison's novels focus on resurrecting a Black historiography. Often Black history has been excluded "from [the] national narratives" of the United States and thus Morrison's fiction "can be seen as a project of historical remembrance and recovery" (Magill 20). Valerie Smith, for example, calls attention to Morrison's circular understanding of history (Smith). Also Ashraf Rushdy has identified Morrison as an author, who recovers via narratives a repressed history of African Americans in the United States (Rushdy 568-569). According to Cynthia Dobbs, Morrison pays special attention to the "historical brokenness of human psyches, bodies and stories" in her fiction (Dobbs 565). She engages with an "aesthetic of pain" to elucidate and speak "the 'unspeakable' experience of the most sense of extreme loss" that African Americans had to endure during slavery (Dobbs 576, 571). Magill further remarks that Morrison's fiction especially investigates the effects that the past has on the present (Magill 20-21). Closely associated with the historical approach is that of pedagogy. Jane Atteridge Rose argues that Morrison carefully constructs her fiction to involve and educate her readers (Rose 23). The African American scholar Marylin Sanders Mobley adds that through Morrison's depiction of slavery and its consequences, the horrors that are connected to these experiences have become "more accessible to contemporary readers" than ever before

(Mobley 357). James M. Ivory maintains that more scholarship is needed to contextualize "Morrison as a postcolonial writer[,]" since she "emerges as a prominent voice to critically examine the psychological weight of the darkest legacy of the African Diaspora, the Middle Passage" (Ivory 29-30). J. Brooks Bouson emphasizes psychoanalysis to highlight interesting aspects of Morrison's novels, focusing on her "representation of family and personal relations" (Bouson 34). The last major approach that has formed around Morrison's fiction is called womanist. Similar to Stover, Deborah De Rosa underlines that "authors like Toni Morrison have worked to clarify and illustrate the principle tenets of womanism" (Rosa 39). This focus differs from feminist theories insofar as it encourages the development of "a wholeness" in communities "which transcends gender, class and racial lines" (Rosa 39).

Morrison's Intellectualism

While the approaches I summarized above inform my readings of Morrison's trilogy, I would like to present another avenue of scholarship – one that investigates Morrison's interest in philosophy, to prepare the ground for presenting my own ideas and conclusions about her fiction as therapeutic interventions. In an interview with the American journalist Claudia Dreifus, Morrison states:

> My books are […] about very specific circumstances, and in them are people who do very specific things. But, more importantly, the plot, characters, are part of my effort to create a language in which *I can posit philosophical questions*. I want the reader to ponder these questions not because I put them in an essay, but because they are part of a narrative. (Morrison and Dreifus; my italics)

As an interdisciplinary writer and scholar, Morrison has been collaborating "with others in different artistic [and philosophical] fields," and has specifically engaged with the philosophical and theoretical "debates of the last three decades of the twentieth century" to explore the intellectual history of Black culture (Tally 5, 4). The Swiss scholar Sämi Ludwig calls attention to her appreciation, adaptation and development of some of the most important thoughts of contemporary philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard (Ludwig). The Oxford scholar Tessa Roynon further expands Morrison's interest in intellectual history by highlighting her engagement with ancient Greek literature and myth.

In her study, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition* Roynon calls attention to Morrison's use of

> old names ('Kore', 'Ajax', 'Circe', and 'Apollo'), old conventions (tragedy, epic, and pastoral); old texts (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Oresteia*, the *Metamorphoses*) to voice her own version of the meanings of America. (Roynon 187)

Roynon argues that Morrison consciously uses Greek myths to "advance" her thoughts about Black culture (Roynon 3). In this respect Morrison's engagement with the intellectual legacy of ancient Greece "contributes to broader debates about culture and power across time" (Roynon 3). Yet, while Morrison uses classical Greek traditions to "reconceive[]" the meaning of slavery and its aftermath, she is also aware of the conflicts that result from her deployment of this intellectual legacy (Roynon 1):

> Morrison's classicism is fundamental to the critique of American culture that her work effects. Her allusiveness is characterized by a strategic ambivalence — that is to say it is fraught with her perception both of the classical tradition's hallowed position within hegemonic culture, its role as a 'pillar of the establishment', and of that tradition's simultaneous subversive potential, its usefulness in the ongoing struggle for fully-realized racial, gender, and economic equality in which she continues to participate. [...] I demonstrate that Morrison belongs to a genealogy of intellectuals that includes W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Bernal, and Paul Gilroy (and many others) who have challenged the purported conservative nature of Greek and Roman tradition, and who have revealed its construction as a 'white' or pure and purifying force to be a fabrication of the Enlightenment. (Roynon 3)

While Roynon highlights Morrison's utilization of ancient myth, she does not engage directly with Morrison's interest in Greek tragedy. The German scholar Nadja Gernalzick also highlights Morrison's affinity to Greek myth and connects her writings to the tragedy *Medea* (Gernalzick). However, both scholars do not engage with the philosophical discussion that has grown up around the genre of tragedy.

My research investigates exactly this academic lacuna. I argue that a spiritual and philosophical affinity exists between the three novels *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* on the one hand and a theory of the therapeutic capacities of tragedy on the other, which the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche developed among others. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that this link between Morrison's

fiction and Nietzsche's idea of tragedy is specifically active in the case of the healing powers that both Morrison and Nietzsche ascribe to the genre. For the two intellectuals, tragedy is an important therapeutic intervention that initiates and maintains an open and participatory culture via a tragic catharsis.

(Black) Physicians of Culture

The two intellectuals are thus physicians of culture, who use the genre of tragedy for two purposes. Firstly, they use the condition and status of tragic narration in a culture as a diagnostic tool. If tragedy has a prominent place in the examined culture the physicians see it as healthy and vital. Contrarily, they see a culture that despises tragedy as unhealthy and sclerotic. Secondly, the physicians of culture utilize tragedy as medicine to support the recovery of a culture in disrepair. A tragedy has the power to break up induration by inducing a purifying catharsis. The physicians of culture thus heal from hardened Apollonian structures and introduce Dionysian liberty and reinvention into a society. This understanding of poets and philosophers as physicians of culture has a long tradition in African and African American thought. Already in 1903, the Black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois conceptualized Black artists and intellectuals in his important work *The Souls of Black Folk* as doctors who have the power to heal American culture from its cold and calculating technocracy. These Black physicians reintroduce empathy and highlight the importance of interpersonal relations on eye level by disintegrating strict social hierarchies and well-guarded cultural boundaries. According to Du Bois, these doctors possess and foster a double consciousness that keeps an equilibrium between constructive and deconstructive forces and thus they enable a processual, participatory and open composition of life. As we will see in more detail below, the African American academic Henry Louis Gates Jr. sees this capacity for affection as a governing principle in Yoruba religion in his seminal study *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates argues that the spirits of Esu and Ifa function as "doctors of interpretation" by ensuring that perspectives can never develop into universal truth (Gates 20). Thus, like the Black physicians that Du Bois imagined, Gate's religious spirits animate the doctors to keep a general openness.

The therapeutic goal of the physicians of culture is the same for both intellectual traditions. The physicians want to realize and maintain an agile society that is open, flexible and reflexive. These communities