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Source: *English Studies in Latin America*, No. 18 (January 2020)

ISSN: 0719-9139

Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Not a Single Story

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the skeptical narrative treatment of history in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). My argument builds on the main concepts of narrative hegemony, power, and resistance through multiplicitous and authentic storytelling as described by Chimamanda Ngozi's book and Ted Talk *The Danger of a Single Story* applied to the novel. Ngozi's concept of the danger of a single story maintains that there is a kind of discourse behind the homogenisation of history; that discourse of relying on only one version of the past. I analyse how the danger of telling and believing a single story can be seen through Toni Morrison's characters' personal voices and narrative resources such as storytelling. I use the following ideas from Ngozi for this purpose: stories are incomplete, stories can heal, and stories exist because of power; power over history, and power over women. This paper, thus, seeks to analyse and illustrate the multiplicity of stories and voices within history by examining Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

KEY WORDS: Single Story, *Beloved*, History, Feminism.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo destaca el tratamiento escéptico de la historia en la novela *Beloved* (1987) de Toni Morrison. Mi argumento se basa en la aplicación de los conceptos de narrativa hegemónica, poder, y resistencia, a través de la narrativa oral múltiple y auténtica descrita en la charla y libro *The Danger of a Single Story* de Chimamanda Ngozi. Este concepto del peligro de la historia única establece que hay un tipo de discurso específico detrás de la homogeneización de la historia, ese discurso de creer en solo una versión sobre el pasado. En este trabajo, analizo cómo el peligro de decir y creer una historia única se puede ver a través de las voces singulares de los personajes de la novela de Toni Morrison, pero también a través del uso de los recursos narrativos, como el de cuentacuentos, o narrativa oral. Para este propósito, se usan las siguientes ideas de la charla de Ngozi: las historias son incompletas, las historias curan, las historias existen gracias al poder; poder sobre la historia, y poder sobre las mujeres. Se busca entonces analizar e ilustrar la multiplicidad de historias y voces dentro de la historia única a través del análisis de la novela *Beloved* de Toni Morrison.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Historia Única, *Beloved*, Historia, Feminismo.

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INTRODUCTION

'We scattered,' said Baby Suggs, 'but maybe not for long.'

(Morrison 169)

It is futile to respond to history about slavery and about women with only one version of the past. In the literary field, the problem of relying on a single story about the past has driven us to come up with a variety of solutions. For example, postcolonial studies and postmodern writings have emerged as methods of displacing hegemonic powers with alternative understandings of the past. I argue that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows multiple approaches to history and women's history in particular through a variety of discourses in the novel, aiming at a multiplicity of stories rather than a single one. I use the lens of Chimamanda Ngozi's *The Danger of a Single Story* to reflect on how these dangers can be understood through a close reading of the novel.

The authors' writings have significant parallels. Chimamanda Ngozi is a Nigerian feminist writer whose Ted Talks have millions of views on YouTube. Toni Morrison is an African-American writer, whose books talk about the identity and heritage of black women in the US. When it comes to discussing the role of women in narratives and history, both authors have similar concerns. For example, they both include issues about identity and feminism, with subtle differences. For Morrison, it was a life-long learning process within her community, while for Ngozi it started with her US experience as a Nigerian woman. These two authors have both witnessed and portrayed women's silencing and exclusion through their writing at different historical moments, both in fiction and non-fiction. To read them as a dialogue is not only appropriate, but complementary.

A SINGLE STORY

Ngozi's *Single Story* is a Ted Talk made into a book. Using personal experience, the author explains how the perspective we have about the world can be damaged when we consider only one viewpoint to understand our own or other people's contexts. The repetition of this single story leads to people being represented as only one (Ngozi 00:09:29-00:09:37). Repetition in history is key, because it "becomes an endless repetition of the same errors" (Eagleton 34). As an African student in the US, Chimamanda reflects on others' impressions of her because of her African background.

One mainstream assumption is the idea of general catastrophe in Africa, where Africans could not be similar to US students in any way (Ngozi 00:05:08-00:05:14). People used to ask her where she learnt English, for example. Her housemate, she says, was surprised because she knew how to use a stove (00:04:25-00:04:49). Ngozi presents this idea as an everyday problem in interaction, where we generalise rather than focus on the individual's experiences. From her own viewpoint, for example, she reports that she had a misguided vision of Mexicans, mainly because of the single story the US government had told about Mexican immigrants (Ngozi 00:08:27-00:09:20). She couldn't see it differently until she visited the country, where she was surprised by the cultural richness and everyday life in Mexico, distinct from the immigrant stereotype.

BELOVED

Beloved was written in 1987 by Toni Morrison. The novel is based on a non-fiction story Morrison read about a slave mother killing her baby daughter. This is the first of many interesting yet disturbing insights about the novel. The novel talks about a house, number 124, where Sethe lives with her daughter, Denver. They believe that a ghost is haunting the house. The novel is about them questioning where this ghost or energy comes from. Through their storytelling, readers find out about other siblings, and about the deceased Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, who received in her house. The ghost is Beloved, the daughter Sethe killed in order to save her from slavery. This spectre eventually ends up absorbing Sethe's energy. Denver saves her mother's life by telling the women in the community what is going on, so that Beloved disappears from the narrative and from the memories of all those who met her. This is a good example of a postmodern narrative, since its storyline is influenced by the rejection of rationality, the disruption of a historical storyline, and by questioning the status quo of women's societal roles, such as that of a mother. I will elaborate more on this later in the analysis of the novel.

In the epilogue, the author says she found a newspaper article which reported that the woman killed her baby to protect her from being enslaved. The first main impression we have about the plot is that of a real event, which becomes a single voice told by the author. In fact, Ngozi's talk starts with her saying she's a storyteller. This is the first similarity with Morrison's novel.

Both authors are implicitly referring to oral storytelling in African traditions and Afro-American communities. Ngozi is part of a tradition with which Morrison also consciously engages because these stories survive in the face of common colonial memories. A good example is that of Tanzania and several other countries that “witnessed the disregard of her oral art and her culture in general by the colonial powers” (Furniss & Gunner 25). Considering this background, Morrison’s novel and Ngozi’s experience rely on stories told in the first person, but at the same time, these stories recreate a certain past only possible through fiction. In Ngozi’s case, she’s a writer too; her experience is based on how she received a single story of reality: the European-centred approach to fiction she received when she began writing.

These different experiences changed Ngozi once she reappropriated the discourse about her own stories in her own particular political and cultural context. In the case of Morrison, it is her empathy that triggers the creation of multiple stories to interpret a single one. That is, Morrison is imagining what the situation would be like for herself. These stories connect the reader with the problem rather than with the ethics of the single event as stated in history, so it becomes a story about motherhood because the meaning of care changes according to their social and historical circumstances. The novel suggests that there isn’t only one way to protect and care for a daughter. Furthermore, we find layers of stories in *Beloved*. For example, knowing about Beloved, the character, is possible only because of the multiple storytelling the characters experience in the novel. Fantasy broadens our possibilities of imagination, so that there isn’t a single explanation for the apparition of this ghost or spectre. Reality is superficially simple yet undeniably complex, so a novel such as *Beloved* is necessary “for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality” (Lyotard 82). Morrison’s use of fantasy breaks the spell of a mother simply killing her child in the slavery period in the US. It becomes then a story about love, trauma, and above all, women’s history. Morrison is efficient enough to be skeptical about her own authority as an author, since in her aim of providing a multiple understanding of that single event, she uses fantasy to provide more possibilities of meaning. Morrison then “does not change irrevocably any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history” (Hutcheon 20). That is, the

discourse of her own fiction through the spell, and the discourse of history directly related with the historicised African-American background.

It's evident for the characters that there is a spell and a ghost in the house, as stated in the first sentence of the novel: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison 3). We readers cannot trust the storytelling that occurs in the novel either. Things happened more or less in that way. *Beloved* is then necessarily an apparition, or memory, or ghost of this event from the past. Using McHale's terms, it is a transgression to reality (52), and therefore, a construction "without guarantee of an identity" (Díaz 106). After all, it seems there is not much difference between fiction and history.

The following sections reflect the characteristics of the single story given by Ngozi. Ngozi's concerns guide the discussion, and then these are exemplified through Morrison's literary treatments of these commonalities, using narrative aspects of the novel and, in some cases, particular characters that portray those ideas.

STORIES ARE INCOMPLETE

A single story presents a particular reality, but not one that is necessarily valid for everyone. If we consider the story of the slave killing her daughter, the reactions against it were apparently varied at the time, but most of them focussed on criticising the mother. I read this incompleteness in *Beloved* on different levels. Even if we are capable of collecting evidence for a multiple understanding of a single event, those versions can never be completed. If we talk about African-American History, for example, this is definitely an incomplete story, especially if we consider that the relations between the African-American community and the police in the United States are still being written. It cannot be reduced to a single event only. The same happens with the mother-killing-her-daughter event. It cannot be reduced to a killing either. Hence, by killing her daughter, Sethe is "abandoning the impossible methods by which she has been taught to pursue power and finding it precisely because of that abandonment" (Gardner 204). It's interesting that by abandoning motherhood, Gardner claims that Sethe gains power. In this respect, Ngozi says that it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power (00:09:37-00:09:42), and through that power, they make a single story, the definitive one (00:10:17-00:10:21).

The conveniently incomplete history of slavery Morrison recreates in the novel is possible because of power. In the context of the novel, the power of the single story can be understood as the hegemonic discourse that *Beloved* tries to dismantle. This is defined as a discourse that imposes a single narrative over others under the guise of common sense. The single story about the characters and their historical moment are a power force which “establishes one particular narrative as a quasi-natural universality and delegitimizes alternative forms of reasoning” (Molden 126). Storytelling and memory, however, play an opposite role. These become the powerful, subverted force in the novel. They are an “alternative form of reasoning” because they are uncertain and variable. This unsteadiness of memory and storytelling makes them a “disorientating terrain” (Molden 140), difficult to grasp and therefore to overpower. The complementary and dominant polyphony of the narratives exemplify this incompleteness in the novel.

Morrison then deviates the power towards the oldest women in the story. Morrison shows two women who provide different versions on motherhood: one killing her oldest daughter, Sethe, and the other one forgetting their names and faces, as in the case of Baby Suggs, as she herself reports in the novel: “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember.” (Morrison 6). Denver’s love is not questioned either, since it justifies her previous decision: “‘For a baby she throws a powerful spell,’ said Denver. ‘No more powerful than the way I loved her,’ Sethe answered and there it was again.” (Morrison 5). The first and only mention of power is the power of the memory or ghost embodied by Beloved, “that power which is the invisible colour of daily life itself” (Eagleton 22) that is, the power of her own personal stories, “of the local, of the regional and idiosyncratic” (Eagleton 28), rather than the power that homogenised the past.

In *Beloved*, the relationship between Beloved and Denver develops through an increasing network of stories, which Sethe recognises, made her feel pain. Her mother-daughter relationship is, in this sense, incomplete too. It can only be fulfilled through the stories Denver and Beloved tell each other, creating a sense of trust among the sisters: “Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got

from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt.” (Morrison 69). In their endless dialogue, they reconstruct their own stories in their own “communal spaces” (Bhabha 24) given by fiction. Their sisterhood is possible through the interaction of their memories and, thus, through the creation of a past they both identify with. It is especially fascinating for Beloved, to whom readers have access only through the painful memories Sethe has about her as a baby. Ngozi tells us that we cannot pretend to encompass all alternative stories in our own voice. We cannot just be “impressionable and vulnerable in the face of a story” (Ngozi 00:01:47-00:01:51), or a single story. It is pointless to grasp them all. However, it seems plausible to become aware of them when reading these voices.

The character of Beloved is, in essence, the representation of an endless story. Beloved is the disruption of the characters’ lives. She, in fact, completes other’s stories. For example, given Paul D’s struggle to find a woman whom he can trust, Beloved tries to become that woman. She tells him “I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name” (Morrison 137), to create a sort of intimacy until now nonexistent for Paul D. In its incompleteness, Beloved doesn’t see herself as a disruption, but as part of Sethe’s face; a powerful memory that can change her face: “She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling” (Morrison 254) so that they complete each other: “You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am (sic) you?” (Morrison 256). In both monologues by Beloved, she repeats that Sethe is hers, because it’s her memory “I am BELOVED and she is mine” (248 and 253). In most of it, no syntax can be found, since her own existence is based on fragmentation (Bhabha 25), as when she’s described as an incomplete human: “It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself” (Morrison 155). At the end, her final lines in the poem, the line “You are mine” (Morrison 256) is repeated three times. Beloved’s existence is not complete without Sethe, and Sethe’s memory is interrupted by guilt, prejudices, and oppression. These are also incomplete without the materialisation of the memory through *Beloved*.

Memories are also incomplete for Paul D. He’s the only man whose memories connect with Sethe in the novel. Paul D’s lack of engagement with what he calls ‘good women’ speaks of his

own incompleteness. His discourse about women is not very clear. He seems to love Sethe, but only because she's the only one who's given him some affection, even if she scared him: "He was wrong. This Sethe here was new. . . more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him" (Morrison 193). It is through memory that he knows someone can be completed. That is, the only way he has to construct his past is through the connection with others' memory, the one he received from his friend: "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (Morrison 321). The effect of his relationships is given through someone else's memory. Just like *Beloved*, Paul D constructs his feelings thanks to incomplete storytelling. Most significantly, that memory speaks of how someone can connect the pieces of their identity, and organise them to make sense. This is at the level of recollection of the past, but also at the level of reconnecting with others' stories to understand your own depth.

These are incomplete stories by women, about women. Sethe never completely tells the story about killing *Beloved*. Mainly because the story is a memory, and as memories, stories in our minds are incomplete: "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (Morrison 73). Sethe's subjective memory simultaneously upholds and subverts her own story, since she is "the carrier of alternative, though not yet articulated narrations of history" (Molden 135). It is in this way that Sethe connects with her past, and especially with *Beloved* and the other women: through fragments of her memory. This is interrupted by her present, as when she's choosing *Beloved*'s epitaph at the beginning of the book: "Ten minutes for seven letters. . . she thought it would be enough. . . Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage?" (Morrison 5). This simple intersection of past and present tells us there's no clear beginning for the novel. Is it when Sethe had killed *Beloved*? Or is it when *Beloved* has reappeared as a girl? This is what Ngozi exemplifies by telling stories starting with those who were presented secondly. For example, a story should start with the indigenous peoples, but then, with the arrival of colonisers, the result is a very different story (Ngozi 00:10:24-00:10:29), meaning that in the dominant discourse, colonisers are given the privilege of being the beginning of the story. This is "the function of the dominant" (McHale 11), which organises the attention of certain

aspects according to dominant interests. This is what Eagleton remarks on the importance of histories, which enable us “to get out from under all that, so that we may make a beginning—so that histories proper, in all their wealth of difference, might get off the ground” (65). The hierarchy given to certain groups implies disregarding or emphasising certain facts. In *Beloved*, however, this dominance is not really clear since the voices change in order to tell the multiple stories, as in the example of Sethe. She starts with the pain of her horrible life, then moves into *Beloved*, or vice versa. Similarly, we get to know details about Denver’s birth because of the story Sethe tells her, with comments such as “and now the part Denver loved the best” (Morrison 38). This is how a multiple discourse is made. These two events are constructed again by the voices of the female protagonists, and also receivers of stories.

STORIES CAN HEAL

If something is needed in history, it is to repair memories, especially those belonging to the oppressed and marginalised groups whose stories have been ignored by hegemonic discourses. A novel such as *Beloved* re-evaluates “the ex-centric and the different” (Hutcheon 217), but “always aware of the contradictions of its inside-outsider role” (Hutcheon 219). Ngozi states that the power stories have to repair relies on the plurality of voices (00:17:50-00:17:54). Women, for example, are among these marginalised groups. In fact, Davis says that Morrison’s novel attempts to heal her readers (243), since the novel’s representation “may have enlarged our culture’s understanding of black women’s history and of the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction era” (249). However, my focus here is on the ramifications of this memory through storytelling and its healing power, presented in the novel by the tree-shaped scar on Sethe’s back:

‘What tree on your back?’ ‘Huh.’ Sethe put a bowl on the table and reached under it for flour.
‘What tree on your back? Is something growing on your back? I don’t see nothing growing on your back.’ ‘It’s there all the same.’ ‘Who told you that?’ ‘Whitegirl. That’s what she called it. I’ve never seen it and never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. But that was eighteen years ago. Could have cherries too now for all I know.’ (Morrison 18)

Sethe will never be able to see the tree: she knows the origin only, her slavery, but doesn't know what it looks like, with the exception of the impressions Amy and Paul D give about it. The scar is a healed reminder from the past. It was once an open and painful wound, represented by the past. The fact time has passed has given it the shape of a tree: the tree grows endlessly, just like the stories about the past. The tree is the power of fiction to heal those injuries, but not forgetting them necessarily. The tree is a source of life in many religious canons and a source of wisdom according to the Christian Bible, for example. By experiencing the tree, one is supposed to gain knowledge. It is in this symbol that many interpretations converge, so that stories can always connect through the endless spreading of its branches. In other words, the tree is also the embodiment of intertextuality in the novel: this is another postmodern characteristic, involving the "rethinking of margins and edges" (Hutcheon 42) of the memory. These scars work as a postmodern reminder of incompleteness and rupture, but they are not open wounds of the past. The tree is the metaphor for the weight on Sethe's back: the open materialisation of *Beloved* given the wounds of the past.

Another brief but significant event that portrays the healing power of storytelling in the novel is when women help Sethe to escape, mentally and physically, from *Beloved*. Denver is finally capable of telling her story to Lady Jones: "Nobody was going to help her unless she told it—told all of it" (Morrison 298). The repetition of the action *told* is twice emphasised in the past tense, where the story lies. As a daughter and a witness, Denver recreates what was going on in her own voice. It is because of storytelling about her present that the town knows the story about *Beloved*. "Denver knew *about* several people, from hearing her mother and grandmother talk" (Morrison 186; author's emphasis). Everyone can heal Sethe because Denver did tell more than one story about her past and present.

The use of monologues in the novel re-create the space of women in this single story by giving the possibilities of multiple stories in their own voices. There are single chapters where Sethe, Denver, and *Beloved* speak of their own experience about the presence of the ghost/girl. All of them have different writing styles and versions of a single event: *Beloved's* apparition. In the case of Sethe, the focus is on the experience of forgiveness and her daughter's understanding of the

reasoning behind her actions. At this point in the novel, *Beloved* is driving Sethe crazy, absorbing her into that single memory—into a single story—about herself, so that Sethe forgets the rest of the world. Particularly, their voices have a space that transcends their incidence in the past only: “When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds” (Morrison 235). There is a sort of privacy given to women in the house, a space that doesn’t exist anywhere else. That private space makes them powerful when creating history through their own stories. It is because of power over their own space they can heal their own past. It is, then, because of the power given in that solitude that multiple stories prevail over single ones. In *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf says that women need their own room, that is, the space for their own voice. There’s a need for them to speak up, which comes alive through the monologues almost at the end of the novel.

SINGLE STORIES EXIST BECAUSE OF POWER OF HISTORY

Ngozi also contributes to the idea of belonging. Stories, she says, do not belong to someone in particular (00:09:12-00:09:18). They do not belong to black people either, since to insist only on the single stories is to flatten their story, overlooking people’s multiple stories (Ngozi 00:13:03-00:13:15), creating stereotypes and generalisations. This is shown in the novel through the character of Amy, a white girl who helps Sethe deliver Denver. Sethe and Amy create, in fact, a relationship around stories. They don’t use each other’s names at first, thus, becoming fictionalised characters for each other. For Sethe, her stories made her feel identified with something else than just a pregnant slave: “It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think that maybe she wasn’t, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby’s last hours” (Morrison 41).

“The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody, white or black, seemed to know it (Morrison 63)”. In *Beloved*, historical facts appear as interruptions (Davis 246), extra information for us to construct the new, private histories about women in *Beloved*. There is danger, Ngozi says, in believing that single story and sticking to it (00:15:20-00:15:25), although Ngozi is not talking about historical or female private stories. We still believe in a single story for slavery,

the one told by white people, for example. Bhabha in fact claims that *Beloved* revives the past of slavery, but with the purpose of a narrative of affective history or historic memory (8). Following this idea, before proceeding, I'd like to show how Ngozi's attempt to move toward skepticism about the dominance of a single story speaks of the literary attempt to move from a modern to a post-modern and even feminist approach to history, regardless of the name we give to this idea. For example, Postmodernism confronts the discourse of art with the discourse of history (Habermas 5; Hutcheon 20; Jameson 125), where in contrast, history is diffused by uncertainty, by the "plurality and difference" (Fuery and Mansfield 107) given by art. Hutcheon explains:

The multiple points of view prevent any totalizing concept of the protagonist's subjectivity, and simultaneously prevent the reader from finding or taking any one subject position from which to make the novel coherent (169).

It is widely agreed that postmodernism responds to modernism as a counterforce (Díaz 28; Eagleton 21; Fuery and Mansfield 107; Hutcheon 8; Jameson 111; McHale 7). I argue that Ngozi's idea of a single story is, in other words, what we have agreed as modernism: a single discourse to refer to the past. Inside the discourse, modernism was characterised by the problems of social alienation (Fuery and Mansfield 107), but that "soon proved destructive" (Fuery and Mansfield 106). It seems that Ngozi responds to this crisis too. Abandoning modernity seems applicable in today's embracement of multiple categories for nationalities, races, gender, and finally histories beyond binary categories. Furthermore, she talks from the experience of danger, and, therefore, the consequences in everyday life when that discourse is the status quo. Ngozi's point is not about whether we *should* abandon the single story or not, but that this *is* happening, and about how we can become aware of this opportunity.

For example, there is no reconciliation between history and the stories told in the novel: "Paul D looked at Sethe. 'Is there history to her question?' 'History? What you mean?' 'I mean, did she have to ask that, or want to ask it, of anybody else before me?' Sethe made two fists and placed them on her hips. "You as bad as she is." (Morrison 53). Traditional and chronological history is displaced to give space to the stories of women about women.

SINGLE STORIES EXIST BECAUSE OF POWER OVER WOMEN

History has been taught through textbooks and through oral stories for generations. Through the emphasis on women's voices, "history is not made obsolete(...) it is, however, being rethought" (Hutcheon 16). As a postmodern novel, while *Beloved* "does not deny the existence of the past, it does question whether we can ever know that past other than through textualized remains" (Hutcheon 20). In fact, Morrison tries to fill a gap neglected by historians (Davis 245), which she fills with female voices where oral storytelling prevails. In the absence of a man or a white person in Sethe's life, there's no history already made for her. In this way the novel presents what Whitehouse calls Sethe's "quest for self-fulfilment" (110). This quest is not a single struggle to fill in a void, but a collective effort of multiple and diverse experiences of all women to do so. From a feminist point of view, the need to have a woman's own voice tell her own story about motherhood, slavery, and killing is key to move the focus on history towards stories and in order to provide a space for those who are not powerful. This is another way to see Woolf's room in the novel: to fill in the narrative voids both within the physical space of the house at number 124, where Sethe and Denver live, and within the fictional history of the novel. The best example for this community voice is near the end of the novel: "the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (Morrison 235). That is, women who belong to a space previously filled with silence. The absence of an authoritative voice shows how women take the opportunity to tell their own stories.

As mentioned earlier, Denver asks these women's community for help. When Sethe is losing her mind over *Beloved*, Denver becomes responsible for storytelling about her own mother's relation with the ghost. At the end of the book we see how it is because of the stories that women reunite and help Denver:

"Others who believed the story didn't want any part of the confrontation and wouldn't have come no matter what the weather. And there were those like Lady Jones who didn't believe the story and hated the ignorance of those who did. So thirty women made up that company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124". (Morrison 303)

Whatever private thoughts they have, they formed a single group all together. Stories, Ngozi says, can also be used to empower (Ngozi 00:14:45-00:14:47). All these single stories work as a sort of procession that completes the circle of storytelling, or the “cycle in which the past can return to haunt” (Davis 256). These women do not depend on others’ storytelling about them, and they are not waiting to be seen either:

It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through. (Morrison 300)

There is never a single story about any single place (Ngozi 00:18:23-00:18:30). As a community, they do not trust in history, but all of them processed the story individually to create a network of the story “fundamentally committed to difference” (Fuery and Mansfield 117). The story is, somehow, lost among the names of women we do not really know but are mentioned in the previous quote: Lady Jones, Ella, those who believe, those who don’t believe, have all a space in the narrative to recreate their own voice but also to act together. Therefore, Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved will not be the exception.

Baby Sugg’s own story illustrates how she, in a way, becomes alive again through providing all women a sense of strength and leadership. Motherhood is lost for Baby Suggs. She became a free woman but as a result her son is in debt for the rest of his life, even after her death. The way in which she forgets her children’s names, as stated earlier, meant Baby Suggs responds to only one discourse: that of slavery. Through Baby Suggs, Morrison again dismantles the single story, or modern discourse, about motherhood. Eagleton talks about two ways to see these histories (45). On the one hand, the history of Baby Suggs is that of Ngozi’s single story: “unilinear, progressive” (46). On the other hand, Baby Suggs’ own stories are:

A matter of constant mutability, exhilaratingly multiple and open-ended, a set of conjunctures or discontinuities which only some theoretical violence could hammer into the unity of a single narrative. (Eagleton 46)

The violence Eagleton mentions has certainly shaped Baby Suggs's histories. For example, thanks to Denver, we know how her freedom acquires shape once slavery is not part of her discourse anymore. After being released, Baby Suggs insists on being called by the name of Baby Suggs, although she was called Jenny by her masters during all her life. In this respect, Ngozi says that one of the consequences of single stories is that it robs people's dignity (00:13:55-00:14:00), because "[h]istory. . .has been a tale of unremitting labour and oppression, of suffering and degradation" (52).

Baby Suggs then insists that Jenny is not her name:

“‘Mr Garner,’ she said, ‘why you all call me Jenny?’ ‘Cause that what’s on your sales ticker, gal. Ain’t that your name? What you call yourself?’ ‘Nothing,’ she said, ‘I don’t call myself nothing.’ (...) ‘but Suggs is what my husband name.’ (...) ‘Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn’t call me Jenny.’ (...) ‘Mrs Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro.’” (Morrison 167)

In other words, “Jenny” is the single story or history told about and to Baby Suggs, but she rejects it. The dialogue shows how Mr Garner and Baby Suggs are different, so that equality (Ngozi 00:14:00-00:14:08) is not possible, even if she's free. This woman was Jenny when she was subordinated, but her identity has changed now that she is free. A baby means the beginning of existence, but also someone who is defenseless. In turn, with the surname Suggs, she also belongs to a husband. That is, she can be released from the discourse of slavery being free, but her only way to denote certain identity is through a family and, therefore, a husband. Despite her past memory of a husband, who she hasn't seen for years, she starts a community of women in 124. Baby Suggs, in this sense, is the moral and spiritual backbone of the novel (Krumholz 398), because she changes her identity to occupy a room of her own, which implies both dignity and leadership in a community where those standards belong to men.

CONCLUSION

Stories are incomplete, stories can heal, and stories do not belong to someone in particular: not to history, nor to men. Stories are also told depending on power. “It was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324) and “[t]his is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 324) is repeated several times at the end of the novel, because it's possible to see this group of stories as an array of voices about

the past, which can be easily forgotten but also easily remembered. The same applies to Ngozi's experience: when she first started writing, her stories were about white, blue-eyed men. When she found out about African literature, her writing changed. This is the danger that Morrison explores, that which readers should avoid: history has been revised by those who understand reality through only that perspective, those who were powerful in slavery and on women have said how history worked with the oppressed. For Morrison, fiction serves this purpose too, that of opening alternatives from the perspective of women telling their own stories. As Hutcheon states:

“Fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel” (40).

Ultimately, there's a need, Ngozi says, for a “mental shift in the perception of literature” (00:02:19-00:02:22) that demands an effort from readers to consider and look for the alternative voices in history. While Ngozi opened her understanding about African literature by reading African writers, Morrison gave those voices a space to open the readers' understanding of African-American identity. Both writers, in their own specific contexts, embrace a multiple perception of literature that remains skeptical of single stories, even of the ones made by themselves, because “all contexts are fuzzy and porous” (Eagleton 46). When we reject the single story, we regain “a kind of paradise” (Ngozi 00:18:13-00:18:18) that embraces storytelling, just like in the novel, and just like the stories told by Ngozi in her talk. It's impossible to engage with a person or place without engaging with all the stories about them (Ngozi 00:13:43- 00:13:54). We engage with them when we understand, through literature, that we're all scattered, but maybe not for long.

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