

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

I don’t remember laughing the last time I had occasion to read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, nor do I remember dwelling upon the moments of laughter to which Jacqueline Bussie calls our attention in “Flowers in the Dark.” One could attribute this to the timing—I read the novel last in preparation for my doctoral qualifying examinations, which didn’t occasion much mirth—but upon further reflection I would say that it’s because most of my critical attentions relative to the novel are occupied with what I see as its two, not unrelated centers of gravity. First, there is the figure of Beloved, who (be she rememorial manifestation, wayfaring stranger, or true-to-life haint) is the text’s artful demonstration of the Faulknerian truism about the past: how it’s never dead; how it’s never even past. Second, there is the narrative meme best represented by Paul D’s reflection on love, in free indirect discourse: “A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom.”¹

The grace of Bussie’s chapter is that she offers a compelling account of the way in which the neglected instances of laughter are inextricably related to these supposedly weightier concerns, and she does so by way of a two-stage process. In the first instance she explains the lack of critical attention to laughter in *Beloved* by citing the incapacity, or simple unwillingness, of most commentators to dissociate humor and laughter. Bussie—not to mention the epigraphic quotation from Morrison—amply demonstrates that the laughter in *Beloved* has little to do with what’s amusing. Instead, and in the second instance, Bussie explains that the laughter emerges from a “collision of narratives,” in response to which each of the characters in question, Baby Suggs, Sixo, and Paul D, “embodies a paradox and incarnates a fractured faith” (176).

In the case of Sixo, who is perhaps Bussie’s most powerful example, the collision of narratives is one of an independent black consciousness—Sixo says which way freedom is and loves outside Schoolteacher’s parameters—butting up against “the gross injustice of the existing social system in which a man can be burned alive on a whim, without repercussion, because of a song” (207). For Bussie, his laughter is an “active” expression of resistance; it is the only tenable, positive response to the “existential meaninglessness” that results from the collision, of which Sixo’s martyrdom is the most fully realized narrative representation. Engaging Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque helpfully, Bussie writes, “Laughter is appropriate to the grotesque situation because it attests to this dual consciousness—the coexistence of horror and hope, meaninglessness and meaning, terror and faith in regeneration—in a way that language cannot. Laughter attests to the possibility of regeneration but only paradoxically and painfully, because the need for regeneration is necessitated by a grotesque situation wherein regeneration is grossly absent” (208).

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 191.

Beyond Bakhtin, Bussie engages an array of thinkers and theologians (hooks, Cone, Foucault, Hopkins, etc.) to give content to what she sees as the revolutionary tone of the laughter of the oppressed: it incarnates the “‘both-and’, in-spite-of character of the existence and resistance of the marginalized” (211); it is “a form of ‘aggressive waiting’, or a mode of ‘revolutionary patience’” (215); it is a testament to “already-but-not-yet liberation” (215); it is “proleptic liberation” (216). However, if I read Bussie correctly, the point of paying attention to the laughter of the oppressed is not that we should celebrate it as a future strategy but that we should regard it as what *was* the best possible response to an untenable subject position. In other words, an oppressed person who resides at a collision site might rightfully take umbrage should someone in a position of power (a theologian, perhaps) counsel the kind of laughter Bussie describes. So while we should not slight the power of the laughter of the oppressed as a counterhegemonic act, the real task, for those in positions to do so, is to ask, how might we “re-structure society so that mothers would not rather kill their children than have them live in it?” (231). Any instance of the laughter of the oppressed is an *objet trouvé* (*entendu?*) that ought to occasion this line of questioning, which is theological, ethical, political.

Bussie’s reading of the laughter in *Beloved* is, to my mind, compelling; the fact of scholarly neglect heretofore suggests that it is needful. Nevertheless, I would like to address three areas of concern that I see in her chapter in an effort to complicate future ethical or theological conversations that might use the scenes of laughter in *Beloved*—or laughter more generally—as source material:

1) I’m taken with Bussie’s title, “Flowers in the Dark,” and with the explanation she gives for it near the end of the chapter: “Throughout the story, Morrison uses the trope of flowers to symbolically represent the flourishing of this incongruous form of protesting hope, which can lead to survival...laughter testifies to the existence of such flowers, even though they are not yet fully allowed into the light” (238-9). As tropes, laughter and flowers correspond in Bussie’s analysis, but I worry about what happens if we enlarge the scope of inquiry to include other such tropes, which share a logic with the flowers (amid darkness) and laughter (amid oppression).

First, there is Baby’s quilt—introduced at a time in the novel that, according to Bussie, postdates Baby’s ability to sustain the dialectical tension between the narrative of hope and the narrative of faith—which Morrison describes as “made up of scrap of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool—the full range of the *dark and the muted* that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, *two patches of orange looked wild*—like life in the raw.”² Second, there is the figure of Beloved, who eventually acts as a kind of poison upon Sethe: when she is introduced, Morrison writes, “Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. Not because she was wet, or dozing, or had what sounded like asthma, but because *amid all that she was smiling*.”³ Then there is Sethe’s tree that *blooms* when she is whipped—the blossoms taking their place on the brown expanse of her back.⁴ And

² Morrison, 46. Emphasis mine.

³ *Ibid.*, 60. Emphasis mine.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

finally there are the earrings that Mr. Garner has given Sethe—spots of light in a dark history of enslavement that, for a time, “made her believe she could discriminate among” the Schoolteachers and Garners of the world.⁵ Whereas the laughter and the flowers to which Bussie points all have a positive valuation (as fruitful resistance or hopeful beacons), these others are, at the very least, ambiguous. I wonder whether Bussie sees these as threatening or as complementary to the reading she offers.

2) Similarly, I worry that the discussion of laughter, more generally, might be a bit one-dimensional,⁶ and I’d like to gesture towards three other dimensions that warrant consideration. First: at the outset of this response I note that I don’t remember laughing the last time I read *Beloved*, but re-reading the episode involving Sixo’s martyrdom, I think that there is a way in which it is darkly comedic. What are we to make of the (at least potential) laughter of the text’s auditors?

Second: I can think of innumerable examples where the representation of laughter is an attempt to further or to sustain hegemonic discourse rather than a counterhegemonic act. Take, for example, the Abu Ghraib torture photographs of recent and enduring infamy: in the ones that feature American soldiers making merry (*laughing!*) in view of abject bodies (be they prostrate or piled), we have a ‘collision of narratives’ where the narrative of human rights butts up against the narrative of American exceptionalism. Surely this laughter has theological and ethical significance, but it is not a positive or revolutionary response to systemic oppression. Closer to *Beloved*’s terrain, one could make a similar point with lynching photography from the Jim Crow South. In many of these photos, which were often sent as postcards to friends and relatives, white southerners pose gaily (*laugh!*) in front of backdrops replete with ‘strange fruit’. Make no mistake: I do not think Bussie’s reading of the laughter in *Beloved* is wrong; I simply think that the picture becomes much cloudier when we broaden the critical lens to include these other instances of laughter, which are structurally similar to the ones Bussie treats in “Flowers in the Dark.”

Third: it’s worth mentioning Andrew Delbanco’s discussion of irony in *The Death of Satan*. Bussie treats this text briefly in an earlier chapter of her book, but on my reading there isn’t sufficient attention to what I think is one of the great insights of that work. In the text Delbanco laments Americans’ loss of a robust symbolism of evil that can cope with the myriad evils in contemporary life, and he worries that we are doomed to oscillate between two responses: either we demonize an other, or we laugh at it and revel in our irony, gaining nothing. Irony, for Delbanco, has the potential to enervate any further, constructive work, and while Bussie is careful to note that we must work beyond the laughter we hear in the annals of the oppressed—that we must ask after the ‘how’ of

⁵ Morrison, 222.

⁶ Bussie’s quasi-definition (she calls it a ‘theological interpretation’) of laughter is as follows: “An attempt by the suffering individual to sustain the integrity of both the narrative of faith and the narrative of negativity and to hold both narratives in dialectical tension. Laughter sustains a certain ambivalence, capturing a ‘both-and’ existential situation in a way that cognitive discourse cannot attain without reductionistic tendencies toward ‘either/or’” (209). While this interpretation (definition?) of laughter comports with the instances of laughter in question in Bussie’s chapter, it cannot, I argue, encompass the phenomenon in a broader sense.

creating a more just society wherein the laughter of the oppressed is obsolete—we must, in any consideration of laughter, consider this enervating potential of laughter. And we must maintain a “reverence for *something*.”⁷

3) Finally, there is the perennial question about the author’s (any author’s) choice of interlocutors. In the present case, I found the engagement with Bakhtin to be extraordinarily useful, and I appreciated the use of Raboteau’s *Slave Religion* to add historical context. I wonder, though, whether Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* might not have been equally germane to the argument: his discussion of the paradoxical, paternalistic logic of American chattel slavery (i.e. slaves are members of a plantation family; slaves are inhuman cattle) seems particularly relevant to Bussie’s formulation of the ‘both-and’ situation of Morrison’s characters and the historical actors they represent. Moreover, there is a vast and rich critical literature on humor, laughter, and irony in African American literature that receives short shrift in Bussie’s chapter. As an example, Clyde Taylor’s typology of ironies (Aesopian, Ethiopian, etc.) in *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract* might provide a theoretical framework for distancing the laughter of the oppressed in the situation of narrative collision from the laughter of the oppressor in a similar situation.

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[NB: It is my sincere hope that the above response both conveys my immense respect for Bussie’s achievement in “Flowers in the Dark” and pushes the boundaries of the discussion as she frames it. I hope, too, that the conversation continues; I’m dying to know whether Professor Bussie has encountered Art Spiegelman’s article, “Drawing Blood,” which appeared in the June 2006 edition of Harper’s magazine and, if so, how she reads the cartoon that he submits at the conclusion thereof as his “final solution to Iran’s anti-Semitic cartoon contest.”]

⁷ Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 211.