Black Historiography Versus the "Nostalgia Mode": Exploring the Limits of Fredric Jameson's Postmodern Critique Through Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Joey Mauro

Abstract: This essay explores the limits of Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernist cultural production by testing it against Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1988), Jameson argues that postmodern cultural products are beholden to the consumer market. He continues to posit the claim that this condition reveals a crisis in historicity that has emerged in late capitalism, a condition called the "nostalgia mode." While revealing much about the relationship between capital and postmodernity, Jameson's theory fails to address the productive capacity of postmodern texts. Finally, this essay considers the productive capacity of Black historiography in Morrison's *Beloved*.

Over the last fifty years, Western liberal democracies have faced increased internal pressure as a sense of shared truth lapses and unity deteriorates. It is difficult to identify what unifies nations without a sense of agreed-upon truth, without an agreed-upon history—a lack of which is only exacerbated by the rise of conspiracy theories, climate change denial, fake news, and the alt-right. This essay explores the relationship between this truth crisis and postmodernism, where postmodernism is taken to mean the cultural manifestation of late capitalism, also known as the era of postmodernity. In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1988), Fredric Jameson argues that postmodern cultural products or texts (he uses the terms interchange-

ably) reveal the crisis in historicity that emerged in late capitalism. For Jameson, postmodernism signifies the breakdown of truth because it is beholden to the market rather than based in history. Jameson's argument, while revealing much about the relationship between capital and postmodernity, restricts the aims of postmodernism to resisting high modernism and developing mass culture. In fact, postmodernist texts also have the productive capacity to challenge the universalist singularity produced by what Jean-François Lyotard calls "master narratives." To explore this contradiction within postmodernism, I turn to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). In it, Morrison renders a complex relationship between literature created in the era of postmodernity, historiography, and truth by presenting the same narrative differently in multiple scenes, reinscribing the scene each time. In the process of reinscription, Morrison presents the possibility for both epistemological and ontological variance within a given narrative, and thus challenges a singular, dominant truth. In placing Jameson's theory in conversation with Morrison's novel, it becomes clear that postmodern cultural products can simultaneously foster the breakdown of truth and historiographic consciousness.

Central to Jameson's argument is the notion that postmodernism (as a cultural logic in aesthetics) expresses the distinct ideology of the social order in the age of postmodernity, the era of late capitalism. Specifically, Jameson refers to postmodernity as the "postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" that emerged from the postwar economic growth in the United States and Western Europe, as well as in the new international order of neo-colonialism (1759). From Jameson's perspective, then, cultural products derive from a given historical context, and so an analysis of the social function of a cultural product or text is an analysis of the ideology of a given historical period. That is, the rise of consumer capitalism becomes the causal condition of postmodern art; postmodernity (the period of late capitalism)

begets postmodernism (the cultural manifestation of late capitalism).

Jameson's analysis outlines two necessary conditions of postmodern cultural production: firstly, cultural products occur as a reaction specifically to high modernism; and secondly, postmodern cultural products do not filter into categories of low or high art. Modernism reflected the universalizing aims of modernity, which was to create totalizing systems of unity that grew as premodern institutions retracted (religious institutions, for example). Modernism was the growth of a new social order, and the projects of high modernism "conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations" by mid-century (Jameson 1758). Jameson's formulation of a postmodern project of refusal is similar to Lyotard's formulation. Lyotard's postmodernism—stumbling out from the wreckage of the Second World War, the mass death at Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the carnage of Auschwitz and the Soviet gulags—rejects the "master narratives" of progress that came from modernity (Lyotard 1386). For Lyotard, postmodernism refuses the singular universal standards of modernity because these standards can only be achieved through hostility towards difference and, ultimately, atrocity (1387). If modernism is the pursuit of absolutes, then postmodernism is the pursuit of variance.

However, in Jameson's view, the rejection of modernism is not replaced by a new project of progress or unity in postmodernism; rather, postmoderninsm offers only a rejection or, more accurately, a plurality of rejections. Jameson suggests there are two imbricated consequences of this project. The first consequence is that the rejection of modernism is a highly atomized rejection because postmodernism offers no singular mode or logic. Postmodernism only offers what Jameson calls "a host of distinct, private styles … that foreshadow social life as a whole in late capitalism" (1761). Simply put, if the project is based on the rejection of modernism—in the rejection of universal and new forms of social unity—then there are going to be many different

arrows pointing at a grand target. The plurality of grievances with the projects of modernism means that there will be many versions of postmodernism (Jameson 1759). In other words, the postmodern rejection of modernism becomes the project(s) of postmodernism. This leads to the second layer of consequence: the postmodern project never moves beyond subversion toward a new political project (1759). As implied above, the cohesive factor of postmodernism is the perpetual cycles of subverting modernist "master narratives." As Jameson puts it, "the unity of [postmodernism]—if it has one—is given not in itself but in the very modernism it seeks to displace" (1759). If modernity offered a political and historical project, then postmodernity offered an apolitical and ahistorical consumer society (1760).

Together, the consequences of the postmodern project (or the lack of one) create the second necessary condition of postmodernity: the "erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" in service of consumer society (Jameson 1771). Jameson's formulation of cultural products in postmodernity, like that of Barth, expresses a sort of formal exhaustion: "writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds … [as] only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already" (1762). In the context of consumer capitalism, art need not discriminate between high and mass culture because the project has no goal related to progress and operates in service of capital. Jameson never makes a claim about a determinant link between capitalism and cultural production, but he does make a useful historical comparison to demonstrate the relationship—in modernity, cultural products were oppositional, created friction, and were offensive to the middle class, whereas in postmodernity, "there is very little in either the forms or the content of contemporary art that contemporary society finds intolerable or scandalous" (1770). Basically, with the advent of mass consumerism, cultural production serves the market rather than challenging the status quo.

Jameson's argument presents a model for understanding the strained relationship between literature and truth in an era of consumer capital. For Jameson, postmodern cultural texts reflect how a late capitalist society is stuck in a perpetual present that it has lost the capacity to historicize. The cultural text does not so much render history but rather an idea of history, a simulation of history, or what Jameson calls "the nostalgia mode" (1762). Jameson explains this by distinguishing between parody and pastiche. Parody takes up a past style to mock it or an established norm to incite political change, and pastiche, while still adopting a past style, does so as "a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic" (1761). The postmodern text, preoccupied with the rejection of high modernism, fails to locate truth in the present, which is a factor that once served as a point of separation between high art and mass culture. For Jameson, the cultural text reflects and maintains the aims of consumer society by robbing the citizens of any notion of historical truth and confining them to a dislocated perpetual present.

While revealing much about historical truth in postmodernity, Jameson's analysis of postmodernism does not go beyond the confines of capitalism and mass culture to explore the productive potential of postmodern texts. Rather than explore their productive capacity, Jameson asserts that there is no distinction between high art and pop culture in postmodernity. This assertion establishes the limit of his analysis: Jameson never considers how postmodern products might differ in merit because he essentializes the link between cultural products and capitalism. Surely, there are differences between postmodern cultural products that make some more productive than others in the pursuit of a common truth.

In her novel *Beloved*, for example, Toni Morrison reinscribes African-American subjecthood—what Henry Louis

Gates calls "the black presence" in a white-canonized history by destabilizing the dominant white narrative presence (2251). In a novel that is ghost story, slave narrative, and historical fiction, Morrison has enough narrative latitude to navigate epistemological and ontological questions that complicate any notion of a single or dominant truth. In other words, with the narrative modes available to her, Morrison creates a political discourse around issues of historiographical truth. For example, the novel features several narrative threads that recount the same incident through different lenses, which creates a contestation of truth, as some accounts feature a dominant white presence and a Black absence, and others centralize the Black presence and destabilize the white presence.

A notable example of this contestation comes in the differing accounts of how Sethe—while running away from the bounty hunter trying to re-enslave her—gave birth to Denver with the help of a white girl called Amy. Morrison marks the different accounts by changing narrative styles: some tellings are third-person narration and others are through dialogue. In the white-dominated account of the birth, the narrative thread opens in the third person with Sethe exhausted and collapsed on the side of a riverbank, lying half-obscured by "blades of wild onions" (Morrison 33). Amy, as the focal point of the narrator, watches Sethe from a distance. Sethe no longer bothers to wave off the bugs, and she is numb to the baby in her womb who is described as "a little antelope ... with impatient hooves" (33). Amy's gaze in this opening scene dehumanizes Sethe's presence, something Morrison makes clear by emphasizing the blending of Sethe's appearance and the natural world (she is one with the bugs and the wild onions, unbothered by them or the figurative antelope in her belly). In fact, Sethe is basically one with the diegesis. In proximity to the white presence, Sethe's humanity is absent. This absence becomes clearer once Amy makes her presence known and the two exchange dialogue. In fact, it is hardly an exchange because Amy dominates the conversation. As the narrator puts it, Amy "talked so much it wasn't clear how she breathed at the same

time" (33). Furthermore, Amy's use of a racial slur in reference to Sethe solidifies Amy's dominance in this version of the scene, with her violent language marking the absence of Black subjecthood and the invasion of the white master narrative. Throughout this iteration of Denver's birth, Amy speaks 1,200 words of direct dialogue compared to Sethe's 150—for every word Sethe speaks, Amy speaks ten. In the white-dominated history of Denver's birth, Morrison produces what Gates Jr. calls the literary faculty "that delimits the humanity of all black people in western cultures" (2247).

However, Morrison reinscribes this incident with an active Black presence at several points in the novel. One such reinscription comes through Sethe's memory of the birth. Unlike the version above, Sethe narrates her version herself as she speaks to Paul D. Through this speech act (through narrative dialogue), Morrison positions Sethe as the authority of the memory. The retelling comes after Paul D expresses concern about Denver's mental state and Sethe reassures him that Denver will be okay because "she's a charmed child. From the beginning" (Morrison 41). Denver's origin story is her source of strength. Sethe goes on:

> Uh huh. Nothing bad can happen to her. Look at it. Everybody I knew dead or gone or dead and gone. Not her. Not my Denver. Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it—which meant she wasn't going to make it either—she pulled a white girl out of the hill. The last thing you'd expect to help. (42)

With Sethe's account, we get a Black presence that challenges the authority of the white-dominant narrative. In Sethe's account, Denver is not compared to an animal and Sethe does not see herself in the landscape. In fact, Denver is the hero. From Sethe's perspective, Amy came from the natural world; Denver summoned her own help from the hill. Amy is a utility of Denver's survival, she is a "thing" that helps the Black women. Compared to the previous telling, the roles are switched: Amy's presence is minor and Denver's is dominant. Morrison, by having Sethe speak the memory,

reinscribes the moment with an active Black presence. The compilation of accounts told through a pastiche of narrative voices does not so much override or negate one another or dehistoricize the incident. Rather, through variation and reinscription, Morrison gives primacy to a historiographic mode (not a "nostalgia mode" like in Jameson's formulation). This historiographic mode complicates narratives of white dominance in both the novel and American nationalist discourse by challenging any shared truth that requires a Black absence.

Unlike Jameson's formulation, the use of narrative pastiche in *Beloved* does not render a text ahistorical; rather, it creates a deeply historiographic text concerned with the ramification of "master narratives" for Black presence, and for Black life. Postmodern texts can challenge the universalist singularity produced by what Jean-François Lyotard calls "master narratives." In fact, postmodern texts have the capacity to render both epistemological and ontological differences, thus challenging a singular truth. Jameson's skepticism of consumer capitalism only allows him to work with one half of what postmodernism has to offer, one half of the postmodern contradiction. In other words, Jameson's critique only looks at the negative side of postmodernity (the rise of consumer culture and the erasure of truth). However, might there also be postmodern texts that contest the dominant culture in the pursuit of truth? Historiographic commentary in art is different from simulating a false historical narrative. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a postmodern text, functions in service of historical truth by refusing a version of history that occludes Black presence.

Works Cited

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