"Thought there'd be huckleberries": Intertextual Game between Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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In an essay titled "Black Matter(s)," Toni Morrison challenges centuries-long Eurocentric notions of literary criticism which hold that "traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed by, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year old presence of first Africans and then African Americans in the United States" (256). In the course of her examination of the conspicuous absence in the American canon of what she calls Africanism, i.e. "the denotative and connotative blackness African peoples have come to signify" (256), Morrison also discusses at some length Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). She argues that while the critique of class and race is present in Twain's novel, it is "disguised or enhanced through a combination of humor, adventure, and the naive" (265). In the character of Huck Finn, Twain "inscribes the critique of slavery and the pretensions of the would-be middle class" (266), but he characteristically downplays the significance of Jim's role in the moral development of Huck. Morrison's main objection to the novel is that it ignores "that there is no way, given the confines of the novel, for Huck to mature into a moral human being in America without Jim [...]" (266). While in "Black Matter(s)" Morrison addresses Twain's novel from the position of a literary critic, this is not her first engagement with that text. In a much more exciting manner, in several passages of *Beloved*, her highly acclaimed novel first published in 1987, she encoded a fascinating dialogue with the 19th-century text. What I aim to do demonstrate is how the intricate web of allusions to *The*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is constructed in *Beloved* and what Morrison's aim might have been with engaging in this exciting literary game.

The answers to the mandatory questions of any intertextual analysis, whether the author of the later text was aware of the earlier one and whether he or she consciously engaged the reader in the intertextual game, should be obvious in this case. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the best-known novels of the 19th century and a perfect example of the "dead-white-male" canon, known to millions of people all around the world. Throughout her teaching career, Morrison must have read and taught the novel on countless occasions. Considered in the light of her essay quoted above, we should have little doubt that Morrison's rewriting in *Beloved* of several key passages of Twain's novel is a conscious, if subtle, literary maneuver on her part.

The intertextuality between Twain's and Morrison's novel was pointed out, among others, by Richard C. Moreland in his article "'He Wants to Put His Story Next to Hers': Putting Twain's Story Next to Hers in Morrison's *Beloved*." In his article, Moreland argues that the juxtaposition of the two novels reveals the forces that hinder working toward social aggregation across barriers of race and culture. Morrison, as Moreland observes, works through the conflicts and fears that Twain only hinted at in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as she pays closer attention to the influence of slavery and racism on the lives of her characters. Furthermore, the African American female perspective of *Beloved* (both Morrison's and Sethe's) opens up dimensions inconceivable in the white male centered microcosm of Twain's novel.

Sylvia Mayer also calls attention to the importance of many conspicuous parallels between the two texts, such as the fact that the white owner of the restaurant Sethe works in is called Sawyer, and that he might be seen as "one version of Tom Sawyer grown up," or the scene when on her way home from work Sethe passes a store "significantly called Phelps', and recalls her anger at the owner's discriminatory practices when serving black customers" (341–42). At the heart of the intertextual play, however, is the scene of Sethe's escape from Sweet Home as assisted by the "whitegirl," Amy Denver. This episode, related in two sessions of Sethe's "rememoryings" in *Beloved* (31–35; 76–85), is paralleled and contrasted with the escape of Jim in Twain's novel, facilitated by Huck Finn himself. The similarities between the two scenes

are striking, but the differences, as will be demonstrated, are perhaps even more revealing.

The most obvious parallel is inherent in the setting: both novels are set in the antebellum United States, divided into free and slaveholding states. This division and the borderline between free and slave territories plays a significant role in both works, inasmuch as the enslaved black characters attempt to escape into free states. Furthermore, in both novels, it is a river (the Mississippi in Twain's novel, and the Ohio in Morrison's) that serves as a borderline, and at the same time as a gateway, between the two worlds. Sethe and Jim also share, at least partially, their motivation to run. He is treated by Miss Watson "pooty rough" and is afraid of being sold "down to Orleans" (242), and thus separated from his family. Importantly, Morrison is much more specific about the treatment Sethe received at "Sweet Home": she is treated as a breeding animal, brutally tortured and humiliated by her masters. Her primary motivation for the escape, however, just like Jim's, is to be reunited with her family.

The escapes of the two principal black characters are facilitated by two young whites: Huck Finn and Amy Denver. Both of them are in their teens and both of them are social misfits of sorts on the run. Huck is running from his father as well as from civilization, while Amy's motivation to escape is somewhat similar to Sethe's: she is illegally kept working in her mother's place, who was an indentured servant and died before serving out her term. While Amy's own years spent in servitude bordering on slavery clearly constitute an experience that aligns her with Sethe, Morrison makes it clear that Sethe's life was far more unbearable. This is something that even Amy admits when, upon seeing the scars on Sethe's back resembling a chokecherry tree, she compares Sethe's fate to her own: "I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. [...] Whoever planted that tree beat Mr. Buddy [Amy's former master] by a mile. Glad I ain't you" (79). The similarities between Huck Finn and Amy Denver are further emphasized in their comparable attitudes to the institution of slavery, as well as toward the individual runaway slaves they encounter in their respective stories. As Sylvia Mayer pointed out, despite the fact that Amy, just like Huck, is "strongly affected by the perverted moral codes of the slaveholding society in which she has grown up [...] she is able to transcend this influence and act on pure moral impulse" (339).

That the environment they grew up in evidently inculcated Huck and Amy with racist views is reflected in their language as well as their

general notions on African Americans. Unable to persuade Jim that the French speak an altogether different language, Huck does not hesitate to declare generalizingly: "I see it warn't no use wasting words—you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (283). Amy, too, uses the "n"-word freely and nonchalantly, and is just as inclined to jump to easy conclusions as a result of her racial prejudice, saying "You must of did something" (80). Hardly knowing anything of Sethe, she immediately sees her against the framework of her racially biased views: "We got an old nigger girl come by our place. She don't know nothing. [...] She don't know nothing, just like you. You don't know a thing. End up dead, that's what. Not me" (80).

In the course of the encounter and interaction between the two pairs of white and black characters, the initial attitudes of the whites change. In Amy's case this transformation seems to have taken place much faster and more spontaneously, while for Huck to overcome the moral code of the slaveholding society and to determine that he would rather go to hell than betray Jim took a considerably longer time. The reasons for this difference can best be understood if the two encounters and the development of the black-white relationship are examined in greater detail in the two novels.

Huck Finn's slow and gradual moral development and maturation in Twain's novel can best be measured in his relationship to Jim. In the first scene the two characters are depicted together (Chapter 2), Huck and his gang are playing a practical trick on Jim, who believes that he has been bewitched (198–99). This early scene foreshadows the later tricks Huck will play on Jim: the rattlesnake joke of Chapter 10 and the trash scene of Chapter 15. Huck's gradual development into a more responsible moral person can easily be charted by examining his behavior after these pranks. He shows no trace of remorse after the first trick; the narrator-protagonist Huck only ridicules Jim for his superstitiousness. When after Huck's next practical joke with the rattlesnake Jim falls sick for four days, Huck admits, if only to himself, his own irresponsibility and calls himself a fool (252–53). Huck's last trick on Jim comes when, after the fog causes them to "miss their exit" at Cairo and thereby Jim's chance for freedom, Huck tells Jim that they have never been separated and all that Jim believes happened was only a dream. Asked to interpret the trash all over the raft, Jim realizes that Huck was playing yet another trick on him and tells Huck: "all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts

dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (290, italics in the original). Jim's sadly reprimanding words make Huck realize for the first time the strength of the emotional tie formed between Jim and himself, and he repentantly apologizes to Jim and resolves to put an end to the tricks.

Initially Huck is only passively facilitating Jim's escape by promising not to reveal his whereabouts. For the first time here, he is torn between two commitments: his word of honor not to tell on him and the code of ethics of the Southern white society. "People would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don't make no difference" (241), Huck asserts. When leaving the island in fear of being detected, however, Huck becomes an active agent in Jim's escape. "Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after *us*!" (263, emphasis added), thus awakes Huck the sleeping Jim. They are really only after Jim, but Huck already identifies with Jim's cause to an extent to take responsibility for his safety. It is also originally Huck's plan to float down on the Mississippi to Cairo, sell the raft and take a steamboat up the Ohio River deep into the free states.

Huck's final commitment on Jim's side, however, only comes considerably later and after much wavering between the two sets of values. While in the final analysis Huck did save Jim from being caught several times during their passage, he is abhorred at hearing Jim's plans to "get and Ab'litionist to go and steal" his two children (308). He actually starts to paddle ashore to give Jim up, but is stopped by Jim's confession that "you's de bes' fren Jim's ever had; en you's de *only* fren' ole Jim's got now" (309). Later still he goes as far as writing the letter informing Miss Watson about the whereabouts of Jim (450). It is only when the duke sells Jim back into slavery (and then only after much struggle) that Huck finally resolves to break his commitment to the ethics of slaveholding society and declares that he would rather go to hell than abandon Jim: "I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. [...] 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it [i.e. the letter betraying Jim] up" (451). Ironically, Huck does not recognize his moral superiority and views his decision not to give up Jim as a sign of wickedness and a betrayal of the values of the society he grew up in. Huck's determination "to go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again" (451) from the Phelps is clearly the climactic peak in the novel. There is, however, a tangible contrast between this splendid plan and its execution: the latter is spoiled by the sudden appearance of Tom

Sawyer. Although, to Huck's utter astonishment, Tom agrees to help free Jim, it must be kept in mind that Jim *is* already free and Tom knows about it. Rather than freeing him, Tom Sawyer actually keeps Jim enslaved and continues to allow him to suffer so that he, Tom, can execute the grandiose plans he lifted from his readings of romances.

One of the serious imperfections of Twain's novel, as Mayer observes, is that Jim "emerges from behind the stereotypical mask of the minstrel figure only for a short time" (340). He is depicted "as a complexly drawn human being" (Mayer 340) in the middle part of the novel (i.e. the actual journey on the Mississippi), but is reduced to a stereotypical representation of slaves in the first and the third (last) part of the narrative. In the first section, in St. Petersburg, the only defining characteristic feature of Jim is his superstitiousness. Although this is a feature he retains throughout the novel, Huck and the reader know him to be a much more complex character in the next part. In the concluding third part of the novel (beginning with Chapters 32), however, "Jim is again reduced to the minstrel figure" (Mayer 340), while Huck loses his previous active role and only acts under the leadership of Tom Sawyer.

As shown before, the scenes of Sethe's encounter with Amy Denver in *Beloved* seem in many ways deliberately paralleled with the middle section of the plot of Twain's novel. The analogies range from the setting, including the approximate dating, the basic situation of an encounter between an escaping slave and a white social outcast, the help offered by the latter, the significance of the river as a dividing line between freedom and slavery, as well as the venue of the birth of Sethe's daughter and the symbolic rebirth of Huck. In her rewriting of Twain's story of interracial alliance, Morrison changed several key elements that serve to correct and adjust what Twain got wrong and to communicate her own message with the core story. While the similarities are important to situate the story in relation to the now archetypal older one, in terms of the intertextual game, it is really the differences that carry much of the meaning of the text. What follows is a close reading of the Sethe-Amy scenes in *Beloved* with special attention to these differences.

The encounter between Sethe and Amy is presented in two passages in *Beloved*. In the first passage (pages 31–35), Denver relives the beginnings of her favorite story, the one concerning her own birth, as it was related to her by Sethe: "easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her eyes [...] . And to get to the part of the story she liked best, she had to start way back [...]" (29). A lonely but imaginative girl, Denver

enters the story of her own beginnings and relives it in every small detail. Tortured and exhausted, humiliated, starving and very pregnant, Sethe is on the run from Sweet Home. She is running *away* from the whip of schoolteacher, the "mossy teeth" (78) of his nephews, and most importantly, running *toward* her three children on the other side of the river, when she is startled by a "*person* walking on a path not ten yards away" (31, emphasis added). That person, the owner of the "young white voice," Sethe assumes, must be a male, a "whiteboy" (31). Sethe's and the reader's assumption, however, proves wrong when she first beholds Amy: "It wasn't no whiteboy at all. Was a girl" (31). This major departure from Twain's version of the encounter should only be noted at this point, for it will gain significance later.

Amy Denver, no longer genderless, but still nameless to both Sethe and the reader, looks like the "raggediest-looking *trash* you ever saw" (33, emphasis added) even to Sethe. The use of the word "trash" seems significant here. For one thing, Amy is established as soon as first seen as a social outcast, "white trash" as she might be called today, just like Huck Finn. Furthermore, the word "trash" also reinforces the kinship between Amy and Huck because Jim likened Huck to trash for fooling him into believing he only dreamed what happened to them. "Her name was Amy and she needed beef and pot liquor like nobody in this world" (32), we learn next. The first name reference, as well as the fact that this is "the part Denver loved the best" (32) relieves much of the tension inherently present in the encounter of a runaway slave and a white person in a forest. The description of Amy as hungrier than anybody in the world, including Sethe, further diminishes the social distance between them. Surprisingly, when asked, Sethe immediately admits she is "running," a word that ironically contradicts with her physical condition. Amy, however, does not react in any stereotypical white way, and returns their conversation to her central concern, i.e. food:

> You got anything on you, gal, pass for food? [...] I like to die I'm so hungry. [...] Thought there'd be huckleberries. Look like it. That's why I come up in here. Didn't expect to find no nigger woman. If they was any, birds ate em. You like huckleberries? [...] That mean you don't have no appetite? Well, I got to eat me something. (32, emphasis added)

Seemingly all that Amy is talking about is food. Encoded in this short passage, however, there is a dialogue not only between Amy and Sethe, but also between the two novels. With the all too familiar setting

and situation, one might think "there would be huckleberries," or at least one Huckleberry. Anyway, it "look[s] like it." That's why Amy came up in here, in the forest/story. But it only *looks* like it—for this is *not* the same story. Sethe's, an African American woman's, appearance in Huck Finn's story was not expected. Notice the absence of a personal pronoun here: "Didn't expect to find [...]." Is it Amy or the reader who is surprised here? Finally a never answered question closes the passage that might be read as a direct reference to Twain's novel: "You like huckleberries?"

Unlike Jim and Huck in Twain's novel, Sethe and Amy have not met before. To some extent, they are both suspicious of the other, as suggested by their body language: they do "not look directly at each other, not straight in the eyes anyway" (33). Even if it is Sethe who repeatedly manages to keep Amy from leaving (cf. "she [Amy] stood up to go [...] 'Where you on your way to, miss?' She turned and looked at Sethe with freshly lit eyes" [32]; also: "she moved off saying, 'I gotta go." [...] "I can't get up from here,' said Sethe. 'What?' She stopped and turned to hear. [...] Amy [...] came slowly back to where Sethe lay." [33–34]), she is also cautious enough not to reveal her real name. As Mayer notes, Sethe "remains aware of the danger of the situation, of the general unpredictability of the behavior of any white person [...]" (341).

At this point, the narration of the encounter stops short for a little while, only to be continued after the appearance of Beloved on the scene: she induces Denver to tell her "how Sethe made you in the boat" (76). Denver picks up her favorite story where she left it off a few pages earlier, with Amy massaging Sethe's feet back into life. When Amy first sees her back, it is she who first compares it to a chokecherry tree, foreshadowing her role as name-giver: Sethe's yet to be born baby will soon bear Amy Denver's name. Constantly jabbering about the velvet she will buy for herself in Boston and predicting that Sethe will not see the next morning, Amy actually saves Sethe's life. When the morning comes, Amy makes shoes for her, finds and steals a boat, and while crossing the Ohio River, helps her deliver her baby.

On the free side of the Ohio, "on a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue" (84). Their different races and backgrounds no longer matter, they are only identified as "two women," defined through their femininity and motherhood, sharing in one of the most universal human experiences: the birth of a child. Should an outsider see them now, they would look like "two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot

whitewoman with unpinned hair—wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher" (85).

After the moments of magic are gone, for the last time, "Amy said she had to go; that she wouldn't be caught dead in daylight on a busy river with a runaway" (85)—and this time Sethe does not ask her to stay. They know they will never see each other again, but this does not matter. Their encounter, symbolizing a momentary transcendence of racial and social barriers and a universal sisterhood of women, will be remembered in the stories of Sethe. "You gonna tell her?" asks Amy. "You better tell her" (85). But Sethe knows she has to keep the story alive, for this *is* a story to pass on.

Arguably, the most significant differences between the two stories derive from two factors: the gender of the characters and the perspective of the runaway slave used in Morrison's version. In both cases, it appears, in her rewriting of the original story, Morrison's aim was, on the one hand, to create "an awareness of the crucial absences in *Huck Finn*" (Mayer 346), and on the other hand, to fill in these absences in Twain's version. With the notable exception of Milkman in *Son of Solomon*, Morrison's most memorable characters are usually black women, very often defined through their motherhood. *Beloved* is a perfect example for this, since Sethe is running to her three children and is just about to give birth to her fourth when Amy comes across her. In their heroic struggle, the two women are bound together by their common womanhood, which proves to be a power strong enough to make Amy overcome and transcend her racial prejudice—and to do so much faster than Huck Finn.

Even more important is Morrison's changed perspective employed in her narration of the events. Denver's birth becomes a story, and it is Denver herself, who tells the story, first to herself then to Beloved: the story of her mother's flight and encounter with the "whitegirl," and her own birth. Thus, unlike Huck-Twain's white male narration of the encounter, the story of Amy and Sethe is presented to us as filtered through the consciousness of the two principal African American female characters, Sethe and Denver.

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