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**Abstract:** In the current context of the proliferation of neo-slave narratives, Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995) strikes a rather singular tone. With its title explicitly echoing Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Cary's novel and its straightforward realism come as a surprise. As this close intertextual reading of the two novels intends to show, beyond expressing a probable anxiety of influence, Cary's narrative appears to revise major tenets of the African American ethos on which *Beloved* rests.

**Keywords:** *Beloved*, *The Price of a Child*, neo-slave narrative, magic realism, African American ethos

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# Beyond Magic Realism: the Stuff of Ordinary Lives? Lorene Cary's Rewriting of *Beloved*

*Claude Le Fustec*

When comparing Lorene Cary's 1995 novel *Price of a Child* with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—published eight years earlier—one is struck by their surface similarity. In terms of subject matter both are based on the real life stories of a fugitive female slave—Margaret Garner in Morrison's case, Jane Johnson in Cary's. The two women's attempted escapes took place in a similar time-frame (1855 in Johnson's case, 1856 in Garner's)—but while Johnson's was a success, Garner's failed. Beyond mere historical data, the main connections between Morrison's and Cary's texts are, of course, their fictional reconstruction of these women's courageous endeavour to attain freedom and their shared focus on the major cost both enslaved women had to pay as mothers. While Margaret Garner went as far as trying to kill her children rather than witness their return to slavery, in Cary's novel, Jane Johnson's fictive counterpart, Virginia (Ginnie) Pryor, has to make the decision to leave her baby boy behind in the South to escape with her other two children—taking advantage of their short stop in Philadelphia with their owner. In short, in these two novels respectively, one mother is prompted to murder her child, the other, to desert her son.

This is as far as potential parallels between the novels go. As becomes clear from the titles, the two narrative projects, in fact, differ widely: in comparison to *Beloved*—with its biblical epigraph heralding a narrative enterprise with strong symbolic resonance—the matter-of-fact character of Cary's title, *The Price of a Child*, almost sounds like a jarring note. While *Beloved's* epigraph and its biblical promise (“I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved”) seems to place spiritual redemption at the heart of the novel, the theme of redemption takes on a much more concrete and financial character (as, literally, payment for) in Cary's phrase “The *Price* of a Child.”

Indeed, this feeling of a stark contrast between the subtle symbolism of Morrison's novel and Cary's 'matter-of-factly' writing is not restricted to a comparison between the two titles. At first sight, though, the narrative strategies of the two novels seem very similar: both are neo-slave narratives "bearing witness to 'the interior life of people who didn't write [their history],' [...] fill[ing] in the blanks that the slave narrative left" (Morrison, qtd. in Bell 167). Both, then, are about "the recovery of lost experience" (167). And yet, as the titles alert us, each goes about this project in quite opposite ways. *Beloved*, as Caroline Rody remarks, is "evidently a politically engaged novel, is also a novel of extraordinary psychological reach" (86). Now, as far as Cary's novel is concerned, one might reverse the analysis and say that *The Price of a Child*, if evidently a "psychological project of reimagining an inherited past" (86), is first and foremost a politically engaged novel. The nuance between them is a matter of narrative priorities that condition each novel's overall attitude towards historical data. To put it in different words, *Beloved*'s famed literary power comes from broaching history as emotional trauma and giving a fictional shape to that repressed past. *The Price of a Child*, in contrast, is more interested in dramatizing history. Cary makes history into an interesting story, at times full of suspense, with episodes like Ginnie's escape or her appearance at the trial of the members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee who had helped her escape; but the "life and death story of the surviving self" (Rody 102) that *Beloved* is, or the "self-definition" (87), in which contemporary African American novels on slavery are engaged, as Rody insists (87)—even if inescapable ingredients of Cary's neo-slave narrative—results in a narrative conspicuously devoid of symbolic suggestiveness.

What might account for this narrative strategy is a remark made by Cary herself in some interviews, which is also expressed in the novel itself: in fictionally narrating Jane Johnson's story as one episode in the undocumented history of black slavery on American soil, she was trying to expose "the play within a play" (Cary 68):

The whole business, underground by necessity, trickled like groundwater, and the white world seldom took notice—of those escaping or of those captured and dragged back to bondage. The play within a play unfolded, born-and-bred Americans crossing the land, on foot, on boats, on trains, parcel post, looking for freedom—and hearing the desperate whispers behind the curtains, America hurried past. Who sang their songs? Who wrote their romance? (68)

The play within a play of American life: Cary herself shows that hers is more the eye of the dramatist than of the novelist. Accordingly, her chapters all bear titles that sum up the gist of the action or the main event, in

sometimes overtly dramatic tones such as the command “stand” given as a title to chapter 2, where the enslaved woman Virginia’s escape is recounted.

This choice to dramatize history in a rather flatly realistic way has a number of narrative and semantic consequences regarding the rewriting of history. One is that traumatic memory stops being a central issue in Cary’s novel. In Cherise A. Pollard’s words, “in *The Price of a Child*, [Cary] moves past the revelation of her protagonist’s psychological trauma in order to portray a character who strategically invokes her memories of slavery to advance the abolitionist cause. Cary’s protagonist is not paralyzed by her memories of slavery” (189). If, as Pollard proceeds to demonstrate, Cary has chosen a feminist portrayal of her central female character as a vocal abolitionist over that of a mute sufferer, the result is a rather straightforward narrative that, far from involving readers in a shared process of imaginative recovery, firmly holds their hands to guide them through a simple, chronological narrative, where we are made to mildly sympathize with the various characters involved. There is no central horror scene around which the narrative would be circling as in *Beloved*. On the contrary, in Cary’s novel, the climactic episode of Virginia’s escape seems quickly disposed of, in the second chapter of the novel, leaving the other eleven chapters to deal with her life out of bondage.

In a way, then, if one turns to the issue of genre, a central debate in the study of neo-slave narratives and even more so in the case of *Beloved*, *The Price of a Child* appears to nearly completely evade it. Indeed, far from the generic recreation consistently examined when studying the relationship of neo-slave narratives to slave narratives, *The Price of a Child* would seem as close as can be to the “univocal 19<sup>th</sup> c. slave narrative in which plot rides character in the protagonist’s journey of transformation from object to subject” (Bell 169). True, Cary’s novel is not univocal, since the third-person narration allows probing into all of the characters’ minds, black and white. But what is conspicuously absent is the complex insertion of a supernatural element (*Beloved*) into an otherwise realistic narrative, which has fuelled the generic debate around Morrison’s novel and its creative rewriting of history. As Carl D. Malmgren puts it, “*Beloved* is a novel that straddles generic forms” (190) in a sometimes uneasy way:

Indeed some of its genre forms seem to rub against one another, to co-exist uneasily, in a state of tension, if not antagonism. The relation between ghost story and historical novel is a case in point. (190)

Much has been said in terms of resulting generic classifications. Like Caroline Rody—and contrary to Carl Malmgren—I would argue for the magic realist character this juxtaposition of the supernatural and the real-

istic gives to Morrison's novel rather than call it "fantastic" (195), as Malmgren does, precisely for the reason Malmgren gives to defend his fantastic thesis: "*Beloved* is both ghost story and historical novel" (195). This is why it qualifies as magic realist, since magic realism is all about this double, non-exclusive reading, whereas the fantastic, as defined by Todorov, relies on the "unresolved antinomy"<sup>1</sup> between a supernatural and rational interpretation. Whatever the conclusion as to the fantastic or magic realist character of *Beloved* however, the main interest of this generic debate regarding Morrison's novel as a neo-slave narrative is its implied relationship to reality and notably the past, best illustrated by Sethe's enigmatic assertion to her daughter Denver: "nothing ever dies" (*Beloved* 36):

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. (36)

From a magic realist stance, this makes perfect sense, as magic realism places all levels of reality (past/present, subjective/objective and mainly rational/irrational, supernatural or magic) on equal footing. Indeed, the essential feature of magic realism is its reliance on a non-rational perception of reality, as opposed to the fantastic:

Unlike the fantastic narrative, which adheres to a rational-empirical worldview and regards anything not sanctioned by this worldview as a menacing intrusion from a separate and unnatural realm, the magic realist world is not based on rational-empirical premises [...] so that presumably fantastic elements are not automatically unlawful. [...] So whereas fantastic literature employs hesitation to express anxiety about the validity of its rational-empirical world-view, magic realist fiction uses hesitation in order to actively question that world-view from a meta-level, suggesting that reality cannot be reduced to the empirically observable or rationally explicable. (Hegerfeldt 90)

As Anne Hegerfeldt underlines, this magic realist mode of writing usually has a political and ideological aim, as a postcolonial gesture that implies questioning the hegemony of the traditionally western rational view of reality:

It is characteristic of texts in the magic realist mode that they examine critically the status of dominant as well as "Other" knowledge by tracing and revealing the manifold ways in which knowledge is produced. [...]

Critics have repeatedly diagnosed in magic realism an obsession with history and its concomitant Western mode of production, historiography. [A number of magic realist works] undertake rewritings of official versions of history, playfully offering alternative accounts. By telling the story from a different, usually oppressed perspective, they reveal the extent to which history never consists of purely factual and impartial accounts, but serves the interests of those who write it. (63)

Quoting Hayden White's "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (1980) and Roland Barthes' 1967 "The Discourse of History," Hegerfeldt proceeds to add:

[Magic realism's] critique of Western historiography and official history [...] ties in with [its] subversion of literary realism, which has been seen as the mode of representation *par excellence* of post-Enlightenment historiography. (63)

In *Ordinary Enchantments, Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Wendy B. Faris, for her part, contends that the magic realist mode signals a major shift in western imagination, a "remystification" of narrative (63), suggesting "the existence of a mysterious realm of the spirit, even a hidden presence of the sacred within the profane" (63). In this context, one might then inquire into what the conspicuously realistic mode of writing of Lorene Cary's neo-slave narrative tells us about its political cum imaginative agenda.

As a matter of fact, it sometimes feels as if *The Price of a Child* were deliberately rewriting *Beloved*, responding to its narrative strategy. One first instance of this is the choice of the place where Cary's heroine Virginia is taken to right after her escape: Olive cemetery, where the parents of the Quicks—the black family who helped her escape and who will take her in—are buried. Coming as it does early in the novel (in chapter 3), the scene cannot but echo another early scene in *Beloved*, one of Sethe's traumatic memories first recounted: her forced sexual intercourse with the engraver in the graveyard so that he will write "Beloved" on her dead daughter's tombstone. In fact, besides the fact that a graveyard is an odd narrative place to situate Virginia's first hours of freedom, Cary's graveyard scene recapitulates all the major themes of Morrison's, only with a dramatic difference.

First of all, the graveyard itself—the place of traumatic and shameful memory in *Beloved*—becomes the proud repository of family ancestry and memory in *The Price of a Child*. The Quicks are meeting there as they do every year on the anniversary of "Zilpha, Emmanuel, Jeremiah, and Beatrice Quick's father" (Cary 35). Asked by Beatrice what she thinks of be-

ing whisked off to the cemetery of all places (70), Virginia answers: "This is a beautiful place, [...] I was thinking that y'all must be proud" (70). The place of shame and traumatic memory becomes that of proud black heritage and Virginia's explicit feeling of protection (78) responds to Sethe's vulnerability and exposure, "rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son" (Morrison, *Beloved* 5).

Second, the theme of naming linked to the graveyard scene in *Beloved* also undergoes significant alterations: suggested in the lone inscription "Beloved" on Sethe's daughter's tombstone are the notions of anonymity, as no specific name is indicated, as well as the omitted price of love, "dearly" not being engraved before "beloved" (5), much to Sethe's concern. This is reversed in *Price of the Child* with the clear indication both of the names of the dead of the family on the tombstones and of the ownership of these tombstones by the family:

They stopped to show her Gabriel and Rebecca Quick's gravestone, which the children purchased when Gabriel died to mark his grave and honor their mother, Rebecca, who was buried in a churchyard in the countryside. The headstone was made from local marble quarried twenty-five miles out of town, the same stone used for steps and sills and lintels, grayish white and streaked with blue. The headstone stood waist high. Next to it rose a thin gray obelisk that read: Roland Quick—son, brother, husband, father. Tyree and Harriet had bought it at their mother's request. Manny had refused to pay for it. (Cary 69)

While the precise indications regarding the marble of the headstones in *The Price of a Child* replace the poetic suggestion of a "dawn-colored stone studded with star chips" (Morrison, *Beloved* 5), explicit mention of the actual price of the family's tombstones replaces the implicit ("dearly" being omitted) physical, psychological and spiritual cost of love represented by Sethe's sacrifice. In a telltale echo, the omniscient narrator of Cary's novel uses Tyree Quick's viewpoint to state: "Children hoped for their parents' rest, and they paid money to the stone carvers, as if carving it might make it so" (Cary 66). This reverses the situation in Morrison's novel where the mother is the one paying for her child's tombstone, with her body—not money—while the end of the sentence in *The Price of a Child*, "as if carving [rest] might make it so" (66), clearly expresses what the magic realist return of *Beloved* shows: the uselessness of carving words when it comes to spiritual peace—thereby implicitly invalidating Morrison's whole literary effort to try and make peace with the past through words.

In fact, as one is made to feel throughout Cary's novel, the whole narrative strategy in *The Price of a Child* suggests more trust in the power of action than of words. Actually, when one compares the two novels, the famed symbolic power of Morrison's narrative seems constantly and con-

sistently subverted by Cary's matter of fact realism. The graveyard episode is a case in point, the poetic quality of the passage in *Beloved*—which is a way of evading horror—taking on a very concrete, literal dimension in *The Price of a Child* and being turned into an experience of racial and family pride. What is more, completing the recasting of the theme of naming which is connected to this scene in *Beloved*, Virginia will decide on her new name as a free woman whilst in the graveyard with the Quicks. And she will do so after Ephraim's reading to her of a passage from the Bible, "from first Peter, the second chapter" (Cary 76):

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people [...] Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy." (76)

This sounds like a direct echo to *Beloved's* epigraph: "I will call them my people, which were not my people and her beloved, which was not beloved" and seems to suggest a symbolic reversal of the failed naming which results in the anonymous "Beloved" on Sethe's daughter's tombstone, especially when Virginia decides to take on Mercy (which is then turned into Mercer) as a first name. Only, what symbolic power the biblical echo between the two novels induces is ruined by the reason at once given for Ephraim's choice to read this particular passage to Virginia/Mercer on the occasion of her newly acquired freedom—mere manipulative rhetoric: "An old priest had once told Ephraim to use the passage whenever black people gathered together, and he didn't know what else to use. It always worked" (Cary 76). In short, as the graveyard scene in particular shows, *The Price of a Child* seems engaged in a systematic process of symbolic undermining regarding its acclaimed predecessor. Be it the central theme of redemption through naming in the graveyard scene, or that of love, or even that of traumatic motherhood in times of slavery, *The Price of a Child* systematically undermines the symbolic import of these themes by tackling them from a more literal angle. One major trope of the trauma of motherhood during slavery time is Sethe's exposure to sexual violence as she is pregnant and what is for her the most unacceptable theft of her milk by schoolteacher's nephews. Now, in Cary's novel, this is echoed through Virginia/Mercer's memory of her sexual submission to her white master, Pryor, when she was pregnant:

She thought of Pryor's long fingers, and how she hated him to touch her breasts. Why her breasts? That had always been hard, just getting past that part. Especially when she was pregnant or, worse yet, nursing. She could wall off from the waist down and make herself not mind so much. Maybe her breasts were too close to her head. She couldn't wall off from the neck

down, which is what she tried to do. (Cary 99)

In *Beloved*, Sethe's trauma rests upon the symbolic value of her experience—not only the absence of control over her own motherhood but her standpoint regarding her rapists, who had milked her like a cow and thus treated her as an animal. In *The Price of a Child*, this becomes an unpleasant sexual experience, described in concrete words clearly devoid of symbolic significance. As for the theme of love, if Tyree's physical tenderness to Mercer elicits the same kind of response from her as Paul D's from Sethe—tears—this is as far as the parallel between the two romances will go. Indeed, Paul D's "blessed manner" with Sethe, as he respectfully "rub[s] his cheek on [...] the sculpture her back ha[s] become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (Morrison, *Beloved* 17) strongly contrasts with Tyree's slight disgust as his hand "feel[s] a scarred patch of skin on the backs of Mercer's thighs, [...] leathery skin, with welts that had raised up once and never gone down (Cary 301). Besides, while Paul D helplessly recognizes that Sethe "is a friend of his mind" (Morrison, *Beloved* 273)—his gratitude stemming from his realization that, plagued by doubts as he has been regarding his own manliness as a former slave, "only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that" (273)—with Tyree, on the contrary, "naturally manhood gleamed" (Cary 140-1)—though Mercer admittedly makes him connect back with it. As for the spiritual rejuvenation Sethe gradually causes Paul D to experience, its echo in *The Price of a Child* becomes Tyree's vague wish to be more of a "political man" (Cary 142), as a consequence of his attraction to Mercer:

Tyree wished that he'd met Mercer before all that. She made him yearn to be more virtuous. It was an old-fashioned idea, quaint. He had to smile at himself. She made him wish to be a political man again: the man with notions, who never veered from them. (142)

In other words, what redemptive dimension Sethe and Paul D's love has is erased from Mercer and Tyree's relationship, an 'ordinary' love story of lust (a word explicitly used) as much as love. Once again, if Tyree ever 'saves' Virginia/Mercer, it is in the very literal sense of assisting her physical escape from Jack Pryor.

One could thus accumulate evidence regarding what begins to look like a systematic rewriting of *Beloved's* cathartic and symbolic narrative into an adamantly realistic story obviously mainly concerned with activism. As Tyree is interestingly made to say, his is not a concern about psychological and spiritual wholeness but about political integrity. In the words of Theile and Drews summing up Pollard's article, the latter,

charts former slave Ginnie Pryor's transformation into the abolitionist Mercer Gray and captures how 'writing black women [...] into history is a particularly political act' that makes possible 'personal and communal transformation' crucial to the processes of black feminist historiography. (xix)

The question remains: does a black feminist historiography dedicated to "breaking through 'the silence of history,' [...] 'to advance the abolitionist cause'" (xix) necessitate such a refusal of symbolic power?

Further examination of Cary's seemingly deliberate rewriting of *Beloved* reveals a highly subversive strategy pertaining to what might be called a certain African American ethos, which Morrison's novel relies on. One feature of this ethos is the traditional sacralisation of the African American family as a consequence of its systematic scattering under the Peculiar Institution. This craving for family ties and community is visible in Sethe's initial bliss when reaching her mother-in-law's, where she is reunited with her children in a house constantly full of visitors. While Cary's novel initially seems to reproduce such a vision through Mercer's admiring eyes when she first beholds the Quicks during the graveyard episode immediately following her escape from slavery, a very different picture emerges through Tyree Quick's perspective by the end of the novel. When faced with the dilemma of staying on to help support his family or move on to Canada with Mercer and her children, he— until then consistently portrayed as the pillar of the family—ponders:

Something had died for him [...]: the illusion that kin transcended will, that when push came to shove, the Quicks would sacrifice anything for their clan. [...]. He'd leave [...]. They'd done fine without Roland. They'd do fine without him. (Cary 299)

In a rather merciless passage, as his father Manny is dying, he even goes as far as to wish for his speedy passing:

He wanted Manny to die and be done with it, so that they could wash him and mourn him and put him in the ground, and Tyree could hunt through the papers and strongboxes to see whether he might still take his handsome Mercer away and start afresh and get it right. (315)

Tyree will stay, however, and sacrifice his dream of a new life with Mercer upon discovering that his family is ruined and will have no means to support itself without him. Still, his decision is not motivated by a myth of 'the African American family' but by his own adult sense of responsibility. In Mercer's words, as she comes to grip with the situation: "Tyree

would not come. Not if his family had no money to take care of themselves; not if he was the man she loved" (317). A final testimony to this adult sense of responsibility, the book ends on the image of the rest of the Quicks' money in Mercer's hands, Tyree's parting gift so that she may redeem her youngest son.

Another tenet of the African American ethos at which Cary seems to aim is the black community's famed spiritual power. Indeed, in *The Price of a Child*, Ephraim, the young Episcopal priest who is to marry Abby Ann Quick, is constantly ridiculed, either by other characters like Sharkey Quick, whose characteristic way of addressing him always "held the threat of sarcasm" (Cary 73), or through descriptive passages, notably those focusing on his attraction to Abby Ann, who is said to "ooz[e] sex and seduction" (74). Ephraim's initial description is in fact of a rather lustful man with a gift for self-deception:

Abby Ann was Ephraim's mission and his temptation. [...] She unleashed in him a lust that made him have to leave the room sometimes at the very thought of her. [...] Just as she had brought his body to life, he would bring forth the hidden beauty in her soul. It had to be there; how else could he love her? She could be a vain and mean-spirited woman. Ephraim knew that, but his desire felt more powerful to him than her faults. (75)

Besides, Ephraim's strategic and rhetorical use of the Bible at key moments in the story reflects a thinly veiled criticism of the false consolation supposedly granted by Christian faith in times of duress. This is made explicit in a passage where Mercer—whose altered name is a comment on the mercantile use sometimes made of Jesus' mercy—is plagued by memories of slavery while on her abolitionist tour. Starting with the once heard words, "*Babies laid in a trough at the end of a row of cotton. Jesus have mercy*" (259; emphasis in original), her horror vision of the babies drowning in the mud during a squall as their slave parents, working in the fields, fail to reach them in time, ends with accusatory queries:

And where was Jesus as the water went up their brown button noses? And where was sweet, sweet Jesus who they called on for mercy, and called on in bed at night? Was he harvesting babies to make into angels before their lives of troubling? (260)

Accordingly, to do justice to the actual horror of slavery, Mercer will choose concrete images over high-flown rhetoric, focusing on her father's tooth, which he broke during a merciless flogging. Later, during the episode when the hall where she delivers a speech is set on fire, she responds

to Tyree's automatic biblical "Next time fire," saying: "My parents were unbelievers" (Cary 291):

"My parents were unbelievers," Mercer said in response, and she could see why now, watching the flames dance and the smoke roll and the men dance and thinking of the God above. [...]

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was infinite mercy, and yet He'd come back as a lion. He'd carry a sword. [...]

Hate like thunder rolled within her and crashed around her and her trying to speak freedom to power. (291)

As suggested by the preceding quotation, if *The Price of a Child* questions divine mercy, it also reads as a meditation on spiritual rhetoric and the power of words. In a telltale passage, Mercer's son, Mattie, takes up a chant that sounds like a direct rewriting of Baby Suggs' redemptive sermon in the Clearing, where she calls for her community to redeem their past suffering by loving every part of their bodies, in a catalogue that culminates in a reference to the heart:

Love your hands! Love them. [...] This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and dance; [...] shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. [...] The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. [...] For this is the prize. (Morrison, *Beloved* 89).

In an almost comic response, Mattie starts chanting to his mother: "I love my boat. I love my mama. I love my sister. I love my eyes. I love my ears. I love my mouth. I love my arms. I love my hands. I love my stomach. I love my legs. I love my feet. I love Mr Ty. [...] I love my shoes" (Cary 213). Once again, what symbolic cum spiritual power Baby Suggs's speech has is parodied, as always when Cary's narrative broaches the topic of redemptive love. In a rather materialistic revision of Baby Suggs's, Mattie ends his catalogue by drawing his mother's attention to his new shoes.

In another instance, irony is targeted at a reference to the "Song of Solomon," which gives its title to chapter ten. Narrating the savage murder of the mentally disabled Nig-Nag, who had helped Virginia/Mercer escape, the chapter is entitled: "Strong as death." Listening to Ephraim's sermon on the occasion of Nig-Nag's passing, as the young priest makes what he deems meaningful pauses while reading from the "Song of Solomon," Mercer muses: "Love might be as strong as death, but who of the

sparse group of assembled mourners had loved this pitiful young man?" (Cary 234).

What is more, beyond Ephraim's admittedly empty rhetoric and what it says about the hypocritical use to which the Bible is sometimes put, Cary's novel seems highly sceptical of the spiritual regeneration supposedly gradually experienced by the former slave. In another passage that reads like a direct response to *Beloved*, Mercer's gradual recovery from the trauma of her enslaved past is couched in a way highly reminiscent of Sethe's own experience. "[A]s color conscious as a hen" since her infanticide, Sethe feels that *Beloved*'s return makes her able to "look at things again" (Morrison, *Beloved* 38-9):

Now I'll be on the lookout. Think what spring will be for us! I'll plant carrots just so she can see them, and turnips. Have you ever seen one, baby? A prettier thing God never made. White and purple with a tender tail and a hard head. (201)

Similarly, after her first few weeks of freedom, Mercer becomes aware of colors:

Their lives went according to Zilpha's unvarying routine.

After a couple of weeks, Mercer felt as if the world had become quieter—and more vivid. One afternoon, as she sat in the kitchen peeling carrots, the color of them struck her, as if, until now, she'd been peeling carrots through a veil. (Cary 155)

A symbol of "life in the raw" (Morrison, *Beloved* 38), in *The Price of a Child*, the color of carrots starts a conversation between Mercer and Zilpha Quick, in which the latter shifts the focus away from the miraculous color of carrots to the shape of Mercer's fingers holding them. Envious of Mercer's youth, the older lady exposes her knuckles swollen with arthritis, anticipating Mercer's final remark near the end of the novel: "The price of freedom is vigilance. The only thing for sure is stay black and die" (Cary 317). Far from Sethe's final revelation and promised rebirth, *The Price of a Child* ends with Mercer's uncompromising and nearly fatalistic realism, only mitigated by Tyree's last act of mercy.

A straightforward narrative, apparently anxious to oppose its acclaimed predecessor's spiritual symbolism and formal intricacies, *The Price of a Child* displays more than mere anxiety of influence. Rather, this neo-slave narrative seems intent on upholding a credo of honesty to counter a certain narrative deviousness,<sup>2</sup> based on the assumption that what we are made to feel is cultural hypocrisy. This cultural hypocrisy is primarily

that of white America, whom Mercer feels hard put to address as she would:

How was she to speak to them with an honesty she knew to be impossible? They could not abide to hear the ill will that had grown up in their American soil. They didn't want to know that it was woven into their sheets of cotton picked by black fingers, as surely as it seeped into their dreams. So what could she say? (254)

Yet, the novel also seems to target the hypocrisy of the Black community, notably the myth of a collective bond anchored in the spiritual strength derived from a common past of slavery. However, an unacknowledged debt of Cary's novel to its famous predecessor might be this very quest for a straightforward realism. To paraphrase Morrison's narrator in *Paradise*, it could be said that, unlike the characters in *Beloved*, Cary's are no longer haunted.<sup>3</sup> Maybe that is the true legacy of *Beloved*: having rid literature of the ghost of slavery, it has made it free to deal with it as the stuff of ordinary lives.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a phrase borrowed from Amaryll Chanady's landmark study of the difference between magic realism and the fantastic in *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*.
- <sup>2</sup> For Morrison, the meandering progress of her narrative was a way of reflecting the way slave narratives sometimes had to circumvent the horror of slavery so as not to alienate their white readership.
- <sup>3</sup> "Unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" (Morrison, *Paradise* 266). The context is that of the cathartic sessions of loud dreaming conducted by Connie that liberate their participants from their traumatic pasts.

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