

Response to “Flowers in the Dark: African American Consciousness, Laughter, and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”

M. Cooper Harriss

I’d like to begin with a word of thanks to Jacqueline Bussie for her deep and insightful engagement of one of the more remarkable (and woefully un-remarked-upon) elements of African-American culture and its religious dimensions. This is a wonderful project, and while I shall challenge aspects of it in the following response, I do so with strong appreciation for Bussie’s work and from a sense of duty to her rigor and synthesis.

“Flowers in the Dark” suggests that laughter in African-American consciousness serves as an act of resistance, rupturing the hegemonic power relationships of caste that define American slavery (169). Toward these ends she engages in close readings of three characters’ laughter in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that are informed by sources ranging from black and womanist theologians to (in a more limited capacity) literary theorists and cultural critics. Within the oppressive structures that she identifies—characterized by either / or propositions, as Bussie notes—laughter imposes an alternative to acquiescence, a humanizing expression of grace, hope, and self-identity that exposes the absurdity of slavery’s dehumanization, thereby demythologizing it, disarming—even if within the existential moment—its ultimate legitimacy. Put differently, within a master / slave dialectic, laughter flummoxes the notion of thesis and antithesis; the “laughing” slave effectively nullifies this dialectic through his or her ironic assertion of ambiguity, the “both-and” paradox that dismantles the “ideological scaffolding” of hegemony and its ideology of domination (212).

Beloved is well suited to support Bussie’s “reinterpretation of laughter as a theological and ethical resource”—especially as it is imagined through the lens of black and womanist theology—in no small part because it is, at its core (and in contradistinction to many, if not most, of its peers among twentieth-century African-American novels), not an overtly funny book. *Beloved*’s political laughter differs substantially from the hilarity of Zora Neale Hurston’s front-porch laughter in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, yet Hurston’s laughter is no less an act of resistance in its ability to cripple the power and influence of Mayor Joe Starks. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine Morrison chiding critics’ hand-wringing over injustice and social protest in the middle of an interview, asking them (as Ralph Ellison, in a similar situation, did of *Invisible Man*): “Look, didn’t you find the book at all *funny*?”¹ So already we must acknowledge that a study in *Beloved* occasions a specific (and therefore necessarily limited) variety of laughter even within an African-American literary context.

I would like to raise three issues with regard to Bussie’s chapter with an eye toward building on her work here and expanding the implications of laughter’s

¹ *Invisible Man* contains no shortage of laughter, from the haunting laughter that accompanies the protagonist’s grandfather’s own dying statement of the subversive life to his laughter when confronted with the recognition of his own invisibility.

theological and ethical significance in African-American literature: The first concerns the relationship between “laughter-as-resistance,” which Bussie discusses at length, and humor, for which she never offers a firm definition. The second concerns her sources—especially the propriety of the highly programmatic worldview that emerges from her heavy reliance upon black and womanist theologies and the ways in which she, in turn, locates them within *Beloved*. The third concerns her use of literature and whether a similar, yet more literary approach might not yield results more in keeping with the broader thesis she wishes to espouse. I shall conclude with an alternative critical reading in the blues that I suggest may serve as a paradox, or occasion a both-and proposition, that bolsters Bussie’s good work in laughter and liberation and renders it more widely applicable.

Turning first to the relationship between laughter and humor, Bussie speculates, correctly I think, about a ‘slavery etiquette’ (167) that, at the very least, understands the conflation of slavery and laughter (and I would include humor in this iteration) as potentially gauche. Clearly in terms of laughter she wishes to dispel such skittishness under the proper circumstances. What of humor, though? Here Bussie is less precise and indeed offers no specific reflection on the concept and its relationship to laughter. Her epigraphs offer seemingly contradictory accounts, with Malcolm X claiming that “humor” is necessary and Toni Morrison herself suggesting that “Laughter . . . for Black people has nothing to do with what’s funny at all” (167). At times Bussie refers to humor and laughter interchangeably (see for instance page 238 her discussion of Paul D’s joke and the laughter that it occasions) yet elsewhere (as on 228) she turns to Morrison’s distinction between laughter and humor. I’m certainly comfortable with the plurality of Malcolm’s and Morrison’s accounts, and even suspect that they might agree in principle, but some attempt at fleshing out this distinction (or lack thereof) and its broader implications for the chapter would be helpful.

Second, despite nods to Bakhtin and others, Bussie places her primary conceptual investment in a reading of the black and womanist liberation theological project. This makes sense in some ways. Morrison’s career has dovetailed with the broader womanist movement. Furthermore, as roughly a contemporary of James Cone, Morrison’s intellectual conceptualizations of blackness bear marks of an awakening to consciousness within a political and cultural climate similar to Cone’s. And like later generation black theologians such as Dwight Hopkins, Morrison has (most recently in 2008’s *A Mercy*) delved extensively into the lore and legacies of American slavery in order to rescue what Bussie calls (in a nice analogy) “midrash[ic]” reconstructions of African-American culture and identity (168). In the process Bussie constructs through her sources a strictly ordered and determined cosmos governed almost exclusively by the navigation of oppression and resistance. For all of the talk that she cites of paradox, complexity, and inversion (to which she rightly points as an ultimate aim in her understanding of laughter), the theologies to which Bussie turns are rigidly (and necessarily) materialist, rooted in dialectical understandings of power, economics, and cultural exchange. In this way I wonder if her sources—or her faith in her sources—might not ultimately limit her project. Of course, slavery, if anything, serves as a systematic representation of this worldview, and Cone, writing in a climate that simply could not comprehend the

assumptions that govern his theological system, is frequently short on rhetorical nuance—a stylistic element that his intellectual descendents have struggled with in the interim. I wonder though, as Bussie cites Audre Lorde’s axiom that self-definition is all that can preclude external definition (184), if a liberation worldview is, in the end, the most fruitful articulation of such selves. Laughter is evident as a descriptive property in liberation theologies, and the paradox is necessary to crack the hegemonic either / or, but to what extent do we truly find internal paradox in such models? Can liberation theologies truly step outside of their programmatic dialectics and embrace the ambivalence that also defines human relationships?

Consider this example: Does Cone’s nomination “The Oppressed” carry an ironic wink (which surely must represent a deadpan analogue of laughter) in his title *God of the Oppressed*, upon which Bussie’s own title *Laughter of the Oppressed* appears to riff? Can it? Should it? “Oppression” certainly resonates with moral significance. But it also reflects an identity fundamentally defined by, or at least theologically authenticated through, the relational identity of “the oppressed” generated by the very hegemonic structural reality that black theology seeks to annihilate. Is Cone “laughing,” playing the dozens, re-appropriating the identity that is rooted in what the hegemon determines through systematic political and economic modes of dehumanization? I suspect that he is. Certainly we could posit the very nature of black theology as a counterstatement to “white theology” as “Signifyin(g)” according to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s definition: “Repetition, with a signal difference.”² Morrison’s *Sixty*, as Bussie shows, asserts his humanity in the face of dehumanization through laughter as will-to-power. But he is always / already human—a fact illustrated by his very capacity to step outside of the dialectic. Bussie’s theological sources derive the power of their critique through this very dialectic, which makes stepping outside of it quite precarious. It would be instructive, then, to observe their own specific senses of paradox, the sources and performances of their own laughter that rescues their systems from the determinations of either / or that they otherwise risk. Again, some consideration of Signifyin(g) would seem a logical place to turn for such an assessment. Absent this critical laughter it is unclear to what extent such sources can do sufficient justice to the complexities, ambiguities, and ambivalences to which Morrison, and Bussie, aspire. Indeed, it would seem that Bussie’s reading of laughter in *Beloved*, rather than emerging from the liberationist worldview, might rather prove instructive to that very worldview.

Which brings us to the third issue: how Bussie uses literature. Morrison is surely a theologian, as Bussie illustrates, but she crafts her theological vision as a novelist, not a monographer. We certainly might read *Beloved* as expressive of black and womanist liberation principles, but I worry that Bussie’s reading treats the novel more as a proof-text of that theological agenda without adequate consideration of *Beloved* as a novel, as a work of literature in which theological and ethical ideology finds representation through literary form and craft. Put differently, why write a ghost story if your aim is simply to reflect theological systems (and deliberately existential and non supernatural ones, at that) like black and womanist theologies? Why waste time with the ghost? Why, insofar

² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 51.

as naming is so vital in such systems of understanding, name your novel for that ghost? Ideology is informative, but, paraphrasing another major literary work named after a supernatural character, Morrison suggests that there is more in heaven and earth than we might dream of in our ideologies. Again, the richness of the literary exemplar resides not in its reflection of ideology but in its complication of ideology. This is precisely laughter's role and a strong corrective on Bussie's behalf.

I'd like to close with an ad hoc argument on behalf of the blues as another conceptual option for reading laughter in literary representations of African-American consciousness. Like laughter, the blues contributes to an understanding of the tragic-comedic as a theological and ethical resource. Indeed, I wondered at several junctures about Bussie's silence with regard to the blues. There are points where she clearly connotes their presence and relevance. She cites Cone's *The Spirituals and Blues* (I count seven citations in the endnotes [242-44]), for instance, and at one point, in passing, discusses "black music" (184). And then there is this wonderful, coy nod: "To preserve sanity, Paul D must navigate the muddy waters of paradox under which both he and Sethe as ex-slaves labor" (229-30). These muddy waters of paradox suggest that the blues stands as a complimentary idiom for the worldview that both necessitates and occasions Bussie's laughter.

The blues paradox in this instance resides in its capacity to unite disparate factions of long-standing debates over the nature of African-American culture and its criticism. On the one hand it has its materialist proponents such as Cone, who has written quite movingly on the blues as "a secular spiritual" reflective of a black theological worldview, stemming "from the same bedrock of experience" as the spirituals and absolutely necessary as their counterpoint: "neither is an adequate interpretation of black life without the commentary of the other."³ Also, literary critics such as Houston A. Baker, Jr. speak of the blues as a matrix of experience that navigates "the economics of slavery."⁴ In this way the blues may contribute to a cultural (and theological) critique on par with the sources to which Bussie refers.

And yet, the blues has also been utilized as a source of resistance to the political framework that drives critical approaches similar to Bussie's chosen liberation models of theology and related critiques across the disciplines. Albert Murray, for instance, turns to the blues as an antidote to what he calls "social science fiction," literature (and readings of literature) that seeks "to replace the legendary, the fabulous, or the mythical with scientific fact," resulting too often in "only stereotypes derived from social science assumptions."⁵ Clearly he sees no paradoxical laughter in these fictional and critical accounts. The blues idiom for Murray represents an existential moment necessitating

³ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1972), 100. Jon Michael Spencer has also, though in ways unique to Cone, discussed the ways in which blues music and performance bears Christian theological resonances in *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

⁴ See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵ Albert Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 28.

“heroic action,” meaning “a way of responding to traumatic situations creatively.” It enables narrative to “deal with tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and farce simultaneously.”⁶ On this reading Sixo improvises his dying laugh as an heroic counterstatement to schoolteacher’s supremacist prescriptions. It becomes a creative act that defies the destructive character of the episode (and of social reality) and invokes the paradox of these conflicting readings. While this is not a wildly different interpretation from the one that Bussie offers (and indeed carries the corrective element that I believe underlies her chapter), it is rooted in a fundamentally different understanding of human motivation—one that has contributed to significant disagreement in broader discussions of the structure and function of race and identity in American culture and its religious dimensions.

Ralph Ellison writes: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”⁷ Like Murray, Ellison’s understanding of the blues is rooted in a literary sensibility that does not shy away from the tragic pain of slavery’s American legacy, but also grounds it within recognition of its comic absurdity. Novels like *Beloved*, then, reflecting a blues idiom, serve as a means of ritualizing the renewal such pain (“fingering its jagged grain”) in a way that draws forth the creative capacity to endure, and even to overcome it (whatever tragic implications such endurance and transcendence, a la Sixo, may bear).

I’ve already gone woefully long in this response, so I cannot do full justice to the blues and *Beloved* in the way that Bussie does to her sources. But I would, by way of closing, like to suggest that within this broader gap between the social scientific orientation informing the liberation perspective, and the humanistic orientation that characterizes the blues (and exemplary literature such as *Beloved*, there’s a way of invoking helpful, paradoxical checks-and-balances against the unilateral application of the either / or that is in keeping with what I take to be the broader sentiment of Bussie’s wonderfully evocative project. In this way she offers us a rich challenge for moving forward—one for which I am grateful.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, John F. Callahan, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 129.