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**LOOSE CANNONS: TONI MORRISON AND JACQUES
DERRIDA ON THE NECESSITY AND VIOLENCE OF OUR
SHARED LITERATURE**

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I. Beginning Again

I am merely making explicit what is always implicit in any beginning or origin, any reinscription of the tradition, any new chapter in the history of philosophy: it is always the other who signs, who authorizes us or gives us the power to speak, who leaves us a tradition or history to work with or against, who situates us with a name, a place, and a time.¹

In what follows, I bring two “loose cannons”—Jacques Derrida and Toni Morrison—into conversation with one another. In doing so, I hope to sketch what their critical theories might bring to bear on “The Western Canon.” This essay is not simply concerned with the texts that make up this canon (or those which are denied admittance) but, rather, with our very relationship to the concept of canon. How does this relationship situate our reading of texts, our formulating of curricula, and—to the central question of this conference—our advocacy for diversity in higher education? In pursuit of these questions, I attempt to break away from any canon debate that would be confined to “the advocacy of diversification within the canon and/or a kind of benign coexistence near or within reach of the already sacred texts.”²

This project arose from my encounter with Toni Morrison’s *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* while I was a student in the Torrey Honors Institute (a “Great Books” program at Biola University). Morrison helped me realize that I’d been caught up in some common presumptions about the supposed transcendence of canonical (often whitemale-authored) texts.³ I found that—even while I was thinking about my own blackness in relation to the African-American literary tradition—I was gravitating towards the explicitly political texts of W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, and others. Morrison’s profound attention to detail (particularly on matters of race) in the texts of Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, and Willa Cather clearly opens up new (and faithful) interpretations. She also reveals how avoidance of “race matters” only constrains and constricts the meaning of

¹ Naas, *Taking on the Tradition*, xvii.

² Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 135.

³ “When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by the label ‘political’” (Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 12).

these texts. This led me to question the assertion among conservative forces in the academy that critical race theory was wholly and necessarily in an antagonistic relationship with the idea of “the West” and its canon.

Similarly, when I began reading Derrida and other thoroughly postmodern philosophers, my received assumption that these writers were soft relativists and anti-traditionalists was also challenged. Reading Derrida, I found that I had to lean heavily on my Great Books education. It was impossible to wade through his authorship without a prior familiarity with Plato, St. Augustine, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, and many other canonical authors. Derrida himself puts forward that “one sees that the respect for the great texts, for the texts of the Greeks and of others, too, is the condition of our work.”⁴

And so my once-static concept of canon was shaken. In the midst of this destabilization (a term common to deconstruction and its discourses), I do not mean to suggest that we tear the canon down to clear the way for something radically new. Indeed, one of Morrison’s primary concerns is that canon war in these terms “may kill the canon. And I, at least, do not intend to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville, and so on.”⁵ Similarly, when Derrida speaks on Plato and Aristotle he expresses: “I love them and I feel I have to start again and again and again. It is a task which is in front of me, before me.”⁶ And so I take these two authors to be uniquely helpful in the search for “some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them.”⁷ This is the second sense of my chosen title: that a right relation to the canon might involve holding that canon more loosely.

There are several reasons why I think this approach to the question of the canon is particularly urgent. While the Great Books movement is thriving and such programs are growing in popularity, I believe this kind of education

⁴ Derrida, *The Villanova Roundtable*, 9.

⁵ Morrison, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 128.

⁶ Derrida, *The Villanova Roundtable*, 9.

⁷ Morrison, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 128.

is susceptible to white-supremacist misappropriations. Neo-Nazis and alt-righters like Richard Spencer often claim the West as their unique heritage (in the modern racialized sense). While highly anachronistic, it makes sense that white-supremecists would make these assertions. Morrison writes that:

Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested.⁸

Canon wars bring into the forefront many of the things we debate within and without the academy: the nature of received tradition, diversity, culture, education, exclusion, progress, and so on. This is perhaps why the debate is waged at the intersection between the academy and the popular press (just think of Allen Bloom’s massively popular *The Closing of the American Mind*).⁹ As such, the conversation is often lowered to the false dichotomies supplied by apparent culture wars and prior political commitments. Morrison describes this as “the virulent passion” that may end up sacrificing and disfiguring the very object that it often wishes to protect—the great texts. This leads to a more interesting question that will not merely “alter one hierarchy in order to institute another.”¹⁰

Behind all this framing is my desire to move beyond a mere defence of the canon by thinkers as (seemingly) unlikely for that task as Derrida and Morrison. I truly believe that their critical theories can guide us towards improved readings of the great texts—that opening these texts to more radical lines of questioning will lead to a more faithful and fruitful hermeneutic. And, in the end, Derrida and Morrison point to the possibility (or impossibility) of higher education becoming something “wholly other.” For “the university should thus also be the place in which nothing is beyond question, not even the current and determined figure of democracy, not

⁸ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 132.

⁹ I also have in mind Harold Bloom’s position at the height of the canon wars—his spats with Toni Morrison in particular. It’s also worth noting that similarly reactionary tendencies often lie at the intersection of popular academic writing and media sensationalism (Jordan Peterson, Jonathan Haidt, etc.)

¹⁰ Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 8.

even the traditional idea of critique, meaning theoretical critique, and not even the authority of the ‘question’ form, of thinking as ‘questioning.’”¹¹

II. Minding the Gaps

*Everything I'm not made me everything I am.*¹²

As an effective literary scholar, Toni Morrison uncovers new passages (passageways, underground crossings) into the texts that come under her critical gaze.¹³ Unlike the majority of critics, however, we can get a sense of her hermeneutic not only from her theory, but from her fiction. In *Beloved*, while Ella is helping the runaway Sethe safely cross into Ohio, she “listened for holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind.”¹⁴ Like Ella’s care for the fugitive, Morrison is intent on excavating literature for what it has said *and* what it has left unsaid. This interrogative mode involves the practice of “minding the gaps,” while also going beyond that basic level of attention. Morrison wants us to dwell on what the authors are fearful of, what they are ignorant of, what they attempt, where they fail, what they avoid because it is too difficult, and what they gloss over because it seems too mundane.

As Morrison describes in her *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, these deeper readings were never encouraged by her formal education and were thus inaccessible until she became an author of fiction. She reflects that “books revealed themselves rather differently as a writer”¹⁵ especially within her particular vocation as “an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world.”¹⁶ The manner that

¹¹ Derrida, *The University Without Condition*, 205.

¹² West, *Graduation*, “Everything I Am.”

¹³ Morrison describes her project in *Black Matters* as drawing “a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the initial charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest

¹⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 108.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

books began to reveal themselves rather differently is caught up in Morrison's belief that good writing is always concerned with the project discovering and imagining the other. She is intent on drawing us into these considerations without any expectation that we become authors as well: while the knowledge of a writer is helpful, it is not indispensable for this kind of close reading. Indeed, we naturally take up the task of discovering and imagining the other daily (to various degrees of success and failure). This is what it means to have the capacity for moral imagination, and as readers we stand both in an empathetic and judgmental relation to the author. What does this position—this kind of interrogation—reveal? Perhaps its central goal is to discover the chasm within a text between that which is unspeakable (by necessity) and what merely *happens* to remain unspoken.

Turned towards American literature in particular, Morrison uses this methodology to examine the Africanist presence (and absence), along with its attendant effects. She describes the national literature's relation to the "unsettled and unsettling population" as characterized by "significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence."¹⁷ Throughout the rest of this essay, Morrison thinks about the representational, metaphorical, and even metaphysical usage of the black body in American literature. I'm reminded of James Baldwin's letter of warning to his young nephew: that "any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundation."¹⁸ The idea of this metaphysical positioning of black bodies is a topic that also gets picked up in recent afro-pessimist scholarship. In Calvin Warren's *Ontological Terror*, for example, this occurs at the deepest level: blackness functions as a proxy for phenomenological nothingness (or non-being) that whiteness then attempts to dominate, destroy, and overcome. In *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and across the literature, a

¹⁷ Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 6.

¹⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.

common theme that gets drawn out is the predication of the presumed freedom of whiteness on the slavery (unfreedom) of blackness.

Along these lines, Morrison performs a close reading of Willa Cather's 1940 novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

I'll spare the details, since Morrison does much more than I could possibly hope to summarize here. In broad strokes, her analysis uncovers Cather's usage of the titular Slave Girl (Nancy) and other black characters:

“surrogate, serviceable black bodies for her own purposes of power without risk, so the author employs them in behalf of her own desire for a *safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice.”¹⁹ Morrison notes that the novel's structure depends deeply on both the black characters and their positions as slaves. They are used by the mistress Sapphira as objects of fear and jealousy and for Cather herself as mere means to question her own loss, love, and frailty. Thus far, however, Morrison sees no problem. The issue arises when Cather herself participates in the logic of slavery by refusing to imagine the black characters as truly human. This leads to inexplicable elements of the story, the most jarring of which is a mother who shows little care for her fugitive daughter. The plot proceeds unconvincingly because the novel's “participation in loss, in love, in chaos” is totally safe. It refuses to think of the imagined Africanist presence as fellow sufferers along with the ailing Sapphira (and Cather herself). In this sense, the novel reveals much more about the author than the black persons that it purports to describe. Morrison terms this the “reflexive” nature of the text: the subject of the dream is always the dreamer.

Morrison extends the analysis of Cather's text towards some more abstract features of American literature. She claims that “national literatures, like writers, get along the best way they can, and with what they can. Yet they do seem to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind.”²⁰ On this account, literature seems to be genuinely descriptive of its time (although not necessarily reducible to the material causes that produces it). With this assumption in mind, what does Morrison take to be America's particular story? Along

¹⁹ Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

the same lines of her analysis of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, it is precisely this “power without risk” and “safe participation” in the realm of human experience. Across literature, philosophy, politics, education, law, and nearly every sphere of thought, this is manifested in the mad (and impossible) struggle to “be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed.”²¹ Manifested in manifest destiny. This is precisely why Morrison’s hermeneutic is difficult to adopt—why it is met with accusations of inhabiting the realm of the merely political rather than the transcendent: “When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by the label ‘political.’”²²

The “Americanness” of our national literary canon, then, is precisely this impulse to flee from the kind of hermeneutic that Morrison is urging us towards. Without allowing the interrogative mode to roam free, the canon is “haunted by what it excludes, combats, or represses.”²³ This language of “haunting” will continue to prove useful in a number of respects: with regard to a history we cannot quite shake and in reference to a presence that is not quite substantial. A ghostly presence.

III. Towards an Authorial Hauntology

*Literature would begin wherever one no longer knows who writes and who signs the narrative of the call.*²⁴

In the previous section, I’ve touched on the way Morrison relates author to their epoch—the relation between literature and the culture that it finds itself “inscribing and describing.” But for both Morrison and Derrida, this relation doesn’t proceed so straightforwardly. There is a necessary connection between author and text, but “the

²¹ Morrison, *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 77.

²⁴ Derrida, *Literature in Secret*, 134.

‘I’ that speaks in a literary text never coincides with the ‘I’ of the writing subject, rather they haunt each other.”²⁵

Literature (perhaps in contrast to the immanence of speech) is predicated on a kind of abandonment:

That abandonment is abandoned to its own drift by the undecidability—and hence by the secret—by the *destinerrance* of the origin and the end, of destination and addressee, of the sense and referent of the reference abiding as reference in its very suspension. All of that belongs to a literary corpus that is [...] as undecidable as the voices and acts that are exchanged without exchanging anything.²⁶

As Derrida acknowledges in other places, the author has “infinite responsibility” towards the event of the text.

Yet this does not mean that the reader can encounter the person of the author in any determinate sense. The act of writing encodes secret intentions, desires, and communications which coalesce into a text that is made, then made public, then published and publicized. Yet the writing itself always remains in secret.

While the text is always—in *some* meaningful sense—a “product of the times,” it can never be reducible to that.

Indeed, Derrida’s claim is even stronger: the text is truly a product of its author, but that relation cannot be

totally reduced either.²⁷ In a meditation on similar themes, John Caputo describes Derrida’s project as “the

liberation of literature and of every kind of discourse: scientific, political, ethical, institutional, religious,

discourse within and discourse without the university, *intra muros* and *extra muros*.”²⁸ This also implies the

liberation of literature *from* precisely those discourses: the text has no duty to answer the definite political or

sociological questions that we might put to it. Literature is not obliged to make sense, to truthfully refer, or to

make clear the referent:

The presumed fictive structure of every work exonerates its signatory from responsibility, before political or civic law, for its sense and referent (what the *inside* of the text means and aims at, exhibits and encrypts, with the result that the text can always not *stop setting down* any sense or referent, not meaning [to say] anything).²⁹

²⁵ Loevlie, *Faith in the Ghosts of Literature: Poetic Hauntology in Derrida, Blanchot, and Morrison’s Beloved*, 336.

²⁶ Derrida, *Literature in Secret*, 144.

²⁷ In *Literature In Secret*, this idea emerges from a meditation on the phrase “Pardon for not meaning (to say)...” (pg. 143). At a simple level, I cannot help but say more than I mean to even in this very essay (which is certainly not a work of fiction).

²⁸ Caputo, *The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida*, 108.

²⁹ Derrida, *Literature in Secret*, 156-157.

Authorial intent (as discussed in the last section) is haunted by what it desires to vocalize but cannot—by its avoidances. But it is also haunted within the relationship between the “I” who writes and the “I” that exists inside of the text. This is a haunting that destabilizes the “I.”

Derridian deconstruction, therefore, poses a deep challenge to the politics of recognition³⁰ or what we commonly call “representation.” To return to the question of canon debate, an often accepted conclusion is that the fight for minority peoples is to see ourselves represented in tradition, canon, and curriculum. I think this is correct, but only one part of the issue at hand. Inclusion and representation in this manner can just be caught up in an institution without calling that institution itself into question (recall Morrison’s claim that “Canon building is empire building”³¹). Furthermore, the author is not even identical to the text—much less are they able to represent or embody whole cultures or races. This is never the task of the author, no matter how hard others may force this role onto them (or how much an author may desire to accept this role). When we reduce the question of canon to the question of individual identities, we demand of authors something that offends the concept of literature—the ability to say something which is not, strictly speaking, true.

I think Morrison’s creative process when she approached *Beloved* illustrates this literary freedom. The novel uses as its historical basis the story of Margaret Garner: an escaped woman who murdered her daughter to save the child from being returned to the plantation. Yet Morrison’s project isn’t really historical: “the details of her life were riveting. But I selected and manipulated its parts to suit my own purposes. [...] The act of writing is a kind of act of faith.”³² Morrison’s task is not to represent what one’s life was or might’ve been. Her relentless questioning within the text (and, by extension, of us, the readers), has nothing and everything to do with the

³⁰ I’m thinking particularly of Charles Taylor and his Massey Lectures on “The Malaise of Modernity.”

³¹ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 132.

³² Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 282-283.

truth of history. For, “no matter how ‘fictional’ the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory.”³³

IV. Contingency & History: *In Medias Res*

*We are like on a trip where one always has to look after one’s baggage, baggage left behind or baggage one is waiting for.*³⁴

Thus far, we have been in pursuit of a general question regarding an author’s relation to the conditions surrounding their writing act. I’d like to direct our attention to what Morrison might mean when she asserts that this act is necessarily “bound up with memory.” It will prove useful to continue alongside *Beloved* in this task, since it was this text which led Morrison to understand “the nature of a haunting—how it is both what we yearn for and what we fear, I was able to see the traces of a ghostly presence, the residue of a repressed past in certain concrete but also allusive detail.”³⁵

Following Emmanuel Levinas, I want to examine the ways in which our presumed beginnings are “already encumbered with the excess of [themselves].”³⁶ Any attempt to begin (or to begin again) functions as a kind of useful illusion or noble lie. Even at the very origin of our birth we are resigned to exist in a particular place, embedded in a family, a society, languages, at an intersection of cultures, in war or peacetime, in a particular body politic, with a religious, ethnic, and literary heritage. Along with all of this, we are also gifted the condition—the ways and means—by which we might successfully accept, learn, and receive these traditions that we did not choose. The lack of choice here—our indebtedness to a history that forces itself upon us without even the *possibility* of asking our consent—is drawn into sharp and brutal relief in the case of chattle slavery.

Morrison meditates on this fact when discussing the opening lines of *Beloved*:³⁷

³³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 243.

³⁴ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 15.

³⁵ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 284.

³⁶ Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 15.

³⁷ *Beloved* opens: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims” (pg. 3).

Because the in-medias-res opening that I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt, and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense.³⁸

The horrors of slavery paint in large letters what is already present in the unease of whatever we consider ordinary life—we did not really choose, deserve, or earn any of it. Thus, along with Morrison, I would like to suggest that our involvement with history is beyond knowledge, certainty, or mastery.

Yet this background also provides the conditions for any possible human freedom—our choices are charted against a horizon of circumstances that we did not choose. I think this is what Morrison is getting at when she dwells on the character of Sethe. The author reflects that it is not the flight from maternal responsibility,³⁹ but the very practice of motherhood which—against the institution of slavery—becomes not only socially unacceptable, but illegal and anarchic.⁴⁰ This leads to the founding sin of the text. When her former slave-holder, “schoolteacher” arrives to steal Sethe and her children back to the plantation, the trauma of her past suddenly becomes the immanent present. This is a situation that she does not choose—one in which she seems to have all choice stripped away. Yet she acts, killing her daughter and reaching for the other children in a violent attempt to protect them from the violence of the plantation.

The reader is thrown into the text without knowledge of the mercy killing. This is also the case for Paul D (an old friend of Sethe's who also escaped from the Sweet Home plantation). In recalling Sweet Home (“which was neither sweet nor home”), we get the first sense of Sethe's relationship to their shared past: “‘But it's where we were,’ said Sethe. ‘All together. Comes back whether we want it to or not.’”⁴¹ This is a complicated scene because she invokes inescapable nature their mutual trauma while also neglecting to tell the whole truth—which is,

³⁸ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 160-161.

³⁹ This may be contrary to what we typically expect (especially as people downstream from the sexual revolution).

⁴⁰ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 282.

⁴¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 16.

perhaps, unspeakable. I think this reveals that Sethe is hovering between resignation towards the past and, on the other hand, a desire to get on with life—a desire to receive Paul D into her home and to return to public life for the first time since the killing that took place nearly 20 years previous.

Paul D, on the other hand, has a clear and consistent desire to escape his past. This is made explicit in the metaphor of his “tobacco tin” heart. In the middle of recounting his loss of identity to Sethe, Paul D catches himself and interrupts the narration of his torture:

Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart beating in him [...] Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past.⁴²

This serious work of “beating back the past” is present from the very beginning—made physical in Paul D's successful beating of the infant ghost out from the house. But—like all ghosts of history that get exercised without proper understanding—the haunting only increases in fervor. In this case, the child becomes embodied: “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water.”⁴³ *Beloved*.

Even while attempting to “beat back the past,” Paul D cannot avoid invoking it as he grows closer to Sethe (particularly in the context of *Beloved*'s embodied return). Sethe draws it out of him, for “her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.”⁴⁴ *Beloved*'s presence allows her mother to move beyond regret and self-punishment—beyond the complete resignation and self-flagellation that had characterized her relationship to the infant ghost for the past two decades. Sethe has the opportunity to explain to herself to her past—a situation that all us regretful people surely envy: “I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all. [...]

⁴² Morrison, *Beloved*, 86.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you"⁴⁵ The possibility of reentering normal life—the possibility of renewed marriage and motherhood that Paul D presents—is eschewed for the stasis of a past that has become fully present. This familiar reunion precludes the desire for starting any kind of new family. Sethe addresses her daughter: “I thought you were mad with me. And now I know that if you was, you ain't now because you came back here to me and I was right all along: there is no world outside my door. I only need to know one thing. How bad is the scar?”⁴⁶ There is no world outside Sethe's door. No future, only the presence of the past.

Through this complicated rejection by Sethe, Paul D comes to represent a common stance towards history (either one's own history, or world-historical progress). His closing himself off to the painful past in an attempt to begin again is naïve and—more fundamentally—impossible. It causes him to be moved by forces that he cannot properly identify or understand: Beloved “moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby's ghost—all bang and shriek with windows smashed and jelly jars rolled in a heap. But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself.”⁴⁷

For Morrison (and Derrida as well), the proper relation to history is not one that charts a middle course between Sethe's desire to make the past wholly present and Paul D's desire to beat it into non-existence. We are not searching for tepid, lukewarm mixing of past regret and future hope that intermingle until they arrive at some kind of absolute entropy. Instead, the proper stance seems to hold gut-wrenching pasts and impossible futures in incomplete, indeterminate, unstable, and destabilizing tension. Derrida articulates something along these lines when he claims that: “History can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered [...] historicity must be *admitted to*, implying thereby that it is something difficult to acknowledge, that is because

⁴⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 216.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

historicity must remain open as a problem, never to be resolved.”⁴⁸ The problem of history—the problem of our own history—must remain as such.

V. Love in the Time of Deconstruction

*He was still too young to know that the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and that thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past.*⁴⁹

I find it necessary to pay more attention than I have henceforth to the anti-traditionalist element of Derridean deconstruction. I have perhaps been too charitable to Derrida—noting only the ways his philosophy is compatible with more conservative ideals concerning the interpretation of literature. This is certainly only one side of the coin, since there is truly a distrust of hierarchy, hoary authority, and received tradition at work in Derrida's authorship.

I consider it appropriate to discuss Derrida's complicated relationship with the Western Canon alongside his 1994 interview *The Villanova Roundtable*. Although there are implications for higher education and the question of the canon across Derrida's work, it is perhaps here that the enigmatic professor professes the point of the matter most directly. This is fitting, since he is speaking in a context most applicable to our more practical concerns: this interview is on the occasion of the inauguration of Villanova's doctoral program in philosophy. What, then, might it mean for Derrida to inaugurate a new institution? To begin again? This is put to Derrida by John Caputo noting deconstruction's reputation in the academy: “They identify deconstruction with a destructive attitude toward texts and traditions and truth, toward the most honorable names in the philosophical heritage. They think that deconstruction is the enemy of academic programs and academic institutions, that it is anti-institutional and cannot accommodate itself to institutional life.”⁵⁰ How can deconstruction hope to respond to these popular accusations?

⁴⁸ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 7.

⁴⁹ Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, ?.

⁵⁰ Caputo, *The Villanova Roundtable*, 4.

Derrida posits that, “however affirmative deconstruction is, it is affirmative in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply a way of repeating the given institution.”⁵¹ Part of the work of this section will entail thinking of canonization as congruent to institutionalization in some relevant respects.

I think that the life of an institution implies that we are able to criticize, to transform, to open the institution to its own future. The paradox in instituting moment of an institution is that, at the same time that it starts something new, it also continues something, is true to the memory of the past, to a heritage, to something we receive from the past, from our predecessors, from the culture. If an institution is to be an institution, it must to some extent break with the past, keep the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new.⁵²

It’s of utmost importance to note: this is not merely the mixture of old and new—the middle ground or third way between traditionalism and radical promise of the future “to come.” It is not the piecemeal “something old and something new” that we traditionally speak of at the inauguration of a new marriage. Derrida is clear that the relationship between tradition and irruption—between tradition and our breaking with that tradition—is to be preserved as a fundamental tension. This is to say that the tension is not something to be finally overcome in either direction—an argument that is to be resolved neither in compromise nor with a clear victor. For we are self-deceived whenever we suppose that we have overcome our history—that we can conquer our heritage in the name of progress. Because, while it is *not* the case that our history wholly determines us (neither does the present determine the future), we are utterly beholden to it by pure necessity and brute fact.

It is often that the conditions for abandoning a tradition are enmeshed in that selfsame tradition. Derrida is quick to admit that this *prima facie* paradox goes “all the way down,” since received tradition also inscribes our very rejections of those rejections (and so on, *ad infinitum*). Like Oedipus, we find ourselves at home in Thebes through the very act of fleeing Corinth. What does it mean, then, to remain in tension with received tradition? What might questioning the canon (while abandoning hope of some final resolution) look like? Speaking of Plato and Aristotle in particular, Derrida says “I love them and I feel I have to start again and again and again. [Reading them] is a task which is in front of me, before me.”⁵³

⁵¹ Derrida, *The Villanova Roundtable*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

At the same time, however, this respect and persistent close reading does not result in a determinate set of ideas, concepts, or any system: the way Derrida reads the canon “is not a way of commanding, repeating, or conserving this heritage. It is an analysis which tries to find out how their thinking works or does not work, to find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within their own corpus”⁵⁴ This mirrors the language that Toni Morrison employs: it is a mark of love to question and wonder—anything else would be to infantilize both author and text. Notably, this practice does not stand apart from the high esteem that Derrida and Morrison hold the canonized authors in. Rather, “to be true to Plato, and this is a sign of love and respect for Plato, I have to analyze the functioning and dysfunctioning of his work.”⁵⁵ Critique is proper (or even internal) to the act of love.

I hope that I’ve shown how the practice of deconstruction and critical race theory properly encroachments from outside of the tradition that they aim to critique. Rather their possibility is inscribed in the Western Canon: “Deconstruction is not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside. Deconstruction is something which happens and which happens inside; there is a deconstruction at work within Plato’s work, for instance.”⁵⁶

VI. On the University to Come

*It is necessary, it seems to me, to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that **calls** for forgiveness?*⁵⁷

Eruption and the advent of the “wholly new” is not limited to individual works of genius that enrich tradition (in part by breaking from that same tradition). This concept is typically employed by Derrida in explicitly political contexts: the philosopher often speaks of the “*a venir*” [to come] in relation to the “democracy to

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32.

come.” This democracy to come (and the *a venir* more generally) is that politics, society, or beloved community we can strive for—an object that generates desire and faith. Yet this “object” isn’t really an object at all. Derrida is wary of the violence that so often accompanies concrete political goals: we see some desired end and use it to justify unjust means that are alleged to lead us towards some final peace or prosperity. The “Democracy to Come” resists this eschatological element because it slips away from our comprehension: it is, by definition, a necessarily unanticipated horizon or event. The arrival of... “we know not what.”

The University’s relation to this concept—the impossible and its impossible approach—is elucidated by Derrida in his 1999 lecture, *The University Without Condition*. This is a complicated text, but the standing question is precisely this impossible paradox at the heart of any idea of a university:

This university demands and ought to be granted in principle, besides what is called academic freedom, an *unconditional* freedom to question and to assert, or even, going still further, the right to say publicly all that is required by research, knowledge, and thought concerning the *truth*. However enigmatic it may be, the reference to truth remains fundamental enough to be found, along with light (*lux*), on the symbolic insignias of more than one university. The university *professes* the truth, and that is its profession. It declares and promises an unlimited commitment to the truth.⁵⁸

Yet this relentless and unconditioned (or unconditional) pursuit of truth is made impossible by that which the University seems to be materially conditioned on. These conditions include expectations set by church and state, the need for capital and the need for work, technologization, globalization, political economy, archivilization and the publishing industry, along with every other practical consideration that would inherently (and sometimes imperceptibly) influence and condition the pursuit of truth.

I would like to direct our attention to something not touched on in this litany of conditions, but deeply tied their consideration from within the American higher education context: slavery. As Craig Wilder argues in *Ebony & Ivy*, “Human slavery was the **precondition** for the rise of higher education in the Americas.”⁵⁹ This is

⁵⁸ Derrida, *Without Alibi*, 202.

⁵⁹ Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*, 114. [Emphasis mine]

the case in the material sense (the leisure proper to liberal arts & higher education has always been predicated on some class of people making that leisure possible). But the claim also goes beyond the merely material conditions: slavery made possible the rise of higher education in the U.S. because it also provided (and demanded) the subject matter—either implicitly in the superiority of the whitemale intellect over all other people, or explicitly in the “study” of phrenology and eugenics. In this case, the material conditions that provided the possibility of the University were conditioned on the pursuit of that which would provide the “moral”⁶⁰ possibility of slavery.

So, when Derrida claims that “this university without conditions does not, in fact, exist, as we know only too well,”⁶¹ I want to extend this impossibility to the central question of this conference. “How can liberal education cultivate racial justice?”⁶² is at heart an impossible question. To cultivate racial justice would mean to move totally beyond the University’s origin—to get past the conditions imposed by its material, formal, efficient, and final causes. This cultivation cannot be found in the incorporation of the descendants of the enslaved into the originary idea of an American University. Rather, it must include the very deconstruction of this vision. This is indicative of both my afro-pessimist outlook and kind of radical (i.e. impossible) Derridean hopefulness.

This afro-pessimism and impossible hopefulness is united in Morrison’s concerns regarding our attitude towards another “*a venir*”—paradise. She writes that “Paradise is no longer imaginable or, rather, it is overimagined—which amounts to the same thing—and has thus become familiar, common, even trivial.”⁶³

Conceptions of earthly paradise end up being simple extensions of certain perceived goods. Among these, Morrison names beauty, plenty, rest, and exclusivity, which all reduplicate wealth and leisure as objects of eternal

⁶⁰ Moral only in the most ironic sense.

⁶¹ Derrida, *Without Alibi*, 204.

⁶² In the description of the 2020 Gaede Institute *Conversations on the Liberal Arts* theme, this is paired with the further question “In what ways has liberal education, past and present, fostered racial privilege?”

⁶³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 249.

desire. With regards to exclusivity in particular (in exclusion of the other elements), the project of paradise is often obsessed with the absence of the unworthy: “Boundaries are secure; watchdogs, gates, keepers are there to verify the legitimacy of the inhabitants”⁶⁴ How can we hope to get beyond this prevailing vision of paradise to a truer, more impossible one?⁶⁵ I think this question is entirely congruent to our striving for any racial justice in the University that would go further than “benign coexistence near or within reach”⁶⁶ of that originary (fundamentally racist) vision.

If the problem is the temptation towards “safe participation” in human experience, then the answer must be tied to what Derrida describes as our infinite responsibility: the perilous acceptance of history as that which “can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered, precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith* and to the *gift*.”⁶⁷ To dangerously accept history (both our own personal past and its place in the tides of world-historical processes) would be to open ourselves up to any demands it might make on us—any questions it may ask. I think this acceptance of responsibility is inescapably (though only contingently) tied to the canon. In holding the canon loosely (not as a “decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered”) we find that it reveals a certain spectre: the ghost—if only in faint outlines—of the University to Come.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 250.

⁶⁵ One which “the gates of hell shall not prevail against” (Matthew 16:8).

⁶⁶ Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, 135.

⁶⁷ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 7.

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