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**WHAT CAN STORYTELLING DO FOR/TO A YELLOW WOMAN?
THE FUNCTION OF STORYTELLING IN THE PROCESS
OF IDENTITY FORMATION OF US MULATTO WOMEN**

The United States has always been a country of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and now – at the turn of the century, when illusions about unified character of American culture can no longer be successfully sustained, the nation appears more than ever deeply and painfully torn by identity crisis. All minorities, so far marginalized in the seemingly homogeneous WASP nation, have been afflicted by the crisis, and as a result they have started to look for more specific forms of identification. They base their search on ethnic heritage rather than lofty ideas of the Enlightenment, such as liberty, equality or government by consent and progress, which, in their case, have remained unrealized and unattainable ideals. Among the peoples who undertook the quest for a new meaningful identity are the Afro-Americans, the largest and the most oppressed minority in the USA. The unheard-of popularity of fiction by black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor or Gayl Jones proves that the time has indeed come to reconstruct the concept of Afro-American identity and to liberate it from universalistic or Eurocentric ideas or images. In this respect, the black women writers perceive their people as a post-colonial or Third World nation, victims of imperialism who have acutely suffered from the experience of colonialism, slavery, racism and the white man's concept of progress. Therefore these writers see their mission in helping their people to regain and maintain their unique identity in the modern society which is so rapidly changing. Their works do not only describe economic destitution and racial segregation of their people but also their struggle for maintaining an uncontaminated identity, free from restrictions imposed by the dominant, imperial culture of the predominantly white cities.

Their mission is to be accomplished by their unprecedented and inimitable approach to writing as storytelling, grounded in folk traditions and beliefs.

For Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison, storytelling is a communal practice – it has to do with recuperation of history and mythology which constitute the core of the nation's identity, through the tradition of telling the stories inherited from mothers and grandmothers, "the culture-bearing black women."¹ These stories, as Alice Walker puts it, are "accumulated collective reality, [the] dreams, imagining, rituals and legends" that constitute the "subconscious of the people."² Telling them again and again brings the community together and keeps the culture alive by constantly reaching to its roots and re-visioning its uniqueness. It also frees the history of the nation from the constraints of the dominant culture, creating perspectives for the future outside the homogenous social system. In other words, such storytelling attempts to reclaim all the parts of the cultural heritage which the larger culture has attempted to discard as irrelevant to the prevailing national experience. Such storytelling "combine[s] subjectivity and objectivity, employ[s] the insights and passion of myth and folklore in the service of re-visioning history."³

As early as in the 1960s, Black Power Movement emphasized that African folk forms should be the base for all modern Afro-American art. The activists of the movement launched a campaign to legitimize African-American culture as a separate culture, with its own ideas, forms and styles rather than a mere derivation of the European American culture. Ralph Ellison applied this theory to literature:

For us [Afro-Americans]," he says, "the question should be what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore which offers the first drawings of any group character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners and customs, which ensure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of human condition. It projects the wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive. These drawings can be crude, but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It is no accident that great literature, the products of individual artists, is elected on this humble base."⁴

Black women writers take these ideas one step further. In their hands, folk tradition serves to revise preconceived ideas about race, class and gender

¹ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 14.

² Alice Walker, "From an Interview," in: *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* (New York: 1983), p. 125.

³ George Lipstic, "Myth, History and Counter Memory," in: *Politics and the Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, ed. A. Sorkin, Bowling Green (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986), p. 162.

⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, (New York, 1953), p. 172.

which were generated by ideological, economic and political transition in American life. For Morrison, Naylor and Jones, survival of the community depends on establishing relevant links with the past. The identity of modern Afro-Americans in the context of great cultural variety can be created only through reinvention of culture from fragments of ancient African past and more recent history of the African Diaspora in the New World. Therefore, as Marilyn Sanders Mobley observes, these writers put themselves in the position of African griots – village storytellers, elders whose task is to convey and pass on to younger generations their history and cultural identity “to clarify the roles that have been obscured, to identify those things in the past that are useful and those that are not; and to give nourishment.”⁵ Toni Cade Bambara describes these women writers as “cultural workers,” while Marilyn Sanders Mobley calls Toni Morrison a “cultural archivist” or a “redemptive scribe.”⁶ In her opinion, “the label redemptive scribe refers to [her] desire to bring about cultural transformation. [Morrison] object[s] to or resist[s] the presumption that the past cannot coexist with the present, that cultural disjunction or discontinuity is a given, that the past must be discarded in the name of the progress. As a cultural archivist, [she] seem[s] consciously to present situations in which the oral tradition of telling the stories is central to the well-being and survival of the self and the community.”⁷

One of Toni Morrison most successful novels, *Tar Baby*, shows the detrimental effects of the absence of oral tradition on the life of a modern, emancipated Afro-American woman. Jadine, the central character in the book, is a beautiful, orphaned, yellow woman, constantly troubled by feeling of inadequacy and alienation. Educated in Paris in the history of European art, she is an example of a black middle class person who, in consequence of being constantly exposed to Western culture and its values, identifies with it and adopts indiscriminately its attitude towards other “lesser” cultures, including her own, African. From this perspective, “Picasso is better than an Itumba Mask,”⁸ and all the African art is mediocre and amateurish. Jadine is so proud of her individualistic, cultivated identity and her refined taste that it blinds her to the predatory quality of white man’s civilization. She openly admires her benefactor, Valerian, for his power and the ruthless way he runs his household and is openly „basking in the cold

⁵ Thomas Le Clair, “The Language Must Not Sweat. A Conversation With Toni Morrison,” *New Republic*, March 2, 1981, p. 26.

⁶ Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1991), p. 11.

⁷ M. S. Mobley, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁸ T. Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

light that came from one of the killers of the world.”⁹ She is also fascinated by a luscious sealskin coat sent to her as a Christmas present by her white boyfriend, Ryk, without giving a thought to the ninety baby seals that were killed to make it. Sometimes, however, the process of white acculturation which Jadine underwent in European schools seems not quite complete. She feels lonely and isolated in spite of her degree in art history and her success as a model. She is slightly perturbed about her African background and finds it hard to accept or forget it. She is deeply shocked when in a Paris supermarket an African woman, a tall “transcendent beauty with a skin like tar”¹⁰ spits at her. Faced with the contrast between the woman and herself, she feels her own inauthenticity: “The woman made her lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic.”¹¹ Then she dreams about the African woman and other archetypal black women, holding to her their sagging breasts, but she is too deeply affected by her cosmopolitan upbringing to achieve a balance between the two polarities in her identity.

Conspicuously absent from Jadine’s life is the tradition of oral storytelling. Raised in isolation, away from black community, Jadine is cut off from the core of black culture. Unlike Morrison, who dedicated her novel to “culture-bearing women” from her own family, “all of whom knew their true ancient properties,” Jadine never in her life had a griot – a mother, a grandmother or a wise aunt who would put her in touch with her ancient heritage. Uprooted, she wages a solitary war to achieve the power to assert herself in a multicolored and multicultural world.

Naylor, on the other hand, explicitly shows in her novel, *Mama Day*, how the consciousness of an individual can be positively transformed through the narrative act of storytelling. The main heroine of Naylor’s novel is Cocoa. Like Jadine, Cocoa is a yellow woman, but unlike her she is reverent of her people’s African heritage and proud of her Afro-American identity. She is the last living heir to the line of the Day women which was founded centuries earlier by a slave woman, Sapphira Wade. “[Sapphira] could walk through the lightning storm without being touched, grab a bolt of lightening in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightening to start kindling going under her medicine pot. She turned the moon into the slave, the stars into the swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four.”¹² But, above all, she is remembered as a great spiritual leader. She persuaded her master, Bascombe Wade, to deed every inch of his island, called Willow Springs, to his slaves, then

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹² Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1993), p. 1.

killed him and, finally free, she flew back to Africa. Many versions of the legend circulate among the islanders, and though nobody, except the narrator, remembers Sapphira's name, all beneficiaries past and present are sure that she left behind seven sons by Bascombe Wade or "by persons unknown."¹³ The descendants of the seventh son, Jonah Day, are still living on the island and the most prominent among them is an old Lady, Miranda Day, called Mama Day, the titular heroine of the book. A worthy and reputable heir to powerful Sapphira Wade, Mama Day performs numerous functions in the community of Willow Springs. She is a figure of power and mystery, respected and feared by all, but filled with love for her people and always reaching out to those in need of her knowledge. She is a matriarch and a griot who holds a vibrant and pivotal place in her family and community and who is entirely devoted to serving them. She is a healer: she cures the sick, delivers babies and gives all kinds of advice. She is a clairvoyant and a conjurer: she performs a fertility rite on her neighbor, Bernice, a healing ritual on her niece, Cocoa, she fights the dark and disruptive forces of the island personified by the jealous old woman, Ruby. All her skills and gifts make Mama Day an unquestionable head of Willow Springs community and of her own family. Although Mama Day has no children of her own, she has the major influence on the upbringing of her niece, Cocoa, whom she prepares to take over her position in the center of the community. Cocoa, raised by this old, "shrewd" woman is always aware of her rich family history, of her people's past and her own cultural identity. She calls it "cool". "It comes with a cultural territory: the beating of the drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went to settle in the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to ripe old, age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it – but even if your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever lose it."¹⁴ Cocoa is stubbornly emancipated and defiant, but she is always mindful of her family saga and her heritage. When she shares it with her husband, George, he concludes: "I was always in awe of the stories you told me so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in a grandmother's house, to be able to walk and see where a great grandfather was born. You had more than a family, you had a history."¹⁵ Due to family teaching Cocoa never experiences identity crisis. The tradition of the oral telling of the stories, of cultivating the memory of the past and elaborating family sagas gives her and other

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Willow Springers roots in their land and helps them to fend themselves against exploitation, loss of cultural memory, misguided education. Contrary to Jadine, Cocoa does not replace folk tradition by an alien version of her own culture, and never in her life does she feel lonely or inauthentic.

However, storytelling is not always a nurturing act. Gayl Jones demonstrates in her novel *Corregidora* that the act of storytelling can also be disordering and upsetting and may do much harm to the process of identity formation. Ursa Corregidora, the main protagonist of Jones's novel, is another beautiful yellow woman who looks Hispanic rather than black. She lives in a town in Kentucky and earns her living by singing the blues in a bar. Like Cocoa, she is also the last woman in the line started generations earlier in Brazil in times of slavery by Corregidora, "a Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner" and a slave woman, Dorita, Ursa's great grandmother. "She was the pretty one, with almond eyes and coffee bean skin, [she was] his favorite, his little gold piece."¹⁶ Corregidora abused her not only for his own sexual gratification but also for profit, as he made his living from commercializing the bodies of his slaves. All of Dorita's sons were sold, while her only daughter, fathered by Corregidora, became his prostitute and mistress. In this way abuse and exploitation of slave women from Ursa's family continued generation after generation, until finally long after the abolition of slavery, Dorita ran away from the plantation for fear of her life because she had done something mysterious "that made him want to kill her." She settled in Louisiana in the USA, but later in 1906 she returned to the plantation to claim her daughter, who was by that time already pregnant by Corregidora.

However, their deliverance from forced prostitution and slavery is not completely successful. The women are haunted by the memories of the past, and as the past mingles with the present it poisons their lives and destroys perspectives for a better future of their children. Corregidora, "the whoremonger and breeder," is still a vivid presence in their lives. They hold on to his surname as a sign of their victimization and pass it on to the daughters, together with dreadful and shocking stories of his cruelty and his photograph so that they "know who to hate." As a result, neither Ursa's mother nor Ursa herself can fully accept any men in their lives. Ursa's mother cannot reciprocate the love of her husband, Martin. She is convinced she does not really need a husband, so from the very beginning of their relationship she "wouldn't let [herself] feel anything." Her coldness and his mother-in-law's strangeness and overt hostility finally drive him away. Also Ursa's husband, Mutt, tries to fight Corregidora's women's bondage to the past: "Whichever

¹⁶ Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 10.

way you look at it we ain't them,"¹⁷ he claims. But that is not the way Ursa perceives the relationship of the past to the present. For her "we're all consequences of something. Stained with another past as well as our own. Their [ancestors'] past is in my blood. My veins are centuries meeting."¹⁸ The fact leaves Ursa confused and estranged. Her present identity of a mulatto woman living in urban Kentucky mingles with the anguished identity projected on her by her female ancestors. When asked: "What are you?" Ursa responds automatically: "I'm an American," but more than anything Ursa is a Corregidora's woman. In her mind, where thoughts about Corregidora are uppermost, every man bears resemblance to the slave owner. She sees her husband, Mutt, as equally violent, despotic and dominating, and when she thinks of him caressing her body, the old man Corregidora "howls" inside her. Unaware, Mutt re-enacts some of the motifs of the stories about Corregidora. One time he calls Ursa "his little gold piece," and ultimately turns out to be as possessive as Corregidora himself. The oppressive patriarchal tradition that used to govern human relations in times of slavery still warps Ursa's relationships with men. All the men she comes across want to treat her like their property, desiring to wrest control over her sexuality and eventually her life. When during one of their violent fights, Mutt pushes Ursa down the stairs and she loses the child she is expecting as well as her womb, the identification of Mutt with Corregidora becomes complete. Just as Corregidora wreaked violence and inflicted unimaginable suffering on the women from her family so she has become yet another victim of male aggression.

Ursa's grudge is even greater, as Mutt takes away from her the only potential she had – her power to "make generations" of witnesses who could testify about the atrocities of slavery and who would keep on hating Corregidora and men like him. Revealing the bitter historical truth is the main mission of Corregidora's women. When Brazilian slavery was abolished, all slave trade documents were burnt by the authorities as an act of purification, but for the abused slave women it was rather an attempt to whitewash the Brazilian history. "That's why they burned all the papers so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold against them,"¹⁹ states Ursa's grandmother. Therefore the memories of women and their daughters must be living archives. Passing family history from one generation to another is a means of preserving the truth against all official attempts to erase it. "We [black women] got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45–46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

burn out a wound. That scar, that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it visible as our own blood."²⁰

The collective memory of Corregidora's women is not only a form of resistance against violence and distortion of truth, but it is also a weapon by means of which Corregidora's women want to revenge themselves for all their torment and misery. However Cat, Ursa's friend, rightly observes that using procreation as a way to get back at Corregidora is a "slave-breeder's way of thinking,"²¹ as procreation was equally appreciated by slave owners who wished the population of slaves to multiply. Moreover, the fact that Corregidora still pervades their motivation proves that he still controls their lives. Identity exclusively based on being a Corregidora's woman equals being a Corregidora's slave and whore, rather than free and independent being. Ursa is so overwhelmed by a deep-rooted hatred and so dedicated to revenge that she does not discern the contradiction in her way of thinking.

Nevertheless, her sterility puts an end to her obsession. As the burned documents can no longer bear witness to the oppression, so Ursa is left "speechless" and helpless after she is "wounded" by Mutt. She cannot contribute to the revenge scheme by "making generations" and passing on to them stories of the mad abuse of women in the times of slavery. She feels exempted from the obligation to remain loyal to her ancestors: "I am different now. I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby had come – what would I have done then? Would I have kept up [giving the evidence to the truth about the past to the future generations]?"²²

Thus Ursa's struggle to achieve an identity free from inner contradictions takes place on many different levels. She fights to free herself from the tension between the past and the present, between her own painful experience and the even more painful experience of other Corregidora's women. She endeavors to be faithful to their vision of her role as a woman and a daughter and, on the other hand, to liberate herself from the pathological effects of slavery that prevent normal life. Her confusion of identity is also caused by her inability to bear children. Because she is sterile, she wonders: "Now, what good am I for any man?"²³ Thus she also betrays how deeply she is influenced by the traditional attitude in the patriarchal society, which measured black woman's worth by her capacity to give birth to children. Finally, Ursa strives to overcome the psychological rupture caused by her white blood and her black blood. Ursa dreads and abhors the white man

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

who is "howling" in her veins. She sees "the shadow of Corregidora under [her] eyes," and she finds it impossible to come to terms with her legacy of miscegenation and incest. It seems to be the most difficult stage in the process of her identity formation, as all of Corregidora's women share more intricate feelings for him than they care to admit. In retrospect, Ursa's grandmother thinks she was glad to be rescued from Corregidora's hateful tyranny, but then she has doubts if she really was because "it is hard to always remember what you were feeling when you ain't feeling exactly that way no more."²⁴ Martin realizes the nub of the dilemma that troubles Corregidora's women. "He had the nerve to ask them how much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love?"²⁵

Consequently, it is ironical that the stories told by the Corregidora's women, whose aim was to perpetuate the truth, cannot be trusted. As the past closes behind them and becomes an unsolved mystery, the stories gradually lose their grain of truth. They become destructive and annihilating because too much is lost in them or willfully forgotten: the repressed love and desire for Corregidora who after all contributed to Ursa's exceptional beauty or the power which Ursa's great grandmother wielded over him – the power so great that she could do to him something that made him want to kill her. Unable to rely on the stories told by her grandmother and mother, Ursa must find her own way to resolve the paradoxes of her identity. She seeks the answers in her blues songs about oppression and concomitant pain and terror, thus turning confusion into art. She also experiments with sex, treating it as a means in a pursuit of the individual power. At the end of the novel, Ursa is still trying to discover what kind of power her grandmother had over Corregidora. She would like to fathom it to be able to assert herself against all men who are naturally endowed with power. It is oral sex with her husband, Mutt, that gives her the clue: "It had to be something sexual. In a split second of hate and love [she] knew what it was – the moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time."²⁶ Ursa gets insight into the kernel of truth that the stories tried to withhold – that love and hate are flip sides of one coin, and that in order to go on with one's life one must learn how to forgive. She learns that stories conveying only the message of racism, sexism and hatred are equally hurtful as the white man's version of Afro-American history.

The three novels depict the impact of the transition from the rural to the urban milieu on the women of color. They explore the issues of authenticity, personal powerfulness and origin in a culture. None of the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

novels gives definite answers about black women's place and status in the contemporary world. However, they all try to create a sense of intimate history which is a blend of collective and personal history, to counter the conventional historical writing and the existing status quo. Their authors strive to gain control over language because control over language means control over information and history. "If a white man hadn't told them [the black people], they wouldn't have seen it. If I come and told them, they wouldn't have seen it,"²⁷ says Ursa, realizing that the one who tells is the one who controls and dominates. Therefore, Jones, Morrison and Naylor tell their own tales and create their own American narrative which emphasizes the popular roots of contemporary Afro-American culture. It is based on folklore and captured through orality which gives black people roots in their heritage and helps them to fend themselves against the loss of cultural memory and assimilation. It proves that the minority cultures can after all validate themselves even if they are under the constant influence of the expansive dominant culture. In times of globalization issues raised by black women writers seem to be of great relevance, as in the nearest future all cultures may find themselves in jeopardy from this new form of neocolonialism.

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.