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Textualizing History, Contextualizing Imaginary: the Reconfiguration of Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sembene Ousmane's "Tribal Scars"

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Abstract

With an indelible ink, slavery marked the history of Africans and Afro-descendants. However, much remains to be discovered and said about this history, as historians do not agree on the figures and the real impact of the institution of slavery on its victims and its visible consequences. Based on Sembene Ousmane and Toni Morrison, this article posits that works of fiction are more suitable instruments to paint a full picture of the human consequences of slavery, both at the physical and psychological levels. The aim of this article is to observe the interface between history and imaginary in the reconstruction of the history of slavery from the African and Afro-descendant perspectives. It comes to the conclusion that such works confronting history with memory are more exhaustive and understandable accounts. However, they must rely on a reconstructed memory, resurrected from the abysses of amnesia where pain and shame had thrown it.

Keywords: history, imaginary, memory, narrative, orature, slavery, Morrison, Sembene

Résumé

L'esclavage a marqué d'une encre indélébile l'histoire des Africains et afro-descendants. Pourtant, beaucoup reste à découvrir et à dire de cette histoire, tant les historiens ne s'accordent pas sur les chiffres et l'impact réel de cette institution ignoble sur les victimes d'alors et ses répercussions visibles jusqu'aujourd'hui. Se basant sur Sembène Ousmane et Toni Morrison, cet article postule que l'œuvre de fiction est plus apte à dresser un tableau complet des conséquences humaines de l'esclavage aussi bien sur le plan physique que psychologique. Le but est d'observer l'interface entre l'histoire et l'imaginaire dans la reconstruction de l'histoire de l'esclavage selon le point de vue des communautés africaines et afro-descendantes. L'article conclue que de tels travaux qui confrontent l'histoire et la mémoire sont plus complets et plus compréhensibles. Cependant, il s'agira d'une mémoire

reconstituée, ressuscitée des profondeurs de l'amnésie où la douleur et la honte l'avaient jetée.

Mots-clés : esclavage, histoire, imaginaire, mémoire, narrative, orature, Morrison, Sembene

Introduction

African-American writer Toni Morrison's seminal *Beloved* (1987) is widely acclaimed as one of the first novels entirely devoted to the sad history of enslavement in North America. Although not garnering an equally broad critical reception, Sembene Ousmane's "Tribal Scars" (1962), is a literary masterpiece depicting the transatlantic slavery from an African perspective. Sembene's story is of prime importance as it lucidly tackles the issue of the African participation in the mass tragedy, portraying the raids of African coasts and villages by unscrupulous slave hunters to load slave boats. Morrison picks up where Sembene stops by describing in *Beloved* the unbearable Middle Passage and the cruel experience awaiting the enslaved Africans in an alien America.

Reading the two stories side-by-side reveals some intertextual phenomena, since they are each concerned with the characters' desperate, tragic strategies to escape slavery and save their loved ones. From a stylistic standpoint, the two writers use similar techniques to recount the horrors of slavery. Concerned with retrieving the memory of slavery, both texts cut across history and fiction, providing a penetrating story which counters the placidly statistical official history inspired by branches of Euro-American studies projects like *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*. Furthermore, both writers rely on fantasy – the magical myth of the haunting spirit in *Beloved* and the legend of the origin of the tribal scars in Africa in Sembene's story.

This article questions the relationship of fiction writers such as Sembene and Morrison with history and their use of other ways of knowing and talking about the past. It postulates that works of fiction based on African traditional methods of collecting, interpreting and transmitting evidence can give us

more complete understanding of history. Thus, the article studies these writers' dealing with history and imaginary in their works of fiction.

With the expression "textualizing history" I mean the artistic processes or poetic devices used to turn history into a literary text. But this history is not solely constituted of official, written documents, but also of "individual and collective memories" (Halbwachs, 22-23), memorial traces, visible testimonies, and oral history. On the other hand, by "contextualizing imaginary" I am suggesting ways of giving a spatial and temporal framework to the origin of a myth or legend, say a popular imaginary. It is to historicize an imaginary by situating it in a specific past, thus validating a belief by conditioning its believability.

This paper highlights the process of memory, or "rememory," in Morrison's words, which designates is a voluntary healing of traumatic memory. In fact, "If dismemberment deconstitutes and fragments the whole, then re-memory functions to re-collect, re-ssemble, and organize the various discrete and heterogeneous parts into a meaningful sequential whole" (Henderson 89). On the other hand, the article deals with the techniques and stakes of fictionalizing historical facts and historicizing popular imaginary, and the subsequent hybrid genre of the written stories.

1. The inscription of history in the literary text

The term historical novel displays an apparent contradiction (Sy 7), since it combines in an antithetic relation two modes of narrative – historiography and fiction. But, on a closer look, one may observe that the contradiction is only superficial, since a work of fiction can have reality as a basis, while conversely history can use fiction as an object. Furthermore, all that is written and presented as history is not always true and all that is stamped with the seal of fiction is not false. Writers like Sembene and Morison are the kind of novelists Mamadou Diouf describes as "non-historians who arrogate to

themselves the right to challenge historians vigorously"[1] (Diouf 337). Writers of this creed do not see any ethical contention in that they, as literary creators, question the conclusions of professional historians, while resorting to other methods.

Both Sembene and Morrison share the vision of the intellectual as someone aware of the problems of his/her society and who has an obligation to awaken their communities for the restoration of their usurped history and dignity. In this sense, the words of J. A. Jones on the historical significance of Sembene's works are illustrative:

> Although Sembene is not historian, his version of [the stories] is consciously historical. In interviews, he asserts his right to comment on history and claims an obligation to present the thing omitted by official histories: 'the artist is here to reveal a certain number of historical facts that others would like to keep hidden […]'(Jones 119).

The same is true with Morrison who advocates a functional art. In her essay titled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she declares that "[t]he best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (202).

Relying on a functional art, some fiction writers like Sembene and Morrison claim the right to look into the past with methods not traditionally "historical" so as to collect, assess, and infer new details from the available information of the official history and the neglected oral source to reconstruct a complete and meaningful history. For this reason, they revalorize and give credit to the oral tradition as Toni Morrison puts it:

> If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West– discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as "lore" or "gossip" or sentiment. (Morrison, quoted in Suprajitno 388)

[1] "Non-historiens qui s'arrogent le droit d'interpeler vigoureusement les historiens." All translations in this work are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Likewise, Sembene asserts his right to use the oral materials as instruments to deal with the history of the conquered which is not truthfully presented in the colonialist official history. So, both writers wage battle against the silences of the dominant history concerning the dominated communities. To do so, they rely on dismissed or neglected versions of history.

> Sembene's role […] can be compared to that of the traditional griot, at once chronicler, critic, teacher and visionary, whose abiding principle was always truth and accuracy. As a chronicler, Sembene sets out from an event in the history of his country; as a critic, he points out the flaws and regressive elements in their way of life; as a teacher and spokesman, he demystifies and denounces the colonial system under which they live, and as a visionary, he maps out a line of development for them, provided that they attain the right level of consciousness (Aire 285).

Sembene and Morrison are novelists who value the participation of their people in history by opposing another view to that of the official version written by the conquerors. For this purpose, they use the perspective of the dominated by giving back the floor to the people from whom colonization and colonial institutions confiscated it. Consequently, the mass of the dominated who, in official history are anonymous and passive, find themselves occupying the core and center of their own narratives.

The novel *Beloved* arises from a trite news item on Margaret Garner, a slave-woman who slaughtered her child, but its mode of writing shows a difference between journalism or history and the work of fiction. Both journalism and the discipline of history rooted in the West, and often colonial in nature, are interested in presenting facts, while fiction seeks and finds the circumstances like the psyche of the characters, and the interplay between external and internal factors. This is why the fictional account is always more complete, more humane, and more involving than the distant, so-called objective articles in newspapers and history books. In fact, according to Boubacar Boris Diop, "One can postulate a paradox: works of fiction allow a much better knowledge of a society than all anthropological treatises"[2] (Diop quoted in

[2] « On peut », observe Boubacar Boris Diop, « risquer un paradoxe : les œuvres de fiction permettent une bien meilleure connaissance d'une société que tous les traités d'anthropologie ».

Godin 49). Of course, all that is written and labelled history is not necessarily "true"; conversely orality, or fiction does not rhyme with falsehood. A work of fiction or a piece of oral tradition can be more real than reality because it makes reality more intelligible, more empathic.

Morrison and Sembene resort to various literary procedures for the inscription of history in their narrative. For this purpose, they provide chronological landmarks in their novels. These can be explicitly mentioned, such as dates, or implicitly by reference to events which actually occurred in the past. Therefore, we note the coexistence of references which place history in its temporal framework and those which account for the chronological succession of the narrative events. In fact, according to Mieke Bal "The events themselves happen during a certain period of time and they occur in a certain order" (38). For instance, both novels deal with the traumatic experiences of the transatlantic slavery. As such, their dealing with documented history is clearly stated from the beginning.

Indeed, Sembene places the action of "Tribal Scars" in a very distant past without mentioning the year: "The slave-ship *African* has been anchored in the bay for days, waiting for a full load before sailing for the Slave States. There were already more than fifty black men and thirty Negro women. Down in the hold. The captain's agents were scouring the country for supplies" ("Tribal Scars" 104). This vivid picture of the slave raid, providing a name for the slave boat, is sufficient to place the story in the temporal setting of the epoch of slavery. Not mentioning the precise time is accurate here in the African viewpoint when dealing with events as ancient as slavery. However, the narrator is more precise with the time of production of the story, which is, according to Ricoeur, of prime importance. Here, if he does not mention dates, it is because the characters are contemporaries to those events described in the context of production.

In the evenings we all go to Mane's place where we drink mint tea and discuss all sorts of subjects, even though we know very little about them. But recently we neglected major problems such as the ex-Belgian Congo, the trouble in

the Mali Federation, the Algerian War and the next UNO meeting – even women, a subject which normally takes up a quarter of our time. The reason was that Saer, who is usually so stolid and serious, has raised the question, 'Why do we have tribal scars? ("Tribal Scars" 102)

The historical events mentioned by the narrator, and referring to the Algerian war of independence, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in Belgian Congo and the break-up of the Senegal-Mali Federation, are temporal beacons that place the narrative time in the mid-fifties and early sixties.

Contrary to "Tribal scars," in *Beloved*, Morrison gives precise dates for the historical events. This aspect highlights a difference of perspectives between Sembene and Morrison writing from, and guided by, the African and American standpoints, respectively. To set the temporal and spatial frame of the story, the narrator says: "If you hear it thus at the Palazzo Roccanera in the late 1870s, then a little earlier in 1873 on the outskirts of Cincinnati, in mumbling houses like 124 Bluestone Road, you hear the undecipherable language of the black and angry dead" (*Beloved* 10). Furthermore, the novel is replete with historical references like the Civil War in which Paul D. took part, the Reconstruction Period, and the Fugitive Slave Act. The latter is the catalyzer of the story because it is thanks to it that School Teacher and his squadron of slave hunters come to 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati to reclaim fugitive Sethe and her children.

Right from the start, Morrison and Sembene inscribe their stories within a register of controversy by contradicting the official version of history. However, for them subverting history does not mean inventing another history or denying all that which is written in history books. Instead, they use the same subject matters but fill the silences and insist on the neglected parts of history. Indeed, through Morrison's dedicating *Beloved* to the "*Sixty million and more*" victims of slavery and Sembene's concluding his story stating that slavery is the origin of the widespread practice of scarification in Africa, both authors claim that this institution actually impacted more people than is acknowledged by the Western mainstream version of history that estimates the toll at over 10-12.5 million Africans forced into slavery. The two literary texts endeavor to prove their cases through a coherent and

convincing narrative. Sembene insists on the impacts of the slave-raids in the continent, while Morrison depicts the horrific and deadly Middle Passage as well as the humiliation, mutilation, and lynching in the American slave markets and plantations.

Some literary writers play a fundamental role in scrutinizing the past through memory and oral tradition and passing it down to the present generation. In fact, African and Afro-diasporic writers carry out a work of excavation of the debris of the past to fill in the absences and silences of the official history. The rewriting of history is carried out through the interplay between fact and fiction leading generally, as is the case in the selected stories of this article, to "a historical novel woven within a fictional plot" (Verma 49). The importance of the historical novel resides in the fact that it makes the history of the colonized more appealing and more valorizing than it is in the classical history books. This result is achieved by "disengaging the materials from historical documents in order to revitalize them as lived experiences" (Sivaraj & Bharathi 2014).

Intertextuality can be seen the main theme but also the narrative strategies of the two *Beloved* and "Tribal Scars." Indeed, both novels are based on stories of killing or mutilating loved ones so that they do not become slaves. In "Tribal Scars," during a slave raid in his village, Amoo killed his wife to save her from the dehumanizing institution of slavery. In a second expedition, torn between the threat of losing his daughter Iome as he lost his wife and the fear of seeing her enslaved, he has the idea to save his daughter's life by laming her to make her inapt and invaluable for slavery: "No. Iome, this is going to hurt, but you'll never be a slave. Do you understand?" Swiftly, Amoo gripped the girl between his strong legs and began making cuts all over her body" ("Tribal Scars" 115-116).

In *Beloved*, Sethe cuts her baby girl's throat so that she does not undergo slavery and its wake of dehumanization, rape, mother-child separation, etc. If the returned Beloved does not understand her mother's motivation and, in a ghostly shape torments her, Sethe's act is however understandable as deriving from past trauma of lived experiences from which she wants to keep her children. In fact, her intension was to kill all of her children and commit

suicide, but she was prevented from bringing her plan to fruition. Ironically, the killing of Beloved saved Sethe and her other children from returning to Sweet Home plantation and the life of slave. The same is true in "Tribal Scars" because if Iome is the direct victim of her father's helpless act, the larger community of her village and beyond reaps the benefit of scarification as a tool of resistance against enslavement.

> When Amoo makes this violent act upon his daughter's skin, he simultaneously upholds the pride of his culture and his people. He sacrifices himself as a slave to the colonists, and sacrifices his daughter's body to permanent physical damage in order to save Iome from slavery (Awbrey 106).

On a closer looker, murder and mutilation stand for an act of resistance against the institution of slavery and an affirmation of agency and self-ownership. "In her fine account of forms of slave resistance in *Within the Plantation Household*, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese considers murder, self-mutilation and infanticide to be the core psychological dynamic of all resistance" (Bhabha 16). The practice of killing or mutilating oneself or loved ones seems inappropriate when judged from outside of the context of slavery. But considering the cruelty of the institution within which people resorted to these extreme acts, one may find that it amounts to choosing between two evils. In fact, killing or mutilating oneself or one's loved ones is an act to claim ownership of oneself and of one's relatives. It stands as a proclamation of the right to decide and control one's life and property rather than giving in to the will of others. Thus, reconsidered, Sethe's and Amoo's acts can be understood as dictated by love; it is a "thick love" as Paul D. puts it, but it is still an extreme love which keeps the loved ones in a safe place before thinking of oneself. Indeed, the love is at the core of the historical novel and makes its object and instance of production more humane.

2. Investing memory and imaginary with a historical value

As the stories deal with resistance against slavery, the kind of narration used by the two writers deviates from the Western model of the novel. Orature is put at the core and center of the stories as a means to validate the type of genre

discarded by the colonial narrative. “In fact, in West African cultures, oral genres like the epic, myths and genealogies can be considered as part of historical remembering, because these aesthetic forms, which develop a representative and symbolic mode of speech, are not separated from historical thinking” (Gehrmann 175). In these two novels, the use of orature is dictated by the nature of the stories told and their relation to memory, imaginary, and even magic realism.

Beloved is an elucidation of the myth of the ghost in the African American community. This myth is caused, according to the novel, by the sufferings and violent deaths, for the most part unaccounted for, of slaves during the transatlantic slavery. The wandering souls of unappeased dead were tormenting their slave relatives and are still tormenting the lives of the slave descents. When Sethe suggests Baby Suggs that they should move to another house to escape the baby ghost in 124 Blue Stone Road, the matriarch indicates the pointlessness of the idea:

> Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil (*Beloved* 5).

Likewise, Sembene’s story is concerned with the etiology of the tribal scars in Africa, which it sees as a sign of resistance against slavery. None of these two stories is accounted for by the official history and both were seemingly forgotten by the collective memory because of “the centuries long suppression of the Black generations, the suppression that alienated them from their past traditions, mythical beliefs, and strong connection with the world of nature” (Mumtaz 112).

In Sembene’s text, to unravel the mystery around the origin of the tribal scars, Saer’s friends consult, in vain, the official archives as well as the traditional repository of history. The embedding narrator recounts his frustration as follows: “Some of us went to neighboring villages and even farther afield to consult the elders and the griots, who are known as the ‘encyclopedias’ of the

region, in an endeavor the plumb the depth of this mystery, which seemed buried in the distant past […] I went to the French Institute and hunted around in books, but found nothing" ("Tribal Scars" 102). The reason why their endeavor comes to no avail suggests that this part of history is not recorded by the conqueror and is erased from the collective memory of the colonized. According to Suprajitno, during colonialism, "Blacks […] are tortured beyond endurance and therefore are forced to shut down part of their mind, or at least their memories in order to survive." (Suprajitno 61). As such, both Morrison and Sembene are calling for a remembering, or more precisely a re-membering, of oneself and of the community through the "healing of history" by means of imagination that acts as a medium to reconstruct subjectivity (Bhabha 17; Silva 1).

The two stories use narrators, characters and situations that trigger individual and collective memory or imaginary. That is the role played by Saer in "Tribal Scars" and Beloved in the eponymous novel. Saer's question in the beginning of "Tribal Scars" encourages his friends and, to a certain extent, the readers to want to find the origin of the practice of scarring. Through her obsession to be told stories of Sweet Home plantation, Beloved is considered as an embodiment of memory. The reconstruction of history is thus achieved through anamnesis that is a reversal of the state of amnesia.

> Anamnesis becomes a particular way of "resisting amnesia" on the part of colonized or formerly colonized peoples. […] In a context in which one's history has been written by the hegemonic dominant, anamnesis becomes a way of resisting the occlusions created by official history, of recovering the traces of another, submerged history in order to create a counter-memory. Because of the gaps existing in historical discourse due to the erasure of records, the dearth of archives, and the death of the witnesses, postcolonial writers often turn to fiction to reconstitute a past that will help them and the community/Nation heal in the present and move forward into the future (Donadey 111-112).

Anamnesis is reached through the return to the oral sources which can reconnect the communities with their past. Stylistically, the inscription of oral features in the written text, gives the novel a hybrid texture where the characteristics of the novel coexist with those of the oral form. *Beloved* is full

of oral characteristics like songs, stories, polyvocality, repetition, digression, hesitation and silences of characters which show the difficulties in telling such a humiliating and painful story. Indeed, Morrison confides in "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation" that orality is tremendously important in her writings. "There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature" (Morrison 199). The novel focuses on women and celebrates their role as custodians of history and black tradition. The story is mainly told by Sethe and her daughter Beloved, but the role played by Baby Suggs and the women of the community of Cincinnati is central. In fact, *Beloved* "is the reconstruction of the Afro American history, especially the regeneration of female identity through indigenous counter discourses" (Mumtaz 112). Through women, we learn the plight of slaves, especially female slaves. They also relate the experience of the first community of African slaves in America, struggling to save their names and languages faced with a dominant power that wanted to erase both. The fact that Sethe does not have a full recollection of her mother and cannot speak the language of her parents is a vivid proof of the alienation and erasure of part of black history and tradition.

In Beloved, a dominant feature of the narration is repetition caused by characters who do not want to narrate their painful memories. So, characters come back many times to a subject to add pieces and bits of information that they did not deliver in the first place. In fact, sidestepping and circling of the shameful narration is common to characters and reveals "the psychological effect of the personal and collective trauma of slavery" (Nidhin Johny, M.Phil. and Subin P. S. 221). A case in point is Sethe's recounting to Paul D. her killing of her daughter: "Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction, which might have helped his head" (*Beloved* 161). Sethe's attitude displays a shameful secret, and she is not alone in this tendency, as "repetition of the past reflects the difficulty the major characters have in talking about their experience of slavery. In every person, there is a concentrated set of specially charged memories that is inseparable from his/her self-identity" (Verma 53).

In the same vein, Sembene's stylistic choices are importantly and strategically invoking West African methods in which the story-teller claims a position of the only one, or the person who knows best the story and at the same time demands interaction from his audience. The narrator Saer, as the traditional storyteller, calls for his audience's attention and finds ways to revive their curiosity and excite their interest in the story he is about to deliver. The text reads:

> "'Tell us then. We give up', we all cried."
> "By now everyone had stopped sipping hot tea, they were all listening attentively."
> "We could find no answer. His historical survey had deepened the mystery for us."
> "'Go on, Saer, you tell us,' we said, more eager than ever to hear his story about of the origin of tribal scars." ("Tribal Scars" 103; 104)

In so doing, he opens the narration with a rhetorical question which puzzles the audience. He is able to discard all their answers to let them know that he alone knows the answer. The audience is interactive and pleadingly probes Saer into telling the answer. In fact, it is only when the audience gives up and acknowledges the storyteller, precisely Saer's, monopoly of the story or his mastering of the techniques of telling that the narration can start to unfold. Traditionally, this changeover is carried through the opening dialogue between the storyteller and his audience. In fact, when everyone concedes, Saer enjoys the position of a professional storyteller and shows his command of the story. He does not directly give the answer to his question, but constructs a plot structured as an etiological tale to explain the origin of scarring. He builds characters and puts them in an interactive situation in order to carry the story to the conclusion that tribal scarification is an act of resistance against slavery.

From the beginning, he makes it clear that his narration does not rely on written history, neither the one written by the colonial French nor the one written by the Arabs. In fact, Saer behaves like the traditional storyteller who would not begin his story unless he feels that the audience is ready and entirely receptive. He would probe the audience by asking some questions or even some riddles he would not puzzle out before ensuring that the audience

is craving to know the answer to the enigma. The first narrator relates how tired they were trying to do research to unravel the mystery in Saer's enigma, saying, "I went to the French Institute and hunted around in books, but found nothing." Saer adds to the mystery of tribal scarring, stating that it only exists in Africa and that it started only when the slave trade reaches its peak. This is apparent in the passage below:

> 'So we've got around to the Americas,' Saer began. 'Now, none of the authoritative writers of slavery and the slave trade has ever mentioned tribal scars, so far as I know. In South America, where fetishism and witchcraft as practiced by the slaves still survive to this day, no tribal scars have ever been seen. Neither do Negroes living in the Caribbean have them, nor in Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic nor anywhere else. So we come back to Black Africa before the slave trade, to the time of the Old Ghana Empire, the Mali and the Gao Empires and the cities and the kingdoms of Hausa, Bournu, Benin, Mossi and so on. Now not one of the travelers who visited those places and wrote about them mentions this practice of tribal scars. So where did it originate? ("Tribal Scars" 103-104).

Similar to what Sembene is doing in "Tribal Scars," Morrison often uses the interaction between narrator/storyteller and reader/audience also. This element among the features of the African-American oral culture is called call-and-response. According to Maggie Sale, "[c]all-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community" (41).

The way the technique of call-and-response functions in two stories is that both Sembene and Morrison use homodiegetic narrators which result in erasing the distance which separates the traditional, external narrator from the reader makes the two texts very engaging as the narrators and characters share the same diegesis. "Tribal Scars" features two character-narrators, the anonymous one who embeds Saer's Narration, introducing it and closing it. *Beloved* is narrated from Sethe's and Beloved's perspectives, or even, for some passages, from these two characters' subconscious. One of the particularities of this type of narrator, contrary to the external, distant and neutral position enjoyed by the modern historian, is the overwhelming

presence of the narrator in his/her lyrical narration, like the griot or the traditional story-teller.

Moreover, the visibility of the narrators gives the story a metatextual dimension since the narrators in the two novels call attention to themselves and their stories to give judgments and comment on the events. The fact that the author of *Beloved* dedicates the novel to the "*Sixty Million and more*" victims of slavery and uses some introductory formulas like the ones used to begin a tale prepares the audience to the story s/he is about to tell and sets what Hans Robert Jauss calls the horizon of expectation. In addition, at the closing line of *Beloved*, the narrator states about the story he/she has just finished to tell: "this is not a story to pass on." But what does s/he mean by this peremptory declaration, which is paradoxical as regard the essence of a story? Why is it not to be told? And why might one tell that which is not to be retold, to be passed on to future generations, audiences? Bhabha identifies the statement to an ironical device, saying the opposite of what one means in order to draw more attention: "Although Morrison insistently repeats at the close of *Beloved*, 'This is not a story to pass on,' she does this only in order to engrave the event in the deepest resources of our amnesia, of our unconsciousness" (Bhabha 18).

The interest of the structure of "Tribal Scars" resides in the mystery posed by Saer to his friends. Saer directs his mates away from their regular topics of conversation when he asks them about the origin of tribal scars in Africa. Saer's story relies on his seeming mastery of the subject, being able to refute his friends' postulations that are based on assumptions but also on some research. The way he dispels their responses triggers more interest and a burning desire to know the answer, a sentiment the narratees transmit to the actual readers of the text and which the narrator exploits to tell his story to an acquired, unquestioning audience.

Moreover, the dilemmas and conflicts in the characters' minds are more aptly revealed by fictive accounts rather than historical narratives. Sembene and Morrison describe the trauma and the fear of black communities faced with the unknown, seeing boats leaving with people who never come back. Both writers capture the anguish and the desperate blacks. In *Beloved*, the

eponymous character relates the Middle Passage with a peculiar language, describing the white men as men without skin and the dead as people who left their bodies behind. In "Tribal Scars", the uncertainties of the outcome of the lives of the deported caused rumors according to which the white men need the skin of the slaves to make their boots. This anguish causes desperate ways of avoiding slavery, such as suicide to which the slave hunters find countering methods like torturing to death the person next in line to the suicide and humiliating the people who failed in their attempts. In this respect Sethe's and Amoo's murdering and scarring of their kin is not interpreted from outside, but revealed from the very character's perspective to disclose the dictates as strategies to avoid enslavement. Likewise, Amoo's siding with Momutu to rescue his daughter sheds light on the dilemma facing the Africans compelled to side with the captors in order to escape being captured.

Conclusion

Studying how history is textualized and imaginary contextualized in the case of enslavement has allowed to understand how, by using their own historical perspectives and methods, African and Afro-decent writers produce a complete narrative of that horrendous past. Toni Morrison's dedication of her novel to the "Sixty Million and more" victims of slavery and Sembene Ousmane's indication that the African pervasive practice of tribal scarring is due to slavery are affirmations that this dreadful institution impacted more people than is actually conceded by the Euro-American official discourse. In fact, Sembene and Morrison are historians deeply engaged in postcolonial theories and methods. Since their enterprise is rooted in contradicting, correcting, or at least completing the official version of colonial history, the material dealt with and ways of narrating are subversive so far as they rely on the oral culture, dismissed as irrelevant by Western civilization with its tradition of writing. By exposing tragic and peculiar aspects of slavery, *Beloved* and "Tribal Scars" show the interplay between fact and fiction in the thematic as well as the stylistic dimensions. The blend of history and imaginary gives birth to a reliable story which restores the Africans' and Afro-descents' past, identity, and creativity.

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