Words That Bind and Loose: Lawrie Balfour's Toni Morrison: Imagining Freedom

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REVIEW

"grand rhetoric of hope" (93–96), despite the fact that some of the most polit- ically constructive results of the Civil Rights Movement's first phase would have been impossible without the "infinite hope"—sometimes secular, sometimes rooted in religious belief—that allowed participants in the Movement to stand firm against the vicious and violent resistance meant to thwart their efforts. Of course, King fully understood that without a fundamental revaluation of Western materialism and militarism, Black people would be unlikely to attain complete freedom from systems of racial domination. But he also understood that the next phase of the Black freedom struggle would not succeed unless it came to be acknowledged as a human struggle—one that could even- tually enlist a broad human commitment to realizing genuine human freedom. Yet one of the special virtues of Lloyd's book is that it, too, is ultimately animated by a commitment to human freedom. Lloyd may understand the Black struggle to realize human freedom in ways that depart from some important aspects of the Black political tradition. But he consistently reminds us that "Black dignity is human dignity," and that "where we find collective struggle against domination, we find what is human" (157). This means that even readers who might resist Lloyd's understanding of what it takes to con- duct that struggle in the twenty-first century will profit from engaging with Lloyd's reflections on the nature, sources and implications of Black dignity as

a practice.

In the final pages of Toni Morrison, Lawrie Balfour recounts how Virginia's Glenn Youngkin, then a gubernatorial candidate, now the governor, mobilized a white mother's disgust at the teaching of Beloved—"some of the most explicit material you can imagine" (211)—to gain votes. Besides illustrating the para- dox of contemporary conservative politics in the US, in favor of freedom in the abstract but against many concrete freedoms, the example of Youngkin signals unease with the multicultural consensus, a second coming of the late-twenti- eth century's "canon wars." (Incidentally, Beloved and Allan

Bloom's The Clos- ing of the American Mind were published in the same year.) It also serves as a reminder of how representative Morrison's work has become of the multicul- tural consensus that guided secondary and tertiary education from the Clinton to the Obama eras. Two generations of US high school seniors and college freshman grappled with the tragedy of Sethe, and with Morrison's particular modes of imagination.

This also means that two generations of US cultural and political elites were shaped by Morrison's representation of tragedy, and her literary voice. To state the obvious irony: novels that were written to say what was unspeak- able have become canonical, have shaped the grammar of contemporary US culture and politics—have become entangled with the powers that be. For those who see themselves as critics of the status quo, or who see their scholarly vocation as one of unmasking power and imagining otherwise, it is tempting to leave Morrison behind, turning perhaps to writers whose work is edgy in both literary and sociological terms; say, overlooked experimental poets. Law- rie Balfour is no apologist for the liberal order—this is her third monograph on how Black thought challenges that order—but she takes a different approach. Instead of treating Morrison as icon (or idol), or a symbol of Black women's genius, Balfour treats Morrison as a political theorist grappling with the con- cept of freedom and contributing to today's debates in political theory about that concept. Reading Morrison in this way, Balfour turns Morrison into an interlocutor whom we can learn from, but also whom we can argue with, part of an internally diverse tradition of Black political thought constituted as much by arguments within the tradition as by the tradition's shared commitments.

Specifically, Balfour suggests that Morrison's "quest to reinhabit the lives of the enslaved and their descendants locates her in a long tradition of thought, art, and political action that is animated by a desire to understand and celebrate black ways of being free" (5). For Balfour's Morrison, freedom is an aspiration, and prose provides occasions to experiment toward it. Freedom is not guaranteed by the state, nor is it a quality of the self-sufficient individual. In multiple registers, Morrison queries what it means for freedom to require escape and for escape to be impossible. Her characters, whether enslaved or navigating the afterlives of slavery, are continually torn by this paradox. It is also at the heart of Morrison's orientation toward her craft, at once faithful to the particularity of Black experiences that have been written out of history and committed to conjuring new modes of seeing and, ultimately, of living. The site at which Morrison navigates this paradox, the way she eludes these seemingly intractable conceptual splits, is language itself. Morrison does not simply write about freedom and its paradoxes. Through her careful, original use of words, phrases, sentences, and narratives, she performs freedom at the level of language, inviting readers to interrogate their own assumptions, to question the way linguistic conventions reinforce social conventions, privileg- ing the powerful and making life unlivable for those at the margins.

The core chapters of Toni Morrison each meditate on a pair of Morrison's novels. They feature thematic discussions linked with close readings of these

novels, and are written in a way that is accessible to readers who have not read the novels, or who have not read them in a while. Among the major themes, Balfour draws out Morrison's reflections on how freedom both pressures and is inflected by place, escape, and responsibility. The final chapter turns to Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, to consider how Morrison links freedom to beauty and motherhood. While these topics may not be the first to come to mind when we conceptualize freedom, particularly in political theory, Balfour presents Morrison attempting to free Black women from beauty standards imposed by the normativity of whiteness. By pursuing beauty, often in unexpected places, Morrison suggests that Black women pursue freedom. This is not simply personal freedom; it is freedom from interlocking systems of domination. It is revolutionary freedom. Indeed, Balfour recovers the revolution-ary context of The Bluest Eye: in the 1970s Morrison was working as an editor, including of Angela Davis's autobiography, and saw herself using the arts to advance Black political struggle.

Perhaps this is an unusual observation to make in a book review, but Balfour's footnotes are spectacular (and kudos to Oxford University Press for supporting footnotes rather than endnotes). Balfour situates her analysis of Morrison's work among, and draws on, a wide range of literary scholarship, historical scholarship, political theory scholarship, and philosophy. Balfour's engagement with the newest currents in Black studies is particularly impressive: she connects themes in Morrison's work with, for example, the work of Kevin Quashie, Katherine McKittrick, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and with contemporary Black creative writers including Kevin Young, M. NourbeSe Philip, Claudia Rankine, and Elizabeth Alexander. She points to support for her claims about Morrison's fiction in the author's unpublished papers. If Balfour's book makes the case that a creative writer ought to be taken seriously as a political theorist, Balfour's notes make the case that questions about race and freedom are most productively addressed when we read promiscuously but discerningly, finding resonances across boundar- ies of genre and discipline.

Even if we can appreciate Morrison as an important voice theorizing free- dom, a haunting question remains: might it be something about her concept of freedom that made Morrison the right writer to become a favorite of educational institutions expressing and reproducing the ideology of what Jodi Melamed has analyzed as neoliberal multiculturalism?1 What is it about Morrison's political-theoretical commitments that makes her less fitting to social movements like Black Lives Matter, movements that seek to pivot away from that ideology and to recenter anti-Blackness in all its depths and expanses? Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Desmond Tutu have been superseded by Audre Lorde and Frantz Fanon in theorizing—often via Tweet and Instagram post—these new social movements, so has Morrison been superseded by Octa- via Butler, James Baldwin, and Zora Neale Hurston, among others. Of course, there is no straightforward answer to this question, but it is a reminder that debates about key concepts within a tradition are shaped not only by the mate- rial conditions

in which ideas are produced, but also the institutional contexts in which they are received. The work of freedom involves continuously inter- rogating ideas but also the contexts in which those ideas circulate, for both together have the power to shape lives, to give life or to take life, to open new worlds or to capture worlds.

NOTE

1. Jodi Melamed, Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).