

Insidious invisibilities

World literature, “race” and resistance

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We are living through sinister times and the last thing anyone needs right now is another theory of world literature. If we are serious about the privileged role that culture – and within it, very specifically, the literary text – holds, not only in terms of registering societal conditions and helping us construct our own personal narratives, but also in terms of actual interventions in that same social and personal reality, then a reflection on the importance of concepts and representations of “race” in world literature is long overdue. To be clear: none of this is new and considerations of how “race,” or more properly, racism, operates in culture, have always been advanced time and time over. Paul Gilroy in *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”* from 1987 had already expressed it in the clearest of terms: “I have grown gradually more and more weary of having to deal with the effects of striving to analyse culture, within neat, homogeneous national units [...] with the invisibility of ‘race’ within the field” (Gilroy, 1987, 12). And yet it is as if with every generation, or even more frequently, one has to start all anew again. For some it may be a degree of discomfort at confronting, or even just being reminded of, the fact that much of our world, and certainly our Western world, has been constructed on the basis of racism. Others might try to excuse themselves with the convenient illusion that racism is something from the past. Or, just as conveniently, claim that as passive beneficiaries of the racist structures of inequality, it really is not up to them to voice an opinion.

Awareness of one’s own position and a dose of self-criticism are qualities to be valued – but they in no way justify silence in the face of a relentless, enduring, even escalating, abject cruelty in human relations. What applies at an individual level, I suggest, should be considered even more strongly when contemplating whole disciplines, such as comparative literature, or fields of study, such as world literature. It is precisely because disciplines and specific fields of study establish, define and replicate regimes of truth that affect large numbers of students and inevitably trickle down to all parts of society, that it is crucial that their implication, however hidden, in the very structures of power that both depend on, and foster, the continuity of racism and all its attendant cruelties be continuously assessed and confronted.

Considering how comparative literature as well as Postcolonial Studies and the current inflection of both often labelled as “World Literature,” were established under the premises of a reaction to the devastation of World War II, and the in the aftermath of the Age of Empire, in the name of a certain enlightened cosmopolitanism, more of a reason to insist on analysing how “race,” for the most part, has been absent from the discourse of world literature. In what follows, my aim is to sketch some preliminary steps that might enable us to move towards a reconfiguration of the field away from what I consider to be a kind of persistent absence of reflection on how “race” cannot be disassociated from gender and class when considering literary and other cultural artefacts and how to persist doing so, especially now, not only constitutes a dangerous ignoring of reality but undermines the very grounds from which the field of study we call world literature would draw its epistemological legitimacy.

The persistence of absence

Even as everyone *knows* – and those who would deny it, know it perhaps even more profoundly – that “race” does not exist except as an abstraction with a specific historical development, and a clear purpose in the subjugation and near annihilation of millions and millions of people, it still goes on structuring our societies and killing people daily. Arguably, a decade ago it might have seemed possible not only to envision a future where “race” would not matter, but to believe that such a stage, although far from complete, had already started. Obviously, important gains have been made. However, as more recent events show, any jubilation around a supposed post-racial era was not only premature but possibly a form of wilful self-deception as well.

The term “post-racial” itself predates the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States in 2009. The earliest of four examples given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates back to 5 October 1971 in an article from the *New York Times*, whereas the first instance in Europe appears to be in an article by Gary Younge in *The Guardian* on 22 May 1997. Younge was cautiously optimistic, noting that the slight increase in the number of relationships across different ethnic groups to some observers would “herald [t]he dawning of a new post-racial era,” while not failing to observe that for others, especially in the Black community, such a development primarily signified “a threat to the future of their cultural heritage as Britain’s ethnic minorities become increasingly submerged into white society leaving future generations with little idea of the identities of their forebears” (Younge, 1997, 2). If Obama’s election represented real hope that change might be possible, the backlash against his victory – which started immediately and intensified to the measure that is well-known – was equally telling, with the spilling over of white supremacist views from the confines

of a radical far-right fringe to more socially accepted venues and the deliberate ambiguity spread by Obama's successor in the White House.

At the beginning of his Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 2014, Paul Gilroy exposed as lucidly as is possible the need to consider racism even if it might have been deemed an obsolete category:

However unfashionable it has now become, studying racial hierarchy and inequality provides a valuable means to extend those inquiries, to locate the edges of the human: blunt and sharp. And that, in turn, means refusing to run away from the idea of race and the forms of systematic knowledge it has enabled, but rather embracing and exploring them as an opportunity to know ourselves and our precious world better.

(Gilroy, 2014, 22)

Violent, even deadly, racist incidents and clashes have been by no means confined to the USA. In Europe, xenophobia has been constantly escalating and no one country is immune. As such, the hope that seemed to be borne by the very temporal designation of 'post'-racial with its implication that racism had somehow been left behind, has long given place to a sober assessment of reality and the persistent and unabated systemic nature of racism in either Europe or the USA, to mention just these two geographical areas. As David Theo Goldberg puts it in the conclusion to *Are We All Postracial Yet?*: 'Postraciality [...] rather than expressing the end of racism, conceals within its conceptual erasure of race the driving mode of contemporary racist articulation' (Goldberg, 2015, 152). I would like to borrow Goldberg's observation on the 'conceptual erasure of race' as 'the driving mode of contemporary racist articulation' to refer to a similar erasure of 'race' in the discourse of World Literature. By now there is ample scholarship on the representation of 'race' in Western literature. Yet, this tends still to be done strictly within national boundaries, and more often than not, with a clear focus on the United States. And even then, one could say that individual studies do not filter down to a reconceptualization of the established canon. As Toni Morrison maintained in her Tanner Lecture at the University of Michigan in 1988, from the three tasks she set out to literary studies, one was the examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, for the "unspeakable things unspoken"; for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature (Morrison, 1988, 135–136).

Looking at the most salient studies of world literature that have been published in the last two decades or so, shows how absent the category of "race" is from the discipline's eye. Even though the terms "race" and "racism" are occasionally deployed, there is hardly ever any consideration of them and

what they mean. For instance, in his seminal set of essays, “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) and “More Conjectures” (2003), Franco Moretti, though clearly not unaware of racial issues, hardly ever touches on them, even though he pioneers a reflection on world literature in connection with Immanuel Wallerstein’s (2004) World-Systems Theory and does reflect on the relation of African and European novels. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is still something like a disconnect between the theoretical premises expounded, with their sharp emphasis of the troubled relations between core, periphery and semi-periphery, and more traditional views on a supposed European developmental primacy in relation to the world. Or perhaps it is just that Moretti was right in pointing to a problem, even if he remained still attached to traditional premises of influence and a hierarchical notion of literary relations. That at least is how I read, at a distance of 20 years, his reference to various cases drawn from South American and African literatures and especially his reference to various noted scholars and critics of the various national literatures involved. However, that is not the point I would like to make. What strikes me most, beyond the importance Moretti’s essays had in furthering a renewal and changing the inflection of studies in world literature, is rather the fact that “race” remains half-submerged in the entire discussion. It is there but hidden, under the surface of “distant reading” as it were. And in that Moretti’s essay is symptomatic of a wider condition.

Consider what many regard as the key text in restarting world literature as a contemporary field of study, David Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?* (2003). It is an impressive, elegantly crafted achievement, that calls out for a transformation of literary studies away from rigid national or even continental compartmentalisations. In that, Damrosch draws on established comparatist practices. The way in which his analysis moves, seemingly effortlessly, between ancient texts and contemporary ones, written in quite a few different languages, and across the continents, did set up a difficult model to follow beyond whatever criticism one may rightly have concerning his schematic, tripartite definition of what would constitute world literature. Yet, here too “race” almost does not get a mention at all, and when it is allowed to come to the fore than it is within citations, from either Rigoberta Menchú’s much discussed and celebrated, though polemic, autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), or as a citation within a citation, from an article on Menchú and the controversy her book raised, by Peter Canby (1999), who cites Guatemalan historian Arturo Taracena. Again, like with Moretti, “race” and racism are there and yet also not there. Readers of Moretti and Damrosch seeking ways to conceptualise the field of world literature will find much that is complementary. However, any idea that “race” would be a key element – or even just one of the aspects that merits serious consideration – would not be one of them.

In 2009, Damrosch published a volume, now in its second edition (2018), which had a clear pedagogical remit – *How To Read World Literature*. “Organised” as Damrosch explains, “around a set of skills” needed “to read world literature with understanding and enjoyment” (Damrosch 2009, 4), the book includes a chapter dedicated to “Going Abroad” (interestingly re-titled “Writing Empire” in the second edition). In it Damrosch considers Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and clearly unfolds for the reader some of the complex issues surrounding that key text:

Do we see Africa, or do we only see Marlow’s hallucination of a dark night of the soul, projected outward? Do we see the essential corruption of European imperialism, or more ambivalently the failings of an imperialism gone wrong, or are we being shown a primitivism so unrestrained and unredeemable that Conrad reinforces the racist basis of imperialism even as he criticizes it?

(Damrosch, 2009, 100)

It might seem that here, at least, we have a clear exposure of the implications of “race” in a canonical text by an influential critic. Further, Damrosch proceeds to introduce Chinua Achebe and quotes from his ground-breaking lecture, *An Image of Africa* (1977), at the University of Massachusetts in 1975, which exposed and denounced the racism inherent in Conrad’s text. This is clearly important and, in some way, does move from the submersion of “race” in *What Is World Literature?* And yet, one should not have too high expectations. True, Damrosch recognises the significance of racism in World Literature – Conrad’s text was, and remains, highly canonical – and by citing directly from Achebe’s seminal essay, he does start to move towards not only recognising the controversial nature of Conrad’s text but also allowing an African, in this case, Achebe’s, voice to be heard. Of course, since the initial publication of *All Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Achebe had long since stopped being just any writer. His prominence had been steadily rising – and continues to do so up to the present, (Celebrating the 60th anniversary of Things Fall Apart, 2020) with Penguin claiming on its blog, *The Perch* (2018), 20 million copies sold and President Obama writing on his Facebook page: “[a] true classic of world literature [...]. A masterpiece that has inspired generations of writers in Nigeria, across Africa, and around the world” (Obama, 2018). Damrosch, however, does not present a reading of Achebe’s novel beyond some fleeting praise. Outside of world literature proper but in a closely related field, that of criticism (or meta-criticism to stay close to that particular discussion), the recent essay by Paul Fry (2020) and the response it drew from Virginia Jackson serve to show how these issues are by no means confined to world literature. Jackson’s essay, in particular, not only engages with Fry’s claims concerning what he sees as the various advantages and disadvantages of contemporary criticism (or what might have been termed “theory” at a different conjunction) but goes beyond and actually demonstrates what I

think is urgently needed. Jackson does so by referring to a poem, “On Liberty and Slavery” (1828) written by George Moses Horton, a slave, as much more significant, even paradigmatic of elements of Romantic poetics, than the one Fry had used in an earlier book on the lyric (1980), Alan Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” (1928). As Jackson makes clear:

In 1828 in North Carolina, Horton was not literalizing the abstraction of apostrophic address, and he was not trying to inhabit an illusion. He was himself the dehumanized human form whose social death lent a spectral animation to the apostrophic figures of Romantic poetics.

(Jackson, 2020, 308)

In the end one can say, returning to Damrosch and world literature, the interest still lies with *Heart of Darkness* first, as it would offer a “devastating deconstruction of the imperial enterprise” (Damrosch, 2009, 100). One could say that Damrosch is simply exercising proper scholarly practice, trying to present as balanced a view as possible, clearly recognising the importance of Achebe’s criticism, yet noting how complex Conrad’s text is. He certainly would not be alone in valuing the work of both authors. Caryl Phillips, for one, has written of his being torn between the two and his conversation with Achebe on the subject. But in the end, Phillips points out, as Achebe had done in 1975, that by attempting to diminish the humanity of Africans, Conrad ultimately disappoints (Phillips, 2003). Rather than wagging an accusatory finger at Conrad or displacing him, what I am interested in is calling attention to a pernicious and toxic view that still haunts us all today. Reading Conrad as part of world literature today just cannot be the same as reading him at the turn of the nineteenth century – or, in any event, before Achebe. The conclusion to the “Going Global” chapter, however, still reverts to a focus on Conrad’s “merits” alone:

England is described as though it were “darkest Africa,” and night is falling anew as Marlow tells his tale. Marlow’s return from a foreign continent has revealed to him an inextricable mix of civilization and barbarism at the heart of the British Empire.

(Damrosch, 2009, 102)

One can almost hear the waters of the Charles River, echoing those of the Thames, allowing a glimpse of “race” and racism, while still submerging them further.

Invisible in plain sight

Two related questions must be considered at this juncture: one, what if “race” is indeed treated as an element of what has been posited as world literature, but in historical terms only? And two, must one foreground “race” in order to

avoid submerging it? In order to sketch a provisional answer to the first query, I want to consider B. Venkat Mani's erudite and wide-ranging study, *Recording World Literature: Libraries, Print Culture, and Germany's Pact with Books* (2017). Towards the end of the book Mani makes some brief remarks on Chinua Achebe and on the Heinemann African Writers Series as harbingers of a new kind of world literature, which nonetheless still remained very much focused on certain writers and on the use of English. Mani also goes further to briefly consider the role of translation in Germany and the place of migrant writers in Germany and world literature. These are important though brief remarks, pointing rather to further work still to be done as befits an epilogue. Even if they do not dwell on the issue of "race" they certainly reflect on the complexities of conceiving world literature outside the traditional canon of largely Western authors. But from the many contributions the book makes, the one that interests me most at the moment is the extended discussion in the chapter on "The Shadow of Empty Shelves: Two World Wars and the Rise and Fall of World Literature." For in that chapter the focus, to a great extent, is on racial articulations of world literature in the Nazi period:

Much like in Hesse's conception, for the Nazis too (via Langenbucher), world literature appears as the source of understanding the customs, traditions, indeed the intellectual wealth of other nations. But world literature is no longer defined by language; it is now also ethnically and racially defined. It is another source of the *Völkerkunde* (race studies) that the Nazis so actively promoted.

(Mani, 2017, 160)

There is no dissimulation of "race" in the framing of world literature here. The fact that the book remains grounded in one specific area, Germany, is not an issue as it does always keep in mind not only what one could designate as transnational concerns, but also is thoroughly informed by a perspective from outside a given area, as Mani informs us at the very beginning, given his upbringing in India, the steady emphasis on migratory and circulation questions and also keeping in mind his own location in American academia. Yet, the fact that when the book does focus on "race," it does so exclusively in relation to Nazi delusions of racial supremacy and does not take into account any others, feels like a missed opportunity. What's more, given the by-now historical nature of the issues discussed, there is a risk, albeit a small one, of thinking that the problems would have gone away, and nothing could be further from the truth as Gilroy has amply shown in *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (1987, especially 114–152). Of course, it is always easy, even facile, to remark on what could have been. Nonetheless, it is perhaps not out of place to imagine that a discussion of the racialised assembly of a canon of great masters in the past could profit from noting how its central features, its dependency on systemic racism, still pertain to today's context.

It is fine that Mani advances a “multicentric, multidimensional, and multilingual nature of world literature” (Mani, 2017, 246). Yet there is no explicit consideration of it also being “multiracial.” Perhaps because of the contorted way in which “race” still gets viewed by many who espouse a liberal point of view. After all, did we not at some point believe that the moment had come when “race” could and should be left behind? That to insist on it would only hamper the possibility for a new future and an expanded form of belonging? Not quite. One of the most eloquent and lucid thinkers on the subject, Gilroy, in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000) called for a new emphasis on the human and away from racial divisions, hierarchies and associations. However, reading that book as part of an expression of hope that might be utopian but certainly is needed, never lets us forget, not for a moment, the devastation wreaked by racism and its enduring reality. One of Gilroy’s main points, to call attention to the importance of fascism in expanding, developing and maintaining racism, to the importance of keeping us alert to the linkages between past evil and contemporary threats, remains as present today as 20 years ago: “The resurgent power of racist and racializing language, of raciology, is a strong link between the perils of our own dangerous time and the enduring effects of the past horrors that continue to haunt us in Europe” Gilroy, 2000, 93).

Belonging and resistance

After pre-emptively exposing a series of possible objections to his own views, Stuart Hall, addressing an audience at Harvard University as part of the 1994 W. E. B. Du Bois lectures, stated one of his most important claims, the “scandalous argument” as he called it,

that, socially, historically, and politically, race is a discourse; that it operates like a language, like a sliding signifier; that its signifiers reference not genetically established facts but the systems of meaning that have come to be fixed in the classifications of culture.

(Hall, 2017, 45)

Even if Hall’s aim might have been primarily the social and political understanding of how “race” can not only survive in the present as a category, but specifically as a device to divide people and inflict some of the cruellest forms of denial, including the absurd denial of every human being belonging to humanity and its corollary – not only the very denial of life but the active attempts at its extinction – I want to draw on it to probe the way in which world literature as a field of study can be moved away from this widespread ignorance of “race” as a crucial category to understand any cultural expression. For one, by placing the analysis of “race” decidedly within the realm of the cultural, and by emphasising its discursive quality, Hall not only opens

up the possibility of applying it to an inquiry into what constitutes world literature, but practically makes it unavoidable. To avoid possible misunderstandings: I am neither proposing yet another theory of world literature nor suggesting that world literature studies should emphasise “race” exclusively or above other categories for analysis.

World literature as a kind of writing, publishing or even just marketing, has always had lofty, cosmopolitan aspirations. The question of “race” needs to always be considered alongside, not in isolation from, the other categories usually privileged in any debate on what properly constitutes world literature. To ignore the centrality of “race” in any conversation around issues such as canonicity, greatness, transnationality reach and influence, or even, especially so, that vaguest and most problematic of designations, the “universal,” is a failure of the imagination. It is also a peculiar form of blindness that sharply reduces the relevance of the field of world literature in present discussions about the role of the humanities and betrays the utopian design of so vast a field of culture as *World Literature*.

Before turning to the related questions of belonging and memory, which I hope will help clarify my points, I still want to refer two recent studies of world literature, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature*, authored by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC, 2015) and Joel Nickels’ *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (2018).

In a sense, we could think one is a logical following of the other, as both articulate possible alternatives to hitherto established conceptions of world literature. Furthermore, both contain a certain interest in anti-systemic modes of organisation that can lead to forms of resistance, even if they also diverge significantly on this. What interests me though, is the way in which both studies do move away from previous and influential delineations of world literature as a field, and in doing so do draw attention to questions of “race” and to peripheral works. Yet, neither really posits “race” directly as the category under scrutiny. In *Combined and Uneven Development*, considerations of “race” are inescapable inasmuch as the whole study depends on an application of both Trotsky’s elaboration on Uneven and Combined Development – itself also taken up by Franco Moretti and Fredric Jameson, and on reading the periphery. As the WReC notes, This identification of unevenness, a staple of Marx’s and Lenin’s work, is then amplified in Trotsky’s writings of the 1930s, in which, on the basis of his consideration first of conditions in Russia in 1905 and subsequently of those in China in 1925–1927, he formulated an elaborated theory of ‘uneven and combined development’ (WReC, 2015, 10). As such, racism is one of the salient factors of inequality that the book considers, especially when looking at conditions in South African literature. A significant difference between the two works, however, is that whereas the WReC’s study draws as much on Immanuel Wallerstein’s (2004) World-Systems Theory as on Trotsky’s considerations

and other Marxist perspectives, Nickels’ book – though referencing the WReC (and work by David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, Emily Apter and a few others) and paying attention to both peripheral groups as well as to class struggles, as it focuses on strikes – seems to have no use for World-Systems Theory, nor for a materialist approach. Resistance is clearly put together in terms of an anti-colonial struggle, implicitly also as an anti-racist one, but “race” remains elusive and always linked to other elements used by oppressive forces – to some extent capitalism, but above all, the state. The sharp attempt at separating state from non-state agents, though necessary, rests on less-than-firm ground given the diffusing ways of power as Althusser remarked in his polemic but influential essay on “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” from 1970 (Althusser, 2001). Besides, doing so without also considering the intrinsic relation between capitalism and systemic racism seems like an odd omission, especially given Nickels’ investment in “imagin[ing] the forms of nonstate self-government that could become possible as a consequence of world-systemic shifts that capitalist crisis precipitates” (Nickels, 2018, 249).

The approach to world literature advanced by Nickels has much to commend it and – given its focus on resistance as well as its clear understanding of the importance of considering various movements for liberation either from colonialism or from economic oppression – it certainly shows ways in which world literature might be inflected away from sterile notions of canonicity and greatness. In contrast to the proposal made by the WReC, which assumes a decisively materialist perspective, Nickels is still closer to phenomenology in terms of his interpretative toolbox – which admittedly is only one element of many others, ranging from psychoanalysis to sociology (Nickels, 2018, 30). While recognising that the current state of permanent crisis in the world under late-stage capitalism does indeed necessitate a variety of intellectual approaches, I still think that at a certain level one must choose in order to guarantee the intellectual rigour called for. Nickels’ conclusion, his variously asserted belief in the capacity of literature to resist what he labels as the “legalized dispossession that goes under the name of globalization” (Nickels 2018, 216) is heartening. In a sense so would be his further conviction that “[t]he ‘world’ in world literature could then be reimagined – not as a cognate of elite, globalized networks of literary prestige, but as a capacity to project alternatives to neoliberalism’s itineraries of social fracture” (Nickels, 2018, 213). Except that, instead of being utopian, it might just be naïvely optimistic. Instead of combating neoliberal forces, the desire to move away from “political elites” and the state could just as well help consistent attacks on various forms of collective organisation at the core of the neoliberal movement. Or, more probably, be engulfed in the vortex of a generalised attack on the very foundations of democracy as a result of their weakening by neoliberalism, something that might not even be so much in the future as already well under way.

In her recent *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Wendy Brown notes how successive crises, combined with “enduring racism,” have wreaked havoc within Western societies:

Thus, liberal political agendas, neoliberal economic agendas, and cosmopolitan cultural agendas generated a growing experience of abandonment, betrayal, and ultimately rage on the part of the new dispossessed, the white working-class and middle-class populations of the First and Second World.

(Brown, 2019, 3)

Yet, what Brown suggests is happening is not an increase in liberal forces, but rather their demise, as it theorises “how neoliberal rationality prepared the ground for the mobilisation and legitimacy of ferocious antidemocratic forces in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (Brown, 2019, 7). Speaking of “social fracture” in the present, one must always consider what has been referred to as the “colonial fracture,” something various thinkers had posited and found a kind of crystallisation in the apt phrase of Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Blancel and Sandrine Lemaire (*La fracture coloniale*, 2006). Discussing modernity in *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy had exposed precisely how the rupture that ushers in modernity is predicated on slavery and colonialism (Gilroy, 1988, 55). This is something I will return to, but first I would like to still take a few more moments to look at belonging and resistance. For one, there is the resistance to allow for a more inclusive, more diversified notion of belonging that even as it seemed to ebb away has returned in full force. Stuart Hall, in 1994, had already drawn attention to a resurgence of racism and nationalism across Europe:

Confronted by the openly racist turn in Germany, Italy, and France, the British are wont to be smoothly complacent. Nevertheless, the particular forms of cultural racism that have grown up in the United Kingdom under the shadow of Thatcherism have once again brought together into a single discourse questions of race, ethnicity, and cultural difference, which now condense with questions of nation, imperial decline, and cultural belonging.

(Hall, 2017, 153)

Even if that is not at all the kind of resistance that I have in mind, it cannot ever be left out of sight nor can it be underestimated because it might hide under a veneer of sociability, only to return ever more violently when times seem to allow for it to show itself openly, as is the case in our present, driven by a politics of fear. Precisely because belonging is such a crucial element for any human being’s self-definition, it always was, and remains, highly

contested. Even at a very basic level, one can see that world literature provides a privileged, perhaps optimal, ground to play out questions of belonging, with all of their permutations in terms of factors like race, class, gender and others. If it is simply not possible to conceive of an individual without reference to a collective social and political body, exclusion, the denial of belonging, even when not absolute, exists in a form of annihilation. To resist that and other forms of annihilation must be recognised as our duty, not just out of any sense of morality, ethics, or justice, but because everyone’s humanity depends on it.

“Re-Memory” and voicing the “Unspeakable”

The opening of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* stands as one of the most remarkable of any work of literature: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children” (Morrison, 1987, 2004, 3). Like Herman Melville’s also well-known opening to *Moby Dick*, “Call Me Ishmael,” it unmistakably sets the tone in a way that is commanding and full of dread, except that Morrison’s is even much more charged. Readers approaching the text for the first time have no way of knowing that 124 is a house, a haunted house to be more precise, and yet by the end of the first page the reader cannot avoid the realisation that there is a hidden, unspeakable violence that will not go away and that must be confronted, no matter how hard that will be. Much has already been written on Toni Morrison and on *Beloved* in particular and here I would only briefly refer to the author’s own comments in the foreword:

The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it. She could not linger outside; she would have to enter the house. A real house, not a cabin. One with an address, one where former slaves lived on their own. There would be no lobby into this house, and there would be no “introduction” into it or into the novel. I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense.

(Morrison, 2004, xviii)

Even if Morrison had written nothing else, that novel alone would have merited her the Nobel Prize and much more. Its indelible and pivotal mark on world literature, however, must be considered in tandem with its emancipatory potential, allowing an entire nation – and, crucially, beyond any one polity or any one country – to reflect critically on itself, its past and what

must be done in the present to shape a different future. Like so much of her work, a central issue concerns the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. “Re-memory” is Morrison’s own way to call attention for the intricacies of memory, its problematic yet inescapable relation to history as well as to forgetting:

It was in *Beloved* [...] that all of these matters coalesced for me in new and major ways. History versus memory, and memory versus memorylessness. Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative.

(Morrison, 2019b, 324)

Beloved is an especially apt text to consider in a reconceptualising of a world literature that is neither blind to “race” nor silences further the voices of those who have been always silenced; that neither forgets about “race,” nor makes it the text’s sole concern. Indeed, *Beloved* is about so much more than race, even as it does centre on the abomination of slavery. All of this, and perhaps more, can be seen in extremely concise form, as stark and seductive as it is sharp, lacerating and haunting, in Morrison’s *A Mercy* from 2008. Many of the concerns of *Beloved* resurface here, except somehow even more raw and more refined at the same time. The figure of Florens is as dangerous and haunting as that of Beloved even if one kills her lover, the Blacksmith, and the other is killed by Sethe, her mother. For, in both characters, Morrison explores an extreme deficit of belonging even when brought about by an excess of belonging. Excessive belonging, whether real or imagined, natural or perverted, is what both constitutes and undoes the two characters. If this appears to be a paradox it is because behind it stands the twisted logic of “race” and slavery. Schoolteacher, who had debased Sethe to the point of almost complete dehumanisation in his pursuit of “science,” insists on recovering his “property,” the woman and children who “belong” to him, after Sethe had managed to flee “Sweet Home” with her children. It is in order to free the children from that perverted “belonging to” that Sethe kills Beloved before she is prevented from also killing the others. 124, the house on Blue-stone Road where Sethe is finally allowed to live afterwards, is thus home, yet it is also always irrefutably different, other, haunted, foreign – a marker of displacement and horror that both shelters and consumes, or expels, those within it. Much more can be said on this and, indeed, the subject of “home” has been variously analysed as it forms a key concern of all of Morrison’s works and the house Jacob Vaark has built for himself, and on which he will die before it is completed, is an equally important allegory. However, I would like, rather, to direct focus to something else in *A Mercy* and that is the very questioning of “race” that Morrison centres in that novel.

By imagining a period in colonial America in which the notion of "nation" was still fluid and divided between conflicting allegiances, and, more importantly, "race" was not yet the one defining element in the hierarchy of oppression and expropriation of labour, Morrison provides a radical way to question our own seemingly entrenched notions of belonging. Morrison is neither naïve nor is she indulging in utopian dreams when she does so. Jacob Vaark had assembled an alternative community, a kind of family, on his property: "A goodhearted couple (parents), and three female servants (sisters, say) and them [Willard and Scully, the two indentured male workers] helpful sons. Each member dependent on them, none cruel, all kind" (Morrison, 2008, 144). Yet, this abnormal estate that defied and resisted the conventions of slavery (though still built on capital) is short lived, and as soon as Vaark dies, it will be set back within more conventional norms as Scully and Willard predict the impending remarriage of Vaark's widow to someone from the village: "Willard closed one eye. 'The village will provide.' He coughed up a laugh recalling the friendliness of the deacon" (Morrison, 2008, 146). The group of people assembled in the Vaark household are a motley group in all senses of the term: Jacob, an Anglo-Dutch trader, farmer and lender; his wife Rebbeka, born in England and sold in marriage to him by her father; and Lina, Sorrow and Florens, the three women who have Jacob as master. One quality that unites them is having been orphaned, even though some clearly suffered more than others. But even Jacob's fortune is shown as completely contingent, an inheritance from a dead relative in New England. And to these one must add the Blacksmith, a Black free man, who is both highly skilled and an artist. Within this household, sometimes seemingly closer to a commune, the various characters articulate forms of belonging that, however tenuous, ephemeral and even fluid they may be, are offered as an antidote to their previous forms of dispossession. When Sorrow becomes a mother after several unsuccessful pregnancies, she literalises this new form of belonging by renaming herself "Complete," thereby annulling the name that had been imposed on her as a reflection of her previous condition. Similarly, by writing this novel Morrison takes further her project of re-membering, of re-assembling the various bodies and body parts fractured by slavery, "race" and other kinds of oppression. And that too is a form of resistance.

The characters in the Vaark household share one other characteristic in conjunction with their orphanhood: the fact that they all have been displaced. And this, I would suggest, is something that Morrison posits, if not as a condition of modernity, certainly as one of its consequences, one that reaches all the way to the present. Modernity, in this sense then, would be not so much the product of Enlightenment ideals – which it also is – as much as the unfolding of capitalism and its reliance on the constant mass migration of people, whether literally enslaved or in an attempt to escape their miserable conditions of life. In 2006, following an invitation from the

Louvre, Morrison curated an exhibition and participated in a series of lectures, events and performances under the project heading of “The Foreigner’s Home.” In her initial lecture, Morrison highlights the importance of displacement to understanding our present condition, and how it affects us all, even if in varying ways:

Excluding the height of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, the mass movement of peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is greater now than it has ever been. It is a movement of workers, intellectuals, refugees, armies crossing oceans, continents, immigrants through custom offices and hidden routes, speaking multiple languages of trade, of political intervention, of persecution, exile, violence, and poverty.

(Morrison, 2019a, 5)

This is a subject that Stuart Hall also focused on as part of the third Du Bois lecture: “Diasporas are composed of cultural formations which cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, ethnos, and nation” (Hall, 2017, 172). As Hall notes, this effectively means that displacement cuts through what were established pillars for belonging, with dire consequences. Yet, instead of just examining all the negativity of a globalisation still predicated on radical inequality, like Morrison, Hall reverts to a kind of imagination: as with any crisis, massive global displacements not only create millions of “homeless” people whose desire and need for belonging becomes severely hampered, curtailed and denied, but it also opens up the possibility of multiple belongings. Hall then starts by mentioning a passage in an article of his that had appeared just one year earlier, in 1993, from which I cite at somewhat greater length: The new “hybrids,” the product of global displacements, “are not and will never be unified culturally in the old sense, because they are inevitably the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several ‘homes’ – and thus to no one particular home” Hall, 1993, 362).

Writing in the summer of 2020, I am more than aware that this may well not only sound, but be, utopian. The escalation of civil conflict, the naked grab for power that no longer even deems it necessary to dissimulate, the threats to the rule of law in some of the most established democracies and the shameless imperial nostalgia that thinks itself presentable, could make one despair of any possibility for a renewed, more inclusive notion of belonging. And yet, 2020 has also shown the resolve of people to face oppression openly, with renewed courage and a new kind of solidarity that does cut through some of the older divisions, be it on the streets of Portland, Oregon, the various marches for Black Lives Matter throughout the USA and Europe or among the hundreds of thousands of dissidents in Minsk and Hong Kong.

In the conclusion of his Tanner Lectures, Paul Gilroy noted the urgency of our present, while sounding a call to resist: “The humanities can no longer be content with complacent antihumanist reflexes born from old conflicts. As the ice melts, the waters rise, and the death dealing drones move silently overhead, it is time for us to be far bolder” (Gilroy, 2014, 74). The task that Hall formulates as his conclusion to the Du Bois lectures is one that remains as valid today as it was then. It is one that has, if anything, gained added urgency with the return of the bloody ghosts of nationalism and a resurfacing of racism allied with all kinds of resentments made perhaps even more virulent because of it having itself moved on to the terrain of culture. It is a task that I think should be applied to the work to be done in world literature, if we are serious about actually doing something that matters instead of simply indulging our intellectual privilege. As Hall says then:

The question is not who we are but who we can become. The task of theory in relation to the new cultural politics of difference is not to think as we always did, keeping the faith by trying to hold the terrain together through an act of compulsive will, but to learn to think differently.
(Hall, 2017, 174)

Thinking differently, recognising the profound damage wrought by racism and other causes of the profound inequality that limits all of our potential to be human and free, and extolling the capacity for literature to help us in the never ending process of becoming and belonging, is certainly not a new theory of world literature, but could, or should, be one of its main tasks.

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