
A Necessary Ethics: Bakhtin and Dialogic Identity Construction in Four Morrison Novels

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Abstract

Reading Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby*, *Paradise* and *A Mercy* through the lens of Bakhtin reveals identity construction as a dialogic endeavour. While this method may be necessary for character development, it serves the further purpose of making an ethical case for the self's responsibility to others. This paper considers key theoretical instruments, as enabled by Bakhtin, in relation to Morrison's treatment of naming and other character constructing elements. It is ultimately Morrison's construction of identity as dialogical which enables the argument that Morrison's fiction offers an ethics in the interest of the other. Writing about the marginalised, the abused and the voiceless reveals Morrison's oeuvre is unmistakably an ongoing engagement with the injustice of slavery and its political, economic, social and psychological aftermath. The relevance of this article lies in its analysis of Morrison's fiction as an antidote which challenges the self's "self-interest", which is at the heart of injustice. This study's primary contribution is in articulating Morrison's portrayal of the self's identity construction as an inescapable dialogism that forms the foundation to a philosophy that promotes greater humaneness, given the other is not separate from the self, but in fact, integral to the self.

Keywords: Morrison, Bakhtin, identity construction, ethics, justice, responsibility

Introduction

This article seeks to demonstrate the ethical value of Morrison's fictional identity constructions, which we have argued is built on an interdependent construction between the self and others in line with a Bakhtinian dialogism. My contention is that Morrison's novels build a case comparable to the philosophy of Bakhtin, which holds that human identity is constructed through a specific relationship of dependence on and also responsibility for others.

An overview of key aspects in Bakhtin's theory will be covered to set the stage for analysis of the role and function of naming in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Paradise* (1997) and *A Mercy* (2008).

Writing about the marginalised, the abused and the voiceless reveals Morrison's oeuvre is unmistakably an ongoing engagement with the injustice of slavery and its political, economic, social and psychological aftermath. The relevance of this article lies in its analysis of Morrison's fiction as an antidote which challenges the self's other-rejecting self-interest, which is at the heart of injustice. The challenge to identity lies specifically in Morrison's portrayal of identity as interdependent and dialogic.

This study's primary contribution is in articulating Morrison's portrayal of the self's identity construction which forms the foundation for a philosophy that promotes greater humaneness.

Bakhtinian theory

Bakhtin argues that all speakers and listeners communicate dialogically and so form their identities dialogically or reflexively. His use of the concept of the “other” is therefore simple; he employs the denotative meaning which simply refers to any and all other people.

Bakhtin’s dialogism

Holquist sums up what he uneasily refers to as “Bakhtin’s philosophy” as “a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge; more particularly, it is one of several modern epistemologies that seeks to grasp human behaviour through the use humans make of language” (Holquist 1990: 13). Bakhtin demonstrates the dialogic concept of language as fundamental to identity. Since we analyse the language in Morrison’s novels to arrive at her unarticulated philosophy concerning the identity of the self, the value of Bakhtin’s theory for this study is its provision of an explicit link between language and identity with his argument that “self” is fundamentally a relation. In fact, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness (Holquist 1990: 18). Thus, dialogue as a clearly discernible relation between two different entities can help us understand the dialogic self.

Bakhtin highlights that our language is not our own when he considers everyday speech: “of all words uttered...no less than half belong to someone else” (Bakhtin 1981: 339). His observation is that we constantly use the speech of others through already established discourse that is connected to a past, which includes, for example, the religious, political and moral authoritative words of adults, teachers and others which invade our language at every turn (Bakhtin 1981: 342; Messent 1998: 232). Our expressions are therefore neither unique nor novel; they are always derived from others or in response to other interlocutors.

The following terms from Bakhtin assisted me to build the case for the self’s identity as constructed dialogically with others. These terms are: “addressivity”, “dialogism”, “answerability”, “polyphony” and “heteroglossia”. In discussing Bakhtin’s theory, the terms “reflexive” and “reciprocal” are also occasionally used to expand the discussion. These dynamics are found in the language used by characters in speech and thought, especially as portrayed by inner dialogue and motivations; changing concepts of the self and others were thus traced from a Bakhtinian perspective.

An utterance is marked by what Bakhtin (1986: 95) terms “addressivity” and “answerability”. This means that utterance is always addressed to someone and anticipates a response and/or answer. Chains or strings of utterances are therefore fundamentally dialogic and historically contingent, i.e. positioned within, and inseparable from a community, a history and a place.

Any understanding of live speech, or live utterance, is inherently responsive in that the listener agrees or disagrees, adds to or responds to it in some or other form. Bakhtin further argues, “the listener becomes the speaker” (Bakhtin 1984: 68). Speakers are oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding of agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth (Bakhtin 1984: 69).

It is Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism and consciousness which provide the primary model for his approach. According to Bakhtin, each social group speaks in its own “social dialect” – possesses its own unique language – expressing shared values, perspectives, ideology and norms. These social dialects become the “languages” of heteroglossia “intersect[ing] with each other in many different ways...As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically” (Bakhtin 1981: 291-292).

According to the Bakhtin Reader, “addressivity” refers to:

...my unavoidable state as a human being; as such I have ‘no alibi for my existence’, I must engage in a constant dialogue with the world as it is given to me; only in this

way can I give my own life meaning and value. In *Author and Hero*, Bakhtin suggests that only through such a dialogue can I hope to complete myself in what he calls the 'absolute future of meaning'. As a consciousness addressed by the world beyond my borders I must answer, for I have the responsibility to do so. My answer, furthermore, will always have an 'addressee'. (1994: 245)

Addressivity, as can be seen from this explanation, is moreover another form of unavoidable responsibility following from one's ability to respond. Speaking into a vacuum is thus not possible. The self's choice of language is firstly influenced and enabled by others, given the historical nature of language, and secondly, in the present, others influence the choice of language which the self resorts to. Hence, one's register differs depending on one's interlocutor: is it a peer, someone in authority, a sports acquaintance, a political opponent, and so forth? In this sense, our language is not solely dependent on our choice of vocabulary and setting – for we are influenced pre-articulate by what we intend to communicate and, more importantly, by the feedback we expect to receive. Going beyond this immediate influence of addressivity is the "always-already" nature of language as belonging to a community of language users – as compared to it being simply novel creations by a speaker. A further important characteristic of language, according to Bakhtin, is "polyphony".

The principle of "polyphony" literally means multiple voices. Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky's work as containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has their own perspective, own validity and own narrative weight within these novels. The author does not place his own narrative voice between the character and the reader, but rather allows characters to shock and subvert (Robinson 2011). It is thus as if the books were written by multiple characters, not from a single author's standpoint (Bakhtin 1986: 112). Instead of a single objective world, held together by the author's voice, there is a plurality of consciousnesses, each with its own world. The reader does not see a single reality presented by the author, but rather how reality appears to each character (Robinson 2011).

"...the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances. This experience can be characterised to some degree as the process of *assimilation* – more or less creative – of others' words" (Bakhtin 1986: 89). Our speech is thus filled with the words of others, with varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of "our-own-ness". For Bakhtin "the immense, boundless world of others' words constitutes a primary fact of human consciousness and human life" (Bakhtin 1986: 143).

The argument extracted from Bakhtin's theory is captured in the following extract from the Introduction to *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*:

We come into consciousness speaking a language already permeated with many voices – a social, not a private language. From the beginning, we are 'polyglot', already in process of mastering a variety of social dialects derived from parents, clan, class, religion, country. We grow in consciousness by taking in more voices as 'authoritatively persuasive' and then by learning which to accept as 'internally persuasive'. Finally we achieve...a kind of individuality, but it is never a private or autonomous individuality in the Western sense;...we always speak a chorus of languages...each of us is a 'we' not an 'I'. Polyphony, the miracle of our 'dialogical' lives together, is thus both a fact of life and, in its higher reaches, a value to be pursued endlessly (Bakhtin 1984: xxi).

Since identity is constructed as a result of the aforementioned principles and via the influence of various social dialects, so the construction of characters is identified via the impact of various others. The concept of "others" will be unpacked in the analysis of Morrison's novels. All four novels are studied in relation to Bakhtin's terms with a focus on specific characters in

each novel, Morrison's employment of naming, and a number of random elements which invite dialogic analysis.

Naming is a reflection of both the named and the namer

In this paper "naming" functions to indicate a name or word used to identify a specific person who is distinct from others. A simple interrogation of the notions "to name", "the named" and "the namer" reveals how bound the identities of the self and others are.

Citing Bakhtin, Gerrig and Banaji demonstrate how simple pronouns and common nouns indicate the double nature of names in identity construction as a general function of language (Gerrig and Banaji 1991: 175). This relational aspect of language is evinced in pronouns such as "our", "yours", "theirs" and in nouns such as "daughter". These words automatically stand in relation to others; such as "mine" stands in relation to "your" or "their", and "daughter", "son" or "child" in relation to "mother", "father" or "parent". The one word exists because the other does and cannot not exist if the other does not. The meaning of these words automatically entails those words which they stand in direct or formative relationships with. While pronouns visibly exhibit this feature of naming, the principle is revealed even in other cases of naming. Ultimately, a name discloses information about both the namer and the named – whether directly or indirectly.

According to Gerrig and Banaji the notion of "self-identity" is problematised by the implications of what happens when one entity names another. They are of the opinion that "self-identities" are cognitive structures which involve more than a list of beliefs the self has about itself (Gerrig and Banaji 1991: 175). On the one hand this list of beliefs entails the roles one assumes with respect to other individuals, and it also serves to generate behavioural choices (Gerrig and Banaji 1991: 175).

This paper ultimately argues that Morrison uses identity construction – as can be demonstrated through the mechanism of naming, amongst others – to challenge injustice.

Let us now consider Morrison's employment of naming in *The Bluest Eye*.

Naming as dialogical identity construction in *The Bluest Eye*

Davis' (1982: 323) notion that naming functions as a two-sided identity construction supports the argument for dialogical construction of identity in Morrison's fiction.

Pauline Breedlove grows up thinking her family does not value her because they have not treated her with consideration for her little idiosyncrasies. More hurtful than the fact that nobody teases her, she, of all the children, has no nickname (Morrison 1999: 86). Harris (1994) notes that nicknames for African Americans function as markers of individuality. Through the nickname, the community recognises and makes a place for a person's distinctive nature (Eichelberger 1999: 72). It is with disbelief that Claudia hears the little white girl calling Mrs Breedlove "Polly", when even her own children and husband call her Mrs Breedlove. Pauline herself welcomes the nickname, because there she feels that special sense of recognition she had always craved for (Morrison 1999: 84). In response to this recognition, believed to be portrayed through a nickname for her, Pauline becomes kind and caring, "with honey in her voice" at the Fishers (Morrison 1999: 85).

Other forms of dialogic identity construction in *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye teems with examples of the subject's identity directly constructed in relation to the words or actions of others.

Fulton (1997: 32) argues that the crucial difference which enables Claudia to challenge white ideological values while Pecola is systematically destroyed by them is the degree of stability and self-love fostered within each of their home environments. Claudia experiences not only her mother's strength and love but also her father's love and her sister's companionship which

enforce the worldview that Claudia is not alone and is part of a stronger group. The MacTeer parents physically attack Mr Henry for having inappropriately touched Claudia's sister, Frieda (Morrison 1999: 77). As an adult, Claudia remembers "love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup" and hands that would put the covers back over her when she kicked them off at night which makes her realise there was, "somebody with hands who [did] not want her to die" (Morrison 1999: 7). There is also Frieda's response to Claudia's fears, "So what? We're together. We'll run if he does anything at us" (Morrison 1999: 59). These are amongst many examples which inform the characters of the two MacTeer sisters. In contrast, there is no "us" to feed off and strengthen Pecola.

Pecola's parents have a strange symbiotic relationship where the one's sense of identity lies in the weakness or weakening of the other. Mrs Breedlove considers her life dim and unrecalled unless punctuated by quarrels and physical fights with her husband, Cholly. For her "they relieved the tiresomeness of poverty, gave grandeur to the dead rooms" and "to deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life" (Morrison 1999: 31). It is not only that Mrs Breedlove would never have forgiven Jesus if Cholly stopped drinking, the fact is she needs his sins desperately since her life has more purpose the lower he sinks (Morrison 1999: 31). Who she is and how she gives meaning to her existence depend on Cholly remaining a "no-account" man who she is called upon by God to punish (Morrison 1999: 31). Furthermore, for Pauline, their fights define her as virtuous (Eichelberger 1999: 83).

Cholly needs Pauline as much as she needs him, inasmuch as she defines herself in contrast to him. He displaces on to her what he cannot face in himself. She comes to represent "one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt" and he violently displaces "the sum of his inarticulate fury and aborted desires" onto her (Morrison 1999: 31). While Cholly needs Pauline to objectify his failure (Furman 2014: 17), she needs him for a positive view of herself. Cholly's treatment of his wife reminds the reader of his choice to hate Darlene who witnessed his emasculation and inability to protect her against the flashlight of the white men since hating them would have destroyed his sense of self. Thus, by hating Pauline, he believes he can "leave himself intact" (Morrison 1999: 31).

Naming as dialogical identity construction in *Tar Baby*

Ryan (1997), Page (1995), and Gerrig and Banaji (1991) all identify the telling nature of the naming which takes place in *Tar Baby*. For Gerrig and Banaji (1991: 188-189), names function as concepts of cognition and are indicative of a speaker's internal thoughts. We have considered the dialogical relation between the person named and the person naming, since the point we wish to illustrate here is what naming the other tells us about the self's perception of both the other, and also itself – even though this consideration is hidden in the name used for the other.

Ondine, Jadine and Sydney reveal their sense of superiority to the island people through the generic names they bestow on them, calling all the female help "Mary", and thinking of them in terms of "a Mary", "another Mary" and "them Marys." They justify this position of calling these different women "Mary" because they believe they could never be wrong, since "all the black women who had been baptised on the island had Mary among her names" (Morrison 1997b: 38). In similar reductionist manner, "Yardman" is also not the name of the male help they use around the house; his name is Gideon (Morrison 1997b: 37, 39, 114).

When Son gives Valerian his birth name, Valerian responds with, "Well, good morning, Willie. Sleep well?" (Morrison 1997b: 146). Valerian, the wealthy white man immediately coins an uninvited diminutive, "Willie", to refer to the black intruder (Gerrig and Banaji 1991: 174). As the book progresses, the name Willie is only used by the white characters (Morrison 1997b: 186). Once again, this name not only speaks to the one named, but also tells of those who give and use the name. The use of the diminutive automatically places Valerian and Margaret in a more authoritative and powerful position than William.

At times the use of the pronoun “our” invites or avoids conflict. When Ondine questions Sydney's efforts to patrol the house, he challenges her, “Whose side you on?” (Morrison 1997b: 100). Ondine reassures him: “Your side, naturally. Our side.” The shift from “your” to “our” quickly closes the potential gap between his side and hers. Page, however, points out that the use of “our” is problematic throughout the novel, as the question of racial unity conflicts with familial and personal loyalties, and the characters wrongly assume that others must be either on their side or against them (Page 1995: 121). When Jadine and Son discuss his “stealing”, Jadine says, “It depends on what you want from us” (Morrison 1997b:118), thereby placing herself on the side of the household. Son is disturbed by this allegiance, taking it as a racial betrayal by Jadine (Page 1995: 121). He asks her, “Us? You call yourself us?” But for Jadine, the reasoning is simple and she responds with, “Of course. I live here” (Morrison 1997b: 118). Son, on the other hand, sees Jadine as the niece of African American servants who should therefore not be identifying herself with the white, capitalist employer.

Other forms of dialogic constructions in *Tar Baby*

Tar Baby reaches its climax on Christmas Eve when the servant Ondine blurts out the secret she has kept for years, that her boss's wife, Margaret, had abused their son as a child. Ondine blurts out, “You cut him up. You cut your baby up. Made him bleed for you. For fun you did it. Made him scream, you, you freak” (Morrison 1997b: 209). A week after this public disclosure, Margaret challenges Ondine's view of herself in relation to the past. Margaret tells Ondine that she knew Ondine had known about what she had done to Michael; she adds that while Ondine may have told of it for the love she had for Michael, she also did it because she hated her – Margaret. Ondine denies this interpretation, but Margaret's argument seems sound, “...and you felt good hating me, didn't you? I could be the mean white lady and you could be the good coloured one” (Morrison 1997b: 242). Margaret's argument demonstrates that Ondine's self-image is informed by judging herself as being superior to Margaret.

The second person whose identity construction is closely tied to the facts surrounding Ondine's revelation is Valerian, the great benefactor in the novel. Upon learning of Michael's abuse, Valerian retrospectively recognises he has not been who he thought he was. He thought he was in control, that he had shaped and managed the world around him well, but this was clearly not so. Instead, he discovers he has never been in control and that through his self-absorption he has been lying to himself. Now, many years after the fact, that stance has consequences of unimaginable magnitude.

As Morrison explains, “[Valerian] had preoccupied himself with the construction of the world and its inhabitants according to (t)his imagined message. But he had chosen not to know the real message that his son had mailed to him from underneath the sink” (1997b: 236) as he sang la la la la, because he could not speak or cry about what was happening to him (Morrison 1997b: 245). Valerian recognises he never knew his wife or his son and that there is something so foul and revolting in this crime of his that it paralyses him. He acknowledges he “had not known because he had not taken that trouble to know. He was satisfied with what he did know. Knowing more was inconvenient and frightening” (Morrison 1997b: 244-245). When he finally discovers the reason for the song, it means his life has in fact been a lie since it is not based on reality but on a selective vision, which meant a selective, narrow, convenient and ultimately selfish vision, which is a true reflection of his character.

Valerian's wilful blindness/ignorance thus eventually reveals himself to always have been what he could not have imaged himself to be. If his perceptions of Michael are so blind, then his views of everyone, including himself, are no longer reliable. The discovery of his son's pain, his wife's abuse and his own unwillingness to have noticed it cause Valerian to become a stuttering and defeated old man overnight.

Naming as dialogical identity construction in *Paradise*

Prior to the massacre in the novel *Paradise*, the men of Ruby call the doomed women of the Convent Jezebels and bodacious Eves. According to Christiansë (2013: 164), Morrison mines the history of naming women by such names and the interplay between them to great effect. Jezebel features in the Bible as a woman and symbol of corruption and destruction. Associations extending from the name Jezebel remind the informed reader of the Whore of Babylon in Revelation, the mother of harlots and abominations, who tempts men, who heeds other gods and offers forbidden food to men (Christiansë 2013: 167-168). Jezebel and her actions remind one of the crime committed by the first mother, the first temptress, namely Eve who not only consumed forbidden food, but tempted man to do the same, which led to their expulsion from paradise (Christiansë 2013: 168). Christiansë emphasises that calling the Convent women by these names is more than simply insulting. With reference to Judith Butler, Christiansë contends “the act of naming can be violently constitutive” (Christiansë 2013: 168). The women are no longer like Jezebel or Eve – they *are* Jezebel and they *are* Eve – and thus already guilty of what their namesakes are accused (Christiansë 2013: 168).

A second example of totalising others through naming can be found in Steward’s reference to Ruby’s youths, whom he not only sees as rebellious but calls “little illegal niggers” who have “no home training” and who “need to be in jail” (Morrison 1997a: 206). When speaking to them regarding the words of the Oven, he threatens them with the words, “Listen here...if you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hoodeye snake” (Morrison 1997a: 87). Just as it is justified to protect yourself against a snake by blowing its head off, so too anyone called a “hoodeye snake” is told they deserve the treatment they will get if they continue with behaviour viewed as in line with such a snake.

Other forms of dialogic construction in *Paradise*

In the history of the United States of America, Reconstruction followed the end of the Civil War, but this did not last long. After the overthrow of the Reconstruction governments, numerous all-black towns were eventually established. The founding families in *Paradise* have responded to headlines inviting them to join such towns.

While they see themselves as not only smart, strong and more than prepared they are rejected by self-supporting negroes from Fairly. One of the men in the party says, “Us free like them; was slave like them. What for is this difference?” (Morrison 1997a: 14). While they would have expected opposition between rich and poor, slave and freeman, and sometimes black and white, they experience the shocking division between light- and dark-skinned blacks, which leaves them struck to the core and immediately hardened towards light-skinned blacks (Slaughter 2000: 294). Declared unworthy by these fair-skinned coloured men who have disallowed them, the dark-skinned founders of Haven, and later Ruby, establish “the blood rule” which holds their residents hostage to skin colour (Grewal 2013: 43) by permanently rejecting and expelling these others from their lives.

The Fairly rejection is significant for the identity consciousness of the 8-rock men. They ignore the fact that they are unable to meet the minimum requirement for payment. Deeper analysis reveals it is truly less the skin colour difference which causes their rejection as it is the financial difference; and the impact of the financial difference leads to their rejection and consequently the shame of seeing their pregnant wives, sisters and daughters refused shelter which has “rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones” (Morrison 1997a: 95).

The symbolism of their lack of money directly reflects on themselves as being inadequate. It is this failed self which threatens to crack their bones (Morrison 1997a: 95). As a survival mechanism the 8-rocks choose to blame their rejection on the racism of Fairly and not on their own inability to live up to the image of themselves as able, hardworking providers. This experience is formative for them to forge their group identity by consolidating their own sense

of racial superiority from that point forth (Brooks-Bouson 2000: 197). From there onwards they would distinguish themselves and in turn reject those not as dark skinned (and thus pure) as themselves; thus simply reversing the (perceived) racism they had suffered.

While other examples of individual identity construction can be found in *Paradise*, one particular example portrays the dialogical impact succinctly. After many years in Detroit, Anna returns to the isolated community of Ruby wearing an Afro. Other than a popular hairstyle in the 1970s, Anna does not intend for it to be a statement, but it nonetheless solicits diverse and intense reactions. Her hair speaks of another world. The young people are eager to embrace this world and therefore admire her hair. Reverend Pulliam's displeasure with the ideas she is silently sowing in town finds expression in a whole sermon preached on the subject (Morrison 1997a: 119). The judgement of Anna's hair, in fact, says much less about her hair than it functions for Morrison to construct his characters' identities. The last novel to be considered is Morrison's 2008 novel, *A Mercy*.

Naming as dialogical identity construction in *A Mercy*

The reader never learns what Florens' mother is named. She is only referred to as "a *minha mãe*", which means "my mother" in Portuguese. For ease of reference she will be referred to as "Mãe" here. This can be argued to be a stylistic move on Morrison's part where Mãe's namelessness is indicative of the stripping away of her identity since being sold into slavery. Just as Florens and her mother are never afforded an opportunity to communicate again, to indicate the reality of slave families torn apart never to have any contact with each other again, so too Morrison portrays the reality of people having become nameless or identity-less in this New World in relation to the white slave-holding population. Morrison's depiction of the slave population in calling them "soulless animals" further justifies their treatment as amoral and valueless creatures (Morrison 2009: 164).

A second reading, however, reveals that forasmuch as Florens and her mother are permanently separated with the unlikelihood of ever meeting again, the very fact that her character is only known as "mother" connects them permanently, since "my mother" is the only name Mãe is identified by. The reciprocity of this naming and the identity construction thereby brought about lies in the fact that the name "mother" is defined as a woman who has a child. Mother and child are two identities inextricably linked, and it is impossible to have the one without the other.

In essence, this otherwise nameless person functions to portray volumes about the nameless millions of Africans and later African Americans who were slaves in the United States of America. The juxtaposition of this mother as a character capable of virtues as complex as foresight and sacrifice contrasts with the slaveholder who deems and treats her as a soulless animal and serve not only to disprove the slaveholder's assessment of the slave, but to reveal soullessness on the part of the slaveholder.

Other forms of dialogical constructions of identity in *A Mercy*

Recognising Morrison's treatment of the role of community in identity construction is important in understanding her overall agenda.

Morrison speaks through Lina about the necessary connections to a group. Babb (2011) points out that the Vaark farm is laid to waste because of a theme Morrison often addresses: an adherence to egocentric individualism, isolation and removal from community (158). Lina observes of the Vaarks: "Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and consolation of the clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed...Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life that way" (Morrison 2009: 56). Dealing with matters such as sickness and death quickly signify that it would be in the self's interest to be connected to a group. Connection to a group acknowledges the interdependence necessary for survival –

especially in a world as socially and environmentally untamed as the early seventeenth century.

The case of Lina demonstrates the value of community best because Lina not only draws on community to help her survive but also to shape her own identity.

Lina's dialogic identity construction

In Lister's (2009: 118) view, Lina is one of the most self-defining characters in *A Mercy* because she has a strong sense of heritage. After the "death of the world" when her village is destroyed by pox and fire, Lina is able to endure the "solitude, regret and fury" by a self-invention which pieces together recollections from her past mixed with European medicine and other useful things (Morrison 2009: 46).

Another factor which fortifies Lina is her decision to become part of an alternative community by becoming "one more thing that moved in the natural world; she cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (Morrison 2009: 46-47). Lina thus relies on her social community and the community of the natural world to shape her new survivalist identity. It may be for this reason that she recognises the danger of the Vaark household's isolated existence.

Furthermore, comparing Lina's synthesised belief system to "the syncretism of what would become United States culture" Babb contends that "*A Mercy* casts hybridity not as a dangerous negative but as American fact" (Babb 2011: 158). One could similarly argue that identity is similarly always already a kind of hybridity. Another character whose strong sense of heritage allows her to survive is Florens' mother.

Mãe's dialogic construction

Despite suffering the traumas of captivity, the Middle Passage, enslavement and sexual exploitation, Mãe knows a time when she was a woman of her clan and remembers what it was like to belong to a nation of her own. This memory encompasses a complete world of experiences and relations which she can compare with her new existence as a chattel. On a slave block in Barbados, Mãe discovers that she "was not a person from her country, nor from her family". She learns she is, "...negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song – all of it cooked together in the colour of [her] skin" (Morrison 2009: 163).

Mãe is, nonetheless, capacitated with sufficient resilience because of her heritage. Her broader range of experiences enables her to contextualise her situation and define her own worth in contrast to the role given her in the New World economy (Rice Bellamy 2013: 21).

Florens's dialogic construction

In contrast to Lina and Mãe, Florens never has the benefit of existing in a society or clan which values her as a person with a meaningful role and a place of belonging. Her life begins in enslavement and the defining moments of her childhood and youth are scenes of rejection and abandonment (Rice Bellamy 2013: 21). Conner (2013: 162) highlights that Florens cannot yet possess herself for she can only feel her own worth if she is possessed by another.

Sorrow's dialogic construction

Another character whose life is profoundly influenced by an "other" is that of Sorrow. Though the details of her life are unclear, it is certain that she has endured a life of trauma, especially one of being taken advantage of by men. As a coping mechanism she had invented Twin, her make-believe double, an identical self whose face matches hers exactly (Morrison 2009: 114, 124). Yet when Sorrow becomes a mother, the reader is told, "Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her" (Morrison 2009: 132). First it is Twin who stabilises her identity and enables her to cope with life. Thereafter it is her child who grounds her and informs her actions and rewritten identity (Morrison 2009: 132).

Jacob's dialogic construction

Jacob partially informs his good sense of himself by how he treats animals and orphans. His ability to see the plight of others is however only partial.

Jacob's view of himself as just and hardworking is grounded in what Christiansë calls an anthropocentrism which finds expression in his attitude toward animals. Drawing on theories by Derrida and Rousseau, Christiansë claims Jacob considers his treatment of animals as conduits through which he distinguishes himself as human (Christiansë 2013: 208).

Conclusion

We have investigated Morrison's construction of identities and found that her dialogical constructions are numerous. It will be noted that the dialogical relationship is not limited to a two-party structure. It is for this reason that Bakhtin's theory includes notions such as addressivity, polyphony and heteroglossia to demonstrate the multiplicity of influences of others on the self which inform the subject's identity.

Examples of these dialogic relationships include, amongst others, the relationship between Pecola and her community (*The Bluest Eye*); Ondine as good because of Margaret's failure as a mother and Jadine as unorphaned because of Son's love (*Tar Baby*); the Old Fathers and the New Fathers who determined their manhood by their capacity to protect their women and children (*Paradise*); and Florens identifying herself as wild in response to her mother and her lover's rejection (*A Mercy*).

Further examples of the dialogic include multiple narrative voices found in the novels. No one voice is privileged and therefore no one perspective functions to silence others. There are no sole protagonists since multiple threads and storylines inform the narratives. The surplus of perspectives further demonstrates Morrison's polyphonic writing extending beyond the limitedness of totalising language or totalising of the other. This element of her style enables Morrison to portray the relationships between self and the other as dynamic and therefore informed by the dialogic.

One finds an ethics of responsibility as central in Morrison's texts, by which her fiction systematically destabilises the various forms of difference which function to promote inhumanity towards not only African Americans but all others (Fultz 2003: 110). In concurring with Fultz, we can conclude that Morrison's fiction intends to "reshape our consciousness and excite our moral sensibilities" (Fultz 2003: 110). It is these portrayals of "response-ability" and answerability which are exposed in simple acts of naming and the examples of the other as discussed above.

Morrison's fiction does much more than portray identity as dialogically constructed. It does more than merely reveal the humanity of the other through the self-discovering its own reflection in and likeness to the other. By constructing identity dialogically, Morrison presents a philosophy of humanness in which the other is to be considered as not only like, but integral to the self – and recognising that however the other is treated, ultimately becomes a direct or indirect treatment of the self. Such acknowledgement should inform the self's behaviour towards the other and enable an ethics that gives rise to human well-being and the undoing of injustice.

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