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Christiana Succar

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Christiana Succar

Creating a Literary Bond:

Lydia Cabrera and Toni Morrison

In comparing the short stories *Cuentos Negros* by Lydia Cabrera and the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison one must recognize the impact of the time period in which the authors' lived, the cultural identity represented in their works and the form and structure utilized to convey messages through literature. Though both women lived in different time periods in history and were from different backgrounds, as minority female writers they expressed similar recognition and insight of a minority culture while in the shadow of the Dominate European-American hegemony.

Lydia Cabrera was born on May 20, 1899 in Havana, Cuba to a prominent family. Though her formal education was inconsistent, she was exposed to renowned writers, politicians and artists. *Cuentos Negro* first published in Paris in 1937 and then in Cuba in 1940 was initially dubbed as stories to entertain her ill companion Teresa de la Perra. However, these stories stemmed from Cabrera's intimate relationship with Blacks from her childhood, adult research and the influence of Fernando Ortiz "the father of Afro-Cuban studies" (Hoffman-Jeep 343).

Thirty-two years later, Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931, in Loraine, Ohio. Though born into a Southern family she grew up in Loraine during the collapse of its steel mill industry. After completing her M.A. in 1955 and holding various faculty positions she published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in the United States in 1970. Though she was not a political activist during the civil rights movement, during her faculty position at Howard she taught two individuals who became well-known figures in the movement Stokely Carmichael and Claude Brown (Peach 5).

As both authors' embarked on these seminal pieces of literature they faced a world in a state of flux. Cuba was a post-colonial new independent nation struggling with new ways to talk about race. Cabrera challenged this conflict in her work by maintaining the African Yoruba language and Afro-Cuban religious culture. She straddles the two worlds between the major Cuban and minority Afro-Cuban culture through the use of polyphonic narratives to present an understanding of Afro-Cuban culture as fundamental to the understanding of Cuban culture. This is evident in the cross referencing of the Catholic and *Orisha* religion in the short story *Bregantino Bregantin*.

In this story, the king of Cocozumba (an African mythic setting) seeks a husband for his daughter. When he marries her off to a worm whose health declines she is passed on to his trusted bull. The bull is a power hungry promiscuous animal that

impregnates multiple women a year and then kills the male offspring. One day he meets his match, Sanune who seeks out the help of the gods. "She came to the edge of the fearsome forest, guided by the spirit of her mother who, while she was alive, was a faithful servant of the saints of iron, her protectors (arrow, bow, nail, chain, and lock), Ogun and Ochosi, Saint Peter and Saint Norbert" (Cabrera 10). "The deceased woman begged for the help from Ogun and Ochosi, and the forest opened its arms..." (12). The saints recognized Sanune as the faithful servant's daughter and Ochosi the protector of women, looked to the goddess of the sea

and the moon and fertility rights, Yemaya the Virgin of Regla (who straddles both Afro-Cuban and Catholic religion-Cabrera, footnote 7 12).

Sanune becomes pregnant and on the eve before birth "she [takes] a bath in an infusion of poplar leaves, artemesia, bay laurel, incense, all of Saint Barbarba's herbs, and sigueraya boiled in aguardiente and bee honey perfumed with tobacco" (15). When the executioner kills the baby Sanune quickly returns to the forest, where Ochosi brings him back to life by rubbing his arms and legs with bee honey. Then, Ogun pronounces to Sanune to "calmly go back to the village. When your son is ten years old, he'll knock over a palm tree with one thrust of his horns, and when he's twenty, a ceiba tree (the sacred tree of Cuba)" (15-16). The calf grows into the bull Bregantino Bregantin!, who rids the village of his tyrannical father reclaiming nature's rights and the birth of men in Cocozumba (19).

Though this tale is rich with other interpretations central to the story such as the power of gender, anthropological references and cultural analysis it overtly illustrates the struggle between Cuban-Catholicism and Afro-Cuban religion through constant comparison between the Catholic Saints and African Gods. Hiriart reminds the reader that Cabrera was aware that religious proverbs were common in Afro-Cuban tales because the Blacks were obligated to harmonize its polytheism with the Catholic culture (45). However, in "Bregantino Bregantin," Cabrera utilizes the comparison between both cultures as a way to empower and create space for Afro-Cuban expression within the Cuban culture.

Similar to Cabrera's struggles, Morrison as a black-female writer, during the civil rights movement focused on black characters living within a white dominated society. She faced head on the hegemonic perception of what defined Euro-American cultural values and ideals impressed on black people. In her novel *The Bluest Eye* the protagonist is a young black girl named Pecola Breedlove who struggles to fit into her community. Given the racial divide of the 1940's she is unable to integrate into white society, so she fantasizes about having white skin, blue eyes and blond hair. While at the same time shunned by the black society because of her ugliness "she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 45).

As the story commences, Morrison cleverly introduces this conflict by emphasizing white middle-class American values as measured through Euro-American standards. The tone of the book is set in the first three lines as one of the narrator's recites the Dick-Jane American primer. "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy." (3). This recitation continues throughout the novel as Pecola faces continuous rejection by the community.

According to Peach, “engaging with the assumptions of the white American primer, Morrison’s novel unfurls the history in Euro-American standards of beauty and in white America’s idealization of the family from an African-American perspective...” (32-33). In addition to the subtle reminder of the influence of the dominant white hegemony, it is also evident in the overt action of the characters.

When Pecola temporarily moves in with the neighbors Frieda and Claudia, she is welcomed with a cup of milk in a Shirley Temple cup. As Pecola takes the cup she “gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (Morrison 19). This fond gaze reflects the ideals that superior beauty consists of light skin, eyes and hair color. However, through the character of Claudia, this iconic view of the white race does not remain stagnant. Claudia says “I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me” (19). Morrison utilizes Claudia both as the narrator and the antagonist for this theme of the novel. As the narrator, she creates a sense of being on the outside looking in at the recognition of the influence of the majority power over the minority race and as antagonist the awareness of suppression of the minority culture.

In addition to their representation of the influence between cultures, both works highlight the importance of cultural identity. Cabrera’s work emphasizes the role the Afro-Cuban culture has in the Cuban culture. She accomplishes this by telling her stories in two distinct settings: the African forest and “el monte” or wilderness of Cuba to emphasize each culture’s identity while creating a bridge between the two. This is evident in the short stories “Tatabisaco” and “El caballo de Hicotea”. In the former the African setting takes place “[e]arly in the morning [where] the women would go to work the fields [and] [t]he men would go deep into the virgin forest to hunt” (Cabrera 112). In the latter, the story commences in Havana where “Hicotea was busy reading *Havana Illustrated* beside a stream where Br’er White Horse came

twice a day to drink" (141). These separate descriptions signify the importance of the wilderness to the individual cultures, but at the same time blend the African and Cuban cultures through their descriptions of an outside space. This blending is important to exemplify Cabrera's anthropological knowledge of the significance of the Afro-Cuban's tribute to the forest/wilderness.

Like Cabrera, Morrison's emphasis on cultural identity is in two forms inclusion and individualism. However, Morrison looks to her characters' behaviors and actions to stress the relevance of African-American identity in the dominant Anglo-Saxon society. On the surface, the beliefs of the character Pecola represent the cultural aspirations to fit in whereas Claudia represents the importance of individualism. Pecola's desire to have blue eyes is a physical change that she believes will gain her acceptance by society. "If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'... Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 46-7). The physical change will take care of the outside perception and dictate on the surface what mainstream society determines acceptable.

On the other hand, the character of Claudia constantly questions these values of white dominance, inadvertently emphasizing the importance of the African-American culture. Each Christmas Claudia received a blonde blue-eyed doll and was told "[h]ere, they said. This is beautiful, and if you are on this day worthy you may have it...I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that the world said was lovable" (21). Such insight allows for individual thought, a shift away from the majority rule.

Moreover, both authors convey their stories in a folkloric language to relay cultural messages through various lessons. They accomplish this by straddling the boundaries of the oral and written discourse, multiple narratives and varied structure. These elements are present in the message conveyed in Cabrera's story "Walo-Wila". In this short story, two sisters Walo-Wila and Ayere Kende live in a house in town. Walo-Wila never went out in public and Ayere

Kende sat out on the balcony to enjoy the cool evening sea breeze. Below the balcony was a golden goblet full of fresh water. As men came by they commented on the beauty of the goblet and Ayere Kende sang "Yes, but my sister is more beautiful!" and the gentleman replied, "I want to see her...Let me come in" and Ayere Kende sang, "If you marry her, you will see her then, my brother" (Cabrera 25).

As many men continued to pass, the banter and song continued. Until one day Stag, the son of Honeysuckle drank out of the golden goblet. Walo-Wila and Ayere Kende sang their lament and despite Walo-Wila's deterrence, Stag pronounced, "I'll marry her." Then, Walo-Wila declared "The mother of my sister lives at the bottom of the sea" (28). At midnight Stag was advised to go down to the bottom of the sea with a gourd of pearls. Stag returned with a gourd filled with sapphires of Olokun (the Orisha Olokun corresponds to Our Lady of Regla-goddess of relationships). Walo-Wila is revealed and Stag learns she is more beautiful than imaginable: "When the moon and the sea kiss..." (28). The power of the written discourse is evident through the imagery of Ayer Kende on the balcony waiting for suitors. The musical call and response create orality and the multiple narratives varied meanings for the reader. This varied literary structure signals multiple levels of meanings and messages through one medium.

Like Cabrera, Morrison's folkloric language utilizes oral and written discourse through the repetition of the Dick-Jane American primer, multiple narrative voices, and play between poetic song and narrative. The introduction and repetition of the primer is like a societal chant of expectation and fluidity between oral and written structure that relays the message to both reader and characters. The multiple narratives relay various messages to the reader. The narrator of the primer is an omniscient narrator who provides Claudia with access to information and other characters outside the immediate range of experience (Peach 34). So, Claudia seeks to understand the relevance and influence of the white middle class to her culture. The play between poetics and narrative is evident in Pecola's reaction to Poland's lament to loneliness.

Pecola climbed the stairs to their apartment. Even before the door was opened to her tapping, she could hear Poland singing-her voice sweet and hard, like new strawberries:

I got blues in my mealbarrel
Blues up on the shelf...(repeat)
Blues in my bedroom

'Cause I'm sleepin' by myself (Morrison 51).

This song represents Pecola's loneliness and desire to be loved. As Maguire explained with Cabrera's work "[b]y changing and confounding expectations of structure and content, expand [their] text's levels of meaning..." (11). Similar to multiple narratives, varied structures enhance the ability identify shifts in meaning directed at the reader and among the characters.

Overall, both female authors overcame various challenges to stand in the present literary stature and though their personal backgrounds and experiences vary there are many commonalities in their literary expression. Both authors rely on a sense of magic to tell their stories. Cabrera's work is less about character development and more about culture with the emphasis on the enchanted expression of cultural and religious values. Morrison develops her characters throughout a novel that has an open structure and fragmentations that leave the reader to interpret subtle messages. Despite their differences, they both recognized the importance of cultures that needed to be heard and recognized by the majority.

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