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Writing Disaster: Literature, Trauma, Memory

Friday, September 30th, 2022

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On Morrison and Jeganathan

Toni Morrison's "The Site of Memory" critically reimagines the conventions of writing fiction. She produces genre-bending prose imbued with African-American lore, accompanied by personal histories that feel frighteningly lived. Conversely, for these possibilities to emerge Morrison developed a technique for excavating truth from and despite absence. This critical restructuring of the genre for Morrison happens at the intersection of fiction and memoir (self-recollection) (85). She insinuates that there's no such version of her writing that can stand alone without an autobiographical bedrock. Her creative process hinges on memory as a conduit for interiority; she endows memory with the agency of a verb. And it's through this mobilization of memory that she's *partially* able to engender a "kind of truth" (Morrison 92).

Morrison problematizes her truth-inventing process by telling us the story of Olaudah Equiano. A harrowing account of a man—never a slave but an enslaved person—who survived the vicissitudes of slavery and war before purchasing freedom at the age of 21 (Morrison 87). After recounting Equiano's biography, Morrison transitions to discuss slave narratives as a prerequisite literature for African-American fiction. To define the sub-genre she relies on Henry Bibb, saying on the one hand that slave narratives render the personal historical by way of offering unique and singular testimony (qtd. in Morrison 86). They work against the absence which has historically veiled Black experiences in the United States. On the other hand, the sub-genre acts as a galvanizing project. *Dear white people*, the slave narrative writer conveys, *see in my humanity the will to abandon that which represses it* (Morrison 86). Hereafter, Morrison completes the justification of her thesis by asserting that imagination is the other crucial ingredient in the truth-making process.

Jeganathan grounds the "Work of Melancholia" in the discourse of loss. He writes to us of a postnational predicament which refuses normative and, by all accounts, Western conceptions of

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mourning (Jeganathan 54). Jeganathan grapples with “doubles-loss” as the most central effect of the nationalist project while criticizing the way in which it debilitates prospects for the recently-independent nation (here, Sri Lanka). Pandian articulates well the magnitude of the loss: “[T]he nation never was, and never will be” (qtd. in Jeganathan 55). The first loss of the “double-loss” removes hope and possibility from the lungs of the new nation by annulling opportunities to self-actualize without foreign intervention. As a direct consequence, the second loss is the loss of the nation's “epistemological orientation to the world” (Jeganathan 55). Which is to say that the nationalist project, by way of propagating colonial knowledge, restructures the epistemology of the colonized. Imagine the relationship between a parasite and its host. Herein, Jeganathan enters conversation with other theorists, disagreeing notably with Freud on the notion of ‘what is melancholia.’ Borrowing from Veena Das, Jeganathan remarks that loss cannot be replaced nor “gotten beyond,” that one needs to inhabit it (qtd. in Jeganathan 55). This inhabitation of melancholia is work, the refusal of loss; for Freud, melancholia cannot be work (Jeganathan 56).

Jeganathan and Morrison’s reflections both arise out of contexts of deprivation. Morrison’s work is predicated on a material lack of history, giving way to an imagined and credible truth representative of African-American livelihoods during slavery. Jeganathan similarly looks at erasure but doesn’t attempt to fill it with anything imagined, effectively coming to terms, albeit begrudgingly, with the two aforementioned symptoms of loss in the postnational context of Sri Lanka. Both thinkers use fiction to better comprehend how the despairing effects of this deprivation can inspire an otherwise unavailable interiority and truth. Jeganathan cites Freud vis-a-vis *Hamlet* to describe how this interiority lends the melancholic “a keener eye for the truth” (56). This “keener eye” can be extended as a direct metaphor for Morrison’s “reliance on the image,” how she uses recollection as best practice for turning images to story (93). This comparison buckles, however, if we remind

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ourselves of how Jeganathan perceives loss as that which cannot be worked through. Morrison characterizes the lulls in her own fiction writing as obstacles that can be overcome. By extension, she does the same with the obstacles of the forgotten history she gives voice to (101).

These papers separately are important, and together their importance is compounded. They shed light on how marginalized lives reconcile the constellations of loss. Without reading them in conversation we'd perhaps conclude differently on whether absence and deprivation engender creative embodiment. In that vein, we see that Jeganathan and Morrison might agree that loss doesn't dampen the human spirit to create. Instead, it inspires in this "grotesque world without possibility" the miracle of a Shakespeare or Morrison to furnish the interior worlds of fictional people who know melancholy well (54). Personally, these essays taught me that even where hope can't be recovered, brilliant accounts of what/who could have been can emerge. What's needed is a not-so-precise amount of hopelessness and imagination.