

Written Sounds and Spoken Letters, but All in Print: An Answer to Bärbel Höttges*

HANNES BERGTHALLER

First of all, I would like to thank Bärbel Höttges for her perceptive comments on my essay, providing a critical counter-point from the perspective of postcolonial theory and affording me an opportunity to clarify somewhat my own argument. What I found particularly helpful was her exposition of Morrison's religious syncretism; whereas I perhaps overemphasized the extent to which Morrison in *Beloved* distances her characters from the Christian tradition, Höttges rightly insists that the religious practices they engage in are best understood as hybridizations of Christian and African elements. Yet, I am not convinced that the interplay between orality and literacy in the novel is simply another example of the same logic of hybridity, as Höttges argues: "*Beloved* is not a novel that *pretends* to be an oral story, and it is certainly not a magic trick that depends on the illusion of orality, but Morrison combines orality and literacy to create something new and distinctively black" (155).

While it may not pretend to *be* an oral story, *Beloved* certainly seeks to suggest that it can *function* like one, and it is precisely on this point that I believe greater skepticism is in order. To hybridize the cultural codes of different ethnic or religious communities is one thing; it is quite another to hybridize different media at the level of their operativity, i.e. with regard to how they engage individuals in communica-

*Reference: Hannes Bergthaller, "Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 116-36; Bärbel Höttges, "Written Sounds and Spoken Letters: Orality and Literacy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 147-60.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergthaller01613.htm>>.

tion. What is at issue is not the reproduction of certain stylistic features of orality within a written text—not the combination of the speech patterns of the Black vernacular with the conventions of ‘white’ literary discourse, which Henry Louis Gates has famously described as the distinctive feature of African American literature. *Beloved* undoubtedly furnishes a prime example of just such a “speakerly voice” (Gates 148), and Morrison’s linguistic inventiveness in the creation of this literary idiom is perhaps one of the best measures of her achievement. However, this should not be taken to imply that one therefore needs to go along with the author’s own account of how her texts are to be received by their proper audience. Morrison has often stressed that her fiction is meant to translate into the medium of print those participatory qualities which she sees as essential to African-American traditions: “antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions” (“Memory” 389).

Too many critics have taken such pronouncements at face value. By and large, they have accepted the idea that those features of Morrison’s texts which reflect her effort to reproduce the participatory dimension of oral discourse somehow make them distinctly “black.” Yet Morrison’s description of how readers participate and co-create the meaning of a text by “filling in” the “spaces” prepared for them by the author (“Unspeakable Things” 157) are strikingly similar to Wolfgang Iser’s notion of “spots of indeterminacy” which are constitutive to *any* act of reading. Morrison has invented a singularly effective and beautiful way of capturing in print the sound and pacing of the African-American vernacular (without ever resorting to the condescension of eye-dialect); what she has not (and could not have) achieved is a literary form which could constitute a community of speakers and listeners in a way significantly similar to that of oral discourse. To put the matter quite simply: to *read a description* of a mass, no matter in how impassioned a manner, is not the same as *participating* in a mass.

This difference may appear too obvious to need pointing out, yet it is of particular saliency with regard to *Beloved* because so many critics have argued that the therapeutic, community-building function of oral narrative as described on the level of diegesis can and should be replicated in the experience of the reader—i.e., that story-telling heals and “re-members” not only the community formed by the novel’s characters, but also the readers who, through their engagement with the novel, are joined to that community. Again, such an understanding of the novel is in keeping with Morrison’s own views as voiced in many of her interviews and essays, but it tends to downplay, if not to elide, the irresolvable tension between orality and literacy that is so essential to the novel’s peculiar pathos. I agree with Höttges when she writes that the “transient quality” of oral narrative is central to *Beloved* because forgetting is necessary for the victims of slavery if they are to “have the chance of a future” (156), whereas the written word resists forgetting and, thus, serves our need for historical memory. I concur that it is therefore important for any interpretation of the novel to keep both of these dimensions in view. I would like to add, however, that it is just as important to keep in mind that forgetting and remembering really are contradictory goals, equally compelling but mutually exclusive. The breakdown of simulated orality which I refer to in my essay bears testimony to the fact that it is impossible to accomplish both of these goals at once. Perhaps the distinctive achievement of Morrison’s novel is to have found a literary form able to contain this existential quandary—on the printed page.

National Chung-Hsing University
Tai-Chung, Taiwan

WORKS CITED

Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: OUP, 1988.

Morrison, Toni. "Memory, Creation and Writing." *Thought* 59 (1984): 385-90.

———. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 2004.

———. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. U of Michigan, 7 October 1988. 7 March 2011.

<<http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/morrison90.pdf>>.