

“Serious Laughter” as a Philosophy of Black Female Survival

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This paper examines Morrison’s representation of black female laughter in *Jazz* from the perspective of sound cultural studies. Despite a non-voice, black female laughter is a central sound that Morrison gives a multifaceted representation throughout *Jazz*. Despite primarily as a private sound from the rural south, black female laughter gradually evolves into a public, modern sound in the black urban life. In a sense, it becomes a sound that is both private and public, natural and cultural, traditional and modern—a sound which transcends boundaries in time and space, as well as those in race, gender, and class.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, laughter, non-voice

Introduction

Laughter is both a physiological voice and a cultural sound which only humankind is capable to make. This is perhaps why human was anciently defined as “the laughing animal” (Dolar, 2006, p. 29). Although laughter is an “essentially human” sound, not all human laughter carries the same weight. Under the racial discourse and legacy of slavery, for instance, black laughter has long been framed as a sound which is “not only loud and excessive but also unreasonable and potentially seditious” (Millan, 2017, p. 16). This is perhaps why African Americans under slavery were once stereotyped as “the laughing negro” (Willis, 1987, p. 122). According to Mike Chasar, authentic “public” black laughter by the enslaved was banned as part of the enforced silence while working, whereas the permitted kind was “either performed in self-abasing fulfillment of the demands of the enslaving plantation owner”, or “was constructed and heard in the blackface minstrel performances across the North” (2008, pp. 60-61). From the 19th and well into the 20th century, the dominant conception of black laughter “was that of exoticized black minstrelsy, and it is not until the Harlem Renaissance era that a ‘modern black laugh’ appears” (p. 76). These discussions demonstrate that black laughter, far from a simple physiological sound, is a significant non-semantic voice which carries complicated cultural and political implications throughout African American history.

Black Laughter as Sonic Memory in the South

Despite a non-voice, black female laughter is a central sound that Morrison gives a multifaceted representation throughout *Jazz*. Violet Trace, a 50-year-old black woman who lives in the “City” with her husband Joe Trace, is a central figure through whom Morrison depicts the power of the sound of laughter (Morrison, 1992, p. 6). Before migrating to the “City”, Violet, together with Joe, was slave in a southern

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plantation. Harsh as life might be, they had sweet memories of their life in the rural south. Especially noteworthy is Joe’s memory of Violet’s laughter. Joe recalls that once he discovered Violet fell asleep after an exhausting day’s ploughing, and tenderly removed her shoes. Violet “laughed then”, despite still asleep and dreaming, “a light happy laughter that he had never heard before but that seemed to belong her” (p. 226). Violet’s laughter is a vital sound of Joe’s memory of his life in the southern plantation. It is a sound which carries his memory of a private, romantic, and joyful moment of their early love. It indicates that Violet, despite being enslaved in the plantation life, is endowed with the instinct of laughing aloud. In a sense, this private laughter is both a signal sound of Joe’s sweet memory of the rural past and an exhibition of Violet’s humanity as an enslaved black woman.

In *Jazz*, black female laughter is also an exhibition of how African American women struggle for survival with resiliency. True Belle, Violet’s maternal grandmother, for instance, serves as a best example. According to Violet’s description, Belle leaves Baltimore and comes to offer a hand to Violet’s mother Rosa Dear, who is struck by the miserable life and heavy burden to raise five children on her own after being abandonment by her husband. As Violet observes, “[she] entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band” although the whole family are “hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor, hungry and irritable” (Morrison, 1992, p. 113). Gradually, the sound of her laughter suffuses the little cabin and cheers up the whole family. Her grandchild “laughed too” and her daughter Rose Dear “smiled” and felt “suddenly the world was right up” (p. 114). In Violet’s memory, True Belle’s laughter is a natural and infectious sound which sweeps away the gloom that clouds the family and empowers her daughter and grandchildren to learn to survive hardships and pains.

Loss of Black Laughter in the Metropolitan North

While they indeed have wonderful sonic memories of the liberating and enlightening black female laughter, many black women lose their loud laughter as they migrate to the metropolitans in the beginning of the 20th century. Alice Manfred, for instance, “laughed loud as a child” yet becomes totally silent due to her experiences of racial riots widespread in big cities in the North (Morrison, 1992, p. 84). Felice’s mother used to laugh a lot, but she stops laughing too as she moves to the “City” because her way of speaking is often laughed at by the new community. It seems that black women, after moving to the “City”, share a common loss of their laughter.

Among all black women in *Jazz*, Violet exhibits a most evident loss of black laughter. “Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced into the city, while they were still a couple, they barely speak to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground as a dance-floor” (Morrison, 1992, p. 36). Violet loses her laughter and is soon rendered voiceless. Her loud and hearty laughter is ultimately replaced by a troublesome silence. “Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until “uh” or “have mercy” carry almost all her part of a conversation (p. 24). The reason for this change is an overwhelming sense of displacement as Morrison struggles to embrace the new urban life in the North, which causes her transformation from a woman with loud laughter to a woman who could only speak to a bird.

Restoring the Sonic Legacy of Laughter Within Black Community

Violet, facing difficulties adjusting to city life, needs to reconnect with her black heritage. Morrison uses Alice Manfred, a middle-aged black woman with similar experiences of racial and gender persecution, to help Violet. When Violet finds out about her husband’s affair with Alice’s niece Dorcas, and that Dorcas is murdered by Joe for loving another man, she becomes furious. In her anger, Violet disrupts Dorcas’s funeral and knocks

over her portrait. After the funeral, Violet’s curiosity about Dorcas grows, leading her to seek out Alice. Despite an initial rejection, Alice eventually accepts Violet, allowing a dialogue that reveals Dorcas’s life and the reasons behind the betrayal, as well as the shared struggles of black women transitioning from rural to urban settings. These conversations help both women break their silence and overcome the hostility from Dorcas’s death and their different social statuses.

Near the end of a conversation about their respective sadness and marital sorrows, Violet stares at Alice for she notices that Alice burns a hole in the shirt she is ironing. When Alice “lift[s] the iron” and sees “the black and smoking ship burned clear through the yoke”, both women burst into laughter. “Violet [is] the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter [is] rocking them both” (Morrison, 1992, p. 113). It seems that the sound of their laughter empowers both women to face up to all the pains they have been suffering and ultimately regain the strength to move forward. Their shared laughter binds them together and allows them to see the absurdity of their situation and the collective plights of black women’s survival. It is a highly cathartic and restorative sound which reminds Violet of True Belle, making her “learn then what she has forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears” (p. 113). Her recalling of that laughter suggests her ultimate success in restoring the lost sonic legacy.

Conclusion

In a sense, Morrison’s writing of the sound of laughter resonates powerfully with her female predecessors’ theories on black laughter as “emotional salvation” (Keyser, 2010, p. 100) or “eruptions of the funk” (Willis, 1987, p. 68). Nevertheless, rather than simply taking laughter as a black cultural heritage, she offers a multifaceted sonic representation of black female laughter to offer a complete picture of the black interiority in the Jazz Age. Afro-American women in *Jazz* laugh differently. True Belle’s “loud” and “hearty” laughter becomes a mark of her identity and the sonic memory ingrained in her granddaughter Violet’s brain, while Violet’s “light” and “happy” laughter later recalls the sweet memories of the rural South. Black female laughter gradually evolves from a private rural sound into a public, modern sound in black urban life. Violet and Alice’s rocking laughter proves their reassertion of the lost black legacy and the essentiality of black female laughter in the urban black communal life. In a sense, in *Jazz*, black female laughter becomes a sound that conveys a restored philosophy of black female survival.

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