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CHOOSING AFRICA: THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMING IN *BELLOVED* AND *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE*

BY LEAH MILNE

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* takes place in the 1870s and tells the story of a black antebellum post-slavery family in Ohio and Kentucky, while Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* begins in 1959 and tells the story of a white missionary family in the Congo. Between the historical space of these two novels, Jim Crow laws are enacted and enforced, *Plessy v. Ferguson* upholds the constitutionality of state-sponsored "separate but equal," and *Brown v. Board of Education* overturns it. A world of racial upheaval—not to mention the span of two continents, Africa and North America—seems to mark the gap between these two novels. And yet in many aspects, the two novels are similar, and looking at one through the lens of the other can enhance the readings of both. Wrapped up in the novels' opening scenes are anxious confrontations between maternity turned upside down, struggles with what Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta calls, sometimes ironically, the "joys of motherhood"—the choices that mothers make for their children, and the consequences these choices can have. The uncanny, somewhat unreal nature of these scenes alludes to far graver issues that language itself has trouble accommodating. It is ultimately through elements of language—specifically through renaming and storytelling—that the women of these novels find their own voices in the face of the dominant forces that oppress them. In exploring aspects of naming and renaming, this essay will reveal how the women in these novels attempt a rebirth in the midst of hardships that are often too large to capture in words.

In fact, the immense problems at the heart of both novels—issues of slavery, colonialism, and finding a religion and identity untainted by white male oppression—are, to use Morrison's term, so "unspeakable" as to demand allegorical renderings. Even so, the large looming questions behind these two novels still remain after their publication: How does one "write Africa"? Is it possible to render through words the history of African and African American oppression? Is it possible to speak of an "Africa" even in this allegorical sense? In the foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison writes that slave and mother Margaret Garner inspired her novel, but that the actual woman Beloved walked out of the water whole and sat next to her. The book then is both myth and history, "historically true in essence but not strictly factual" (xvii-xviii), and takes on through the omniscient narrator the voice and perspective of everyone from Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, to the reviled plantation owner, Schoolteacher, and finally the choral voices of Sethe and her daughters, Denver and Beloved. Similarly, Kingsolver, in an interview on her publisher's website, describes her book as an allegory that is "political and domestic, symbolic and epic." She writes that "this novel is asking, basically, 'What did we do to Africa, and how do we feel about it?' It's a huge question. I'd be insulting my readers to offer only one answer." She therefore tells the story through Orleanna, writing retrospectively, and her four daughters—15-year-old Rachel, twins Leah and Adah, and the youngest, Ruth May—who narrate their impressions of the Congo, their missionary father Nathan, and their world as they experience it. In approaching the writing of "Africa" by resorting to both multiple voices and singularly intimate stories—each about a home and the family within that home—Morrison and Kingsolver point to both the impossibility of and the necessity to contain these larger questions on a more manageable scale.

The importance both authors give to the rendering of voice and perspective in these books also indicate the significance of renaming and re-inscribing through language. Dauterich points out that in *Beloved*, the characters' names "exemplify the close ties between name and action. Sixo's 'Thirty-Mile woman' gets her name because he walked that far to be with her. 'Baby Suggs Holy' combines her husband's last name, his nickname for her, and her chosen profession once she is free. Stamp Paid's name connects to his freedom" (34). In fact, the naming of Baby Suggs reveals more than just her "chosen profession." She takes on the last name Suggs, and passes it on to her son and Sethe's husband Halle, even though the name belongs to a person she calls her husband only as a "manner of speaking"—who is not even Halle's birth father (167). She also takes this name despite the fact that her bill of sale lists her as Jenny Whitlow. Though her former owner suggests that Baby Suggs is not an appropriate name for a freed slave, she nonetheless chooses the name that she, through the memory of her husband, has christened herself (167-68), characteristically maintaining for both practical, and what can only be called political, purposes.

In contrast, the title character in *Beloved* is not given the chance to name herself, which gestures back to the impossibility of language to truly capture all that *Beloved* represents—the agony of the Middle Passage, the grief for children prematurely lost to slavery and death, and the "too thick" love of a mother who learns through Baby Suggs "that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (194, 28). *Beloved's* abstractness is made evident in her first physical encounter, when she speaks, not a name given to her at birth, but the name bought for her tombstone through Sethe's humiliation. Paul D and Denver hear only the voice first and the name afterwards (5, 62). Morrison's portrayal of *Beloved* is necessarily dense and intricate because of the weight of representation placed upon the character. Thus the very

struggle “of accounting for [Beloved] as a presence and as an absence, and of understanding what the word means, is symptomatic of the difficulty of reading Morrison’s novel. . . . The name both marks and preserves against loss” (Handey 680). Consequently, even through her name—which is at once noun and adjective, title and epitaph, the opening of a prayer and, as the book’s last word, a goodbye—Beloved resists easy categorization. Because the loss that Beloved and her name represent is irretrievable, it must in some ways be forgotten, though Morrison vividly renders Beloved’s desperate struggle to “claim a place for herself in memory” (Poole 138). For Handey, the inadequacies of the English language to accommodate the nameless Beloved find resolution in certain aspects of West African philosophy, where the power of *nommo* has the ability to give life and to “make real” in the sense of making one *muntu* (Handey 677).¹ The part of Beloved that represents Sethe’s “crawling-already? girl” remains unnamed at the end of the novel (110, 323), suggesting that the weightiness behind her name is unaccommodating in language, thought, and memory.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the renaming of the daughters by the residents of Kilanga is the first sign that the girls’ new home and its inhabitants will form and inform their futures. Kingsolver draws heavily on other languages—particularly Kikongo—to capture the essence of the more unspeakable concepts that the novel faces. In fact the neighbors rename the girls in Kikongo, in some ways kinder than others, but in all ways true to their identities and the impressions they make. Rachel, for example, the eldest and also the most close-minded and materialistic of the daughters, is widely known as Mvúla, a termite whose paleness and apparent terror of life mirror her own (208). While most of the Kilangans refer to Leah as Leba, or “fig tree” (in kindness to the fact that her actual name in Kikongo means “nothing much”), a family friend and Leah’s future husband, Anatole, gives her the name of Béene-

Béene, which he later reveals to mean “as true as true can be” (287), a fitting summary of the unflinching way she cuts to the heart of truth in even the most difficult circumstances, including the death of their youngest sister, Ruth May. Similarly, Ruth May’s name, Bandu, means both “the littlest one on the bottom” and “the reason for everything” (238), appropriate for the way that her meekness in life and the suddenness of her death shade the meaning of everything that Orleanna, and—in some ways—Leah, and the rest of the girls voice their thoughts throughout particularly the second half of the novel. More than the others, Leah’s disabled twin Adah finds in Kikongo a solace from the insufficiency of the English language and, years after her mother and sisters’ exodus from Kilanga, she reflects on the meaning of her own Kikongo name as she considers the aftermath of a body formerly wracked with hemiplegia:

How can I explain that my two unmatched halves used to add up to more than one whole? In Congo I was one-half *benduka* the crooked walker, and one-half *bënduka*, the sleek bird that dipped in and out of the banks with a crazy ungrace that took your breath. We both had our good points. Here there is no good name for my gift, so it died without a proper ceremony. I am now the good Dr. Price, seeing straight. Conceding to be in my right mind. (493)

Adah’s preoccupation with words leads her to find a home and an identity in the subtleties of the language and in the multifaceted intricacies of her Kikongo name, which to her is more meaningful and nuanced than the name given to her at birth.

This is not to say, of course, that the aspects of naming in either Kingsolver or Morrison’s books are romanticized in their mysteriousness and complexities. In fact, at the heart of this naming and renaming of children are the unspeakable secrets of mothers and the reasons behind the often heart-breaking choices they have to make. Adah believes that these choices begin with the naming of the

child, a choice that can itself have lifelong consequences. In her discussion with her friend Nelson on the importance of *nommo*, she realizes that a rabbit, because it is named such, cannot have any life other than a “rabbit life.” Similarly, a “child is not alive, claims Nelson, until it is named. . . . This helped explain a mystery for me. My sister and I are identical twins, so how is it that from one single seed we have two such different lives? Now I know. Because I am named *Adah* and she is named *Leah*” (209). If a child is not alive until named, then it is notable that the actual given name for “Sethe’s crawling-already? Girl” is never revealed. As a child, Nan reveals that Sethe’s own mother, pregnant multiple times through rape in the Middle Passage, “threw them all away but you. . . . Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never.” (74). Thus Sethe understands even as she holds the just-born baby Denver in her arms that the “moment of certainty” about the baby’s life was ephemeral at best (99). The only choice that she, and women like her mother and her neighbor Ella, are allowed to make seems to be whether they allow their children—named or unnamed—to live with them in slavery, or not to live at all.

Naming a child thus signifies a promise for life that Sethe and her fellow slaves are not always in a position to make. That Sethe’s own mother, above all the other unnamed children, chooses her and names her makes the reality of her mother’s death that much harder to bear, particularly if that death was the result of an attempt to escape. As Keizer points out, Sethe refuses the idea of her mother’s death being a punishment for escape “because it would mean that she left her daughter behind. Her mother’s abandonment of her and the fact that Sethe never got enough milk when she was being nursed are the tragedies at the very base of Sethe’s life, and she tries to compensate for her own motherlessness by being a super-

mother to her children" (34). Morrison may have in fact intended Sethe's mothering to be beyond superior as a response to the assumption "that slave women are not mothers; they are 'naturally dead,' with no obligations to their offspring or their parents" (*Dark* 21). Though this may have inspired, as Demetrakopoulos describes it, a maternal instinct carried "to an absurd and grotesque length" (58), it is, in Sethe's extreme circumstances, a mothering that is necessarily wrought on life or death. Thus Sethe makes sure her children, whom she describes as her "best thing" (321), escape before she does and, when even this plan fails, decides to save them from the hardships of slavery by choosing which one to kill first.

An extreme circumstance of a more biological quality forces Orleanna to make what could have been a life-or-death decision with her two youngest and most helpless daughters, Adah and Ruth May. Ruth May, identified in the opening scene as "her only secret, her favorite" is constantly renamed in Orleanna's first-person passages, which direct their pleas of forgiveness to "the eyes in the trees," "my own flesh and blood, my last born," and "my little beast, my eyes, my favorite stolen egg" (385). The names of endearment and regret that Orleanna bestows upon Ruth May after her death by snakebite become a kind of litany or prayer in their desperation. They are a supplication for forgiveness against harsh judgment. When colonies of stinging driver ants invade Kilanga, both Leah and Orleanna—incidentally the two protagonists who are the only mothers at the book's end—feel that they have been judged by their decisions. In inadvertently leaving behind her family, especially her crippled twin Adah, in the panic of flight, Leah compares herself to Simon Peter thrice denying Jesus—once when the slow-moving Adah was almost eaten by a wild animal, here again with the ants, and the first time in the womb, when Adah was inflicted with her disease (300). Meanwhile, surrounded by biting ants, Orleanna, as told through Adah's judging

eyes, is said to have “weighed her life” against Ruth May’s. When Orleanna, after a moment’s hesitation, chooses Ruth May, Adah feels abandoned for death. And yet, even in this potential death, Adah finds rebirth: “The wonder to me now is that *I* thought myself worth saving” (306). Unknowingly echoing one of Orleanna’s secret names for Ruth May, Adah feels that, by deeming her own life precious, Adah has marked herself as “a beast in the kingdom” (306). Orleanna, seeming to reflect herself on that incident, characterizes mothering of one’s last born child as “love by a different name” (382). Unlike the raising of the twins and Rachel, which was accompanied by a flurry of exhausting choices where “one mouth closed on a spoon meant two crying empty” (381), she describes mothering Ruth May as precious, a way to suspend that moment of certainty that Sethe sees only briefly at Denver’s birth. “The last one,” Orleanna says of Ruth May, “is the babe you hold in your arms for an hour after she’s gone to sleep. . . . She’s the one you can’t put down” (382). That she literally refuses to put Ruth May down to help a pleading Adah escape the ants in Kilanga reveals how Orleanna’s decision was made long before the ants invaded.

These extreme choices made in the name of motherhood haunt both the mothers and the children left behind. Hearing the unspoken pleas of the babies in the neonatal intensive care unit calling to her in what sounds to Adah like Ruth May’s favorite game (“*Live or die, live or die?* they chorused. *Mother May We?*”), Adah is haunted by the choice that Orleanna made in Kilanga, and scared further still that, given a second chance to choose whom to take out of the Congo, her mother would have chosen “perfect Leah” instead. When, after much deliberation, Orleanna tells Adah that she chose her because “after Ruth May, you were my youngest,” Adah herself chooses to be comforted by her mother’s “made-up bedtime story” (444). She realizes that “it was not a question of my own worth at all. There is no *worth*. It was a question of position, and a

mother's need" (444). Whether true or not, Orleanna does not come about her answer through practicality or favoritism. It is possible she does not even come about it through love. In its straightforward inexplicability, in its inability to be truly defined and elucidated by language, Orleanna's interpretation of her motives echo the secret reasoning behind Sethe's own decision. In her attempt to explain the choice of killing the crawling-already? baby to Paul D, she realizes that "the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one" (192); that, even if anyone asked for an explanation, she would not be able to form the correct words to give one. In actuality,

the truth was simple . . . she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. . . . And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (192)

Sethe, like Orleanna, is "a woman who forever defines herself through her maternal bonds" (Demetrakopoulos 54), and when these bonds are pushed to their limits, the choices made are also pushed beyond the reach of common words. Handey notes that "because Sethe killed her daughter to prevent her being taken as a slave—and hence named as one—'Beloved' is a call that resists slavery's name and that asks for a response" (681). That Sethe is unable to articulate an adequate response is a testament to the intensity of her love. When language is insufficient in making clear the unspeakable, when it is not humanly possible to name the agony behind the choices they make, these mothers instead choose to tell stories, or to circle around them.

The legacies of these stories and the choices behind them filter down into the consciousness of the children left in their wake. For example, Denver, forced in a reversal of

roles to mother Sethe after Sethe's intense "motherlove" for Beloved almost kills her (286, 132), learns most clearly from her mother's choice that, to paraphrase Ella, "past errors" should not be allowed to take "possession of the present" (302). While Poole suggests that Denver's leaving behind of Sethe represents "a certain brutality" (144), it is in fact a poignant combination of Sethe's and Sethe's mother's own brutal but love-driven choices: Denver decides to leave 124 and her mother behind in order to save both. In her rescue attempt, Denver discovers a community of mothers and, notably, a community of names. In her former teacher's living room, Denver asks for work and finds, in Mrs. Jones' sympathetic term of endearment, a rebirth: Denver "did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly [by Mrs. Jones] and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman" (292). Denver's own name, itself a testament to the rare and unexpected benevolence of her namesake (36), is placed alongside "paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others," a community of mothers who have willingly let go of the past in order to make sure that a child and her mother are fed (292-93).

The legacy that Leah and, to a different extent, her other sisters inherit from Orleanna is that of undying apology, though with Leah in particular this apology has increased tenfold to encompass more than just Ruth May. The first inkling of Ruth May's death occurs during a long convalescence, when Leah realizes that children die in the Congo every day, and that her early life in Georgia shielded her from such worries. "I used to threaten Ruth May's life so carelessly just to make her behave," she recalls. "Now I had to face the possibility that we really could lose her, and my heart felt like a soft, damaged place in my chest, like a bruise on a peach" (236). Orleanna's first-person sections, which are divided between entreaties for Ruth May's forgiveness and disillusionment with her country for leading the Congo in killing their political fa-

ther Patrice Lumumba, find their echo in Leah's own social activism and constant need to apologize for her whiteness and for her failure to save Ruth May, and children like her, from dying in the wilderness.

Having first landed in the Congo, a "place [they] believed unformed" (10), by the end of the novel, Leah has instead chosen the Belgian Congo over America, stating that "when the neighbors or students ask me my nationality, I tell them I come from a country that no longer exists" (433). She finds no reason to embrace a country that "regarded my husband and children as primitives, or freaks. . . . I can't drag a husband and sons into a life where their beauty will blossom and wither in darkness" (468-69). Leah chooses to eschew the conveniences and luxuries of America in favor of a hard but accepting life for her sons in the Congo. Adah thus observes that, in the wake of the oppressive religion of their father, Leah's newly adopted "religion is the suffering" (442). In naming her own children after her dead friends from Kilanga (434, 440), Leah attempts her own rebirth through them. In this she also learns from them a lesson that came much harder to mothers like Orleanna, who prays to a little girl who is beyond the reach of either time or language, or Sethe, who feels that with *Beloved* returned she can eschew both time and language, simply "hurry time along and get to the no-time waiting for her" (225-26). While Leah feels she may have doomed her friends to death simply by their friendly association with her and the English words she taught them (434), she learns to wait for time to catch up and heal the hurt embodied in her white skin. Her friends' namesakes, the sons who, as her husband Anatole tells her, "love [her] more than their own eyes," (470) regard their mother as neither white nor American. They themselves "are the colors of silt, loam, dust, and clay, an infinite palette for children of their own," Leah recounts. Through them, she "understand[s] that time erases whiteness altogether" (526), and that the Congo's wounds—at

least those caused by whiteness—may become less extreme as the years go by. The ability to allow time to pass and to allow old wounds to properly heal is a legacy that Leah passes on to her children.

It is in this legacy, in fact, that the true impact of these representations of naming can be seen. Referencing another well-known colonial book about the Congo by Joseph Conrad, Adah reflects on the Congo's literal renaming of itself and its cities like Stanleyville and Leopoldville: "Congo was a woman in shadows, dark-hearted, moving to a drumbeat. Zaire is a tall young man tossing salt over his shoulder. All the old injuries have been renamed: *Kinshasa*, *Kisangani*. There was never a King Leopold, no brash Stanley, bury them, forget. You have nothing to lose but your chains" (495). It is no mistake that the new Zaire government begins by renaming cities to erase the traces of their conquerors. This symbolic act through which power is wrested through language is part of Mobutu's ideology of *authenticité* (Dunn 109), the campaign name suggesting that these acts of renaming are attempts to get at the truer identity of a Congo before colonization, what Dunn calls a "self-invention" (emphasis his, 111).² Both mothers and the self-proclaimed fathers of a country understand the importance of naming to signify the promise of new beginnings.

However, both Kingsolver and Morrison do what Mobutu does not, and that is to return to the importance of the naming itself, and to honor the stories behind the act. Nelson, in his explanation of *nommo* to Adah, says that "water itself is *nommo*, of the most important kind . . . Water is the word of the ancestors given to us or withheld, depending on how well we treat them" (210). The component of *Beloved* that belongs to the heritage of, as mentioned in Morrison's dedication, the "Sixty Million and more" slaves who died during the Middle Passage is markedly associated with images of water throughout the novel and, in her last sighting, is a trace of footprints by

the stream and a woman with fish for hair (324, 315). The final passage of the novel testifies to the importance of Beloved's name and the story and larger history it represents: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?" (323). Out of the water and the everyday lives of Sethe and Denver, Beloved fights for her name to be remembered.

Adah similarly realizes that remembering the reason for the naming is as important as the name itself, and that simply renaming old wounds does not always help them heal: "If chained is where you have been, your arms will always bear marks of the shackles. What you have to lose is your story, your own slant. You'll look at the scars on your arms and see mere ugliness, or you'll take great care to look away from them and see nothing. Either way, you have no words for the story of where you came from" (495). For Adah, as well as for Morrison and Kingsolver, language is not enough to wash away the pain of a country's wounds. After all, behind the renaming of the Congo is Mobutu, a man placed into power by the Americans after the assassination of Lumumba (on the same day, it should be noted, that Ruth May is killed by a snake). Leah, Anatole, and his sister Elisabet repeatedly practice the new names of the Congo "as if we're trying to memorize a false identity. . . . Elisabet worries genuinely, in spite of our reassurances, that she and Anatole might have been assigned new first names, since theirs are European and 'colonialist.' . . . The old couple next door . . . always forget and say 'Léopoldville,' then cover their mouths with their hands as if they've let slip a treason" (445).³ While the new names of the Congo are a sign of power moving away from Belgium and America, they also mark the beginning of the reign of the "kleptocratic dictator" Mobutu (Haskin 6). In this case, as in the history of slavery presented in *Beloved*, a complete erasure of the past is not only dishonorable, but it is also unwise. The question Morrison's narrator

asks, "How can they call her if they don't know her name?" resonates through these attempts to wrest agency through naming and renaming. *Beloved* and *The Poisonwood Bible* are both pleas to remember the story behind the names. Even if rebirth occurs, forgetting the old names would make the new ones meaningless.

The eventual failure of Mobutu's attempt to impose *authenticité* upon the Congo denotes, in part, the inability of language to write and rename Africa. While his government's corruption, his lack of political savvy, and his subsequent lack of international support are what ultimately caused Mobutu's decline in power, Mobutu's rhetoric and performative speech worsened his standing at home and abroad throughout his time in power (Dunn 127, 137). Concerning the use of the English language, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o sees no distinction between language and politics when he writes: "We as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?" (26). Though they go a somewhat different direction than Thiong'o, who uses this reasoning to eschew English altogether in his own work, Kingsolver's use of Kikongo, and Morrison's evocation of African philosophical and spiritual concepts are, in their own ways, political choices of language. Both understand that their own names and the words they use can either bring honor or dishonor to the legacy of Africa and slavery in America. As Kingsolver says in her publisher's interview of *The Poisonwood Bible*, "I've been thinking about this story for as long as I've had eyes and a heart. I live in a country that has done awful things, all over the world, in my name. You can't miss that" (n.p.). Orleanna's dictatorial, prejudiced and misogynistic husband is named Nathan, a name close enough to "nation" to suggest what Strehle

refers to as the ugliness of American exceptionalist thinking.

And yet the critical reception of both *Beloved* and *The Poisonwood Bible* reveals the problems that come with any representation of Africa and its history. Purcell, for example, looks at the possible inaccuracy of Kingsolver's presentation of Congolese attitudes toward twins to point out how she has effectually gotten away with essentializing Africa (2). Similarly, Stanley Crouch has famously accused Morrison and Alice Walker of having adopted their own essentialized religion of suffering that is discernable by its "inclinations to melodrama, militant self-pity, guilt-mongering, and pretensions to mystic wisdom," specifically with *Beloved* being Morrison's attempt to "enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest" (204-05). With *Beloved* seen as partially representing the sixty million and more slaves who died in the Middle Passage, and the deceased Ruth May calling herself *muntu* Africa, "one child and a million all lost on the same day" (537), there is an understandable suggestion of essentialization in both novels. Still, for Leah, Orleanna, and Sethe, the legacy of Africa is inextricably tied up with the memories of dead children. Both writers in their interviews and other works have proven sensitive to the danger of essentializing Africa and, for that matter, the history of any other large group of people. As Handey states, "Morrison's own theoretical work demonstrates what her novel bears out—that normative theory and reading practice cannot properly unlock African American literature when it is marked as heavily as is *Beloved* by African culture" (679). In fact, in the writing of both these novels there is a suggestion of a kind of counter-essentialization: "Unlike authors such as Joseph Conrad," Ognibene states, "Kingsolver reverses expectations and roles: it is not the Congolese who are ignorant or 'savage' or say the wrong words but the colonizers" (34). Morrison enacts this counter-essentialization even more explicitly by writing about the other in a way

that does not dehumanize them. *Beloved* herself is a legion, a way to avoid privileging the dominant voice.

Being in the business of writing, Kingsolver and Morrison understand the impossibility of language in wholly depicting the history and collective experience of any country or community, but they both show in their books the importance of making sure that such histories and experiences no longer remain “disremembered and unaccounted for.” In her own exploration of the history of the American literary canon in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes,

I am vulnerable to the inference here that my inquiry has vested interests; that because I am an African-American and a writer I stand to benefit in ways not limited to intellectual fulfillment from this line of questioning [regarding the often unspoken Africanist presence in American literature]. I will have to risk the accusation because the point is too important; for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive. (12-13)

In an interview with *The Independent*, Kingsolver echoes Morrison’s sense of responsibility with language and story when she admits, “I am well aware you have got plenty else to do than read this book. Maybe it’s Southern modesty, but I really wouldn’t bother you if this weren’t important. . . . That’s how I come to my readers: ‘I won’t bother you, unless it’s important. Trust me, it is’” (Palmer 9). Both writers depict the passions behind their own writings as a compulsion. While it is impossible to write about these peoples and histories comprehensively and to the satisfaction of all involved, it is impossible too for these authors to not write about it. In another echo that resonates through both books, Brother Fowles tells Orleanna, “We’re branches grafted on this good tree, Mrs. Price. The great root of Africa sustains us” (258). As if in response, the narrator of *Beloved* states, “Ax the trunk, the limb will

die" (285). Both Morrison and Kingsolver understand the importance and danger of what they are writing, but cannot ignore their roots and their responsibilities simply because the language will not bend enough to accommodate their subject matter. In their allegorical novels, they attempt, however difficult the task, to put a name to the unspeakable.

Notes

¹ For his insights into *nommo*, Handey draws from a study by Jahnheinz Jahn that, while insightful, is at peril of essentializing African cultures under one umbrella category (again highlighting the difficulty in writing Africa). Handey comments in his first footnote that when Jahn refers to "Africa" he is referring to West African culture (only a somewhat lesser generalization, but one that Handey does not confront). Kingsolver also references Jahn in her bibliography, Adah noting that, in the Congo, "*nommo* is the force that makes things live as what they are: man or tree or animal. *Nommo* means *word*" (209).

² Though, in a sign of things to come, Dunn is mystified by Mobutu's choosing of the name Zaire, which, as he notes on page 111, is a "Portuguese corruption over the more authentic Kikongo form 'N'Zadi.'"

³ In fact, Haskin notes that Mobutu did eventually force the people to drop their Christian names in favor of ones that more authentically reflected African traditions (42, 44).

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