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ARCHIVING TRAUMA: MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY IN TONI CADE BAMBARA'S *THOSE BONES ARE NOT MY CHILD*

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Toni Cade Bambara spent twelve years researching the Atlanta Child Murders, a quest inspired by her personal fears and her activist drive. *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) appeared posthumously and became a testament to the author's unyielding spirit and social responsibility. One boy's disappearance takes the reader on a difficult journey into the parent organizations' efforts to build an archive of information that would help in catching the perpetrator(s). The following paper is an attempt to comment on one mother's search for her son by archiving the past, present and future. The particular focus chosen for research purposes joins feminist perspectives on motherhood and space.

Key words: Atlanta Child Murders, race, mother, community, space

When Toni Cade Bambara died in 1995, she left behind twelve years of research on the Atlanta child murders that took place in the period 1979-81 but had implications surpassing the short historical period often associated with them. She undertook this task in the hope of raising attention to the inconsistencies pervading the investigation and to the minor media coverage. She acknowledges that James Baldwin's *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), his book-length essay concerning his visit in Atlanta and his involvement in the search parties, was not "a voice in the chorus" but "out there alone" so it was not able to "round out the story" (Bambara 2021: 666). In other words, not that many authors undertook writing on the topic for one reason or another[1]. So, her goals did not only entail fictionality but were linked to enacting change in reality. This should not surprise readers familiar

[1] Since Bambara's time there is only one other notable novel that engages with the murders – Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002).

with Bambara: politics and art were not separate for her. "She always knew what her work was for. Any hint that art was over there and politics was over here would break her up into tears of laughter, or elicit a look so withering it made silence the only intelligent response" (Morrison 1996: ix). Nevertheless, collecting data, creating fictional spaces and re-living trauma was also a personal cause of hers, not only a political one. As a woman who raised her daughter in Atlanta, she felt intimately aware of the tragedy suffocating the black community. The novel's prologue mostly inspired by Bambara's own feelings at the time paints the picture of a mother unable to perform ordinary tasks in the face of all-encompassing fear. Unfortunately, Bambara never completed the project on her own as her health slowly declined in the 1990s. Toni Morrison, her friend and confidant, decided to raise awareness of Bambara's achievements by, first, publishing a book collecting essays, interviews, and fiction (*Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (1996)) and then structuring and editing the Atlanta research into *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999). When talking about the editing process, Morrison claims that Bambara's work did not need many alterations, additions or refinement. She adds:

> Her [Bambara's] writing is woven, aware of its music, its overlapping waves of scenic action, so clearly on its way–like a magnet collecting details in its wake, each of which is essential to the final effect. Entering her prose with a red pencil must be delicate; one ill-advised (or well-advised) "correction" can dislodge a thread, unravel an intricate pattern which is deceptively uncomplicated at first glance–but only at first glance.
>
> (Morrison 1996: viii)

It is clear that Morrison did not approach Bambara's work as she would any other writer; she was fearful that by affering touching here and there she would change the overall meaning Bambara had in mind. The editing process became even harder in the wake of Bambara's death[2].

Some say that the overall manuscript totaled over 1200 pages, which Morrison brought down to the still impressive 700 pages. Regardless, the book feels exceptionally long as it is frequently unclear what its real purpose is; it is a compendium of information that could have filled several different books – the unraveling of a family, STOP activities like mailing, transcribing, or examining film reels, community (especially parents) vs. the inadequacy of the police force, the criminal court system and race, etc. In a

[2] For more see: Fagan, Allison. "Secondary Agency: Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and the Making of *Those Bones Are Not My Child*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2023. 135-156.

famous review of the book, Shanna Benjamin suggests, "Although Bambara succeeds in creating a significant revisionist historical document, her use of the details of her extensive research at times becomes a distraction. In a non-fiction work, such details might have been expected, even demanded. But in a work of fiction they seem to push the novel beyond the boundaries of its focus" (Benjamin 2001: 339). Many statistical details as well as characters who appear and disappear without leaving a trace as a significant presence make the novel not read like a novel at times. Besides that, many critics and readers expected her to produce a book similar to *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), what she initially became famous for; something concise with clear aims of exploring black female subjectivity. For a creator like Bambara who dabbled in a variety of mediums producing *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, though, does not seem like a weakness as the novel balances between cinematic film sequences, fiction and documentary in a very postmodern way (though quite distinct from the established traditions of white male postmodern writing in Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme and from Toni Morrison's magical realism), which is in itself an impressive feat. Malaika Adero calls the novel the "sum total of what Toni's life and work was about: motherhood, activism, education, and art" (Adero 2007: 236). Many points of inspiration eventually lead to a multivocal literary creation.

Though grandiose in conceptualization and execution, *Those Bones* has not received sustained critical attention; there are less than ten different papers, tackling its complexity. The same, actually, might be said about Bambara's other publications. Hailed as one of the mothers of the women's renaissance in the 1970s, she usually appears as a point of comparison to other more well established writers. This might be partly explained with her love affair with film that overshadowed her attachment to literature. The present exploration is, on the one hand, an attempt to examine one more point of view, dealing with the Atlanta child murders and "the city too busy to hate", as I have previously worked on Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*[3] and am aware of most of the dominant discourses; on the other, it is one more effort at breathing life into less-known (and forgotten by some) but still relevant literary works. The particular focus chosen for research purposes joins feminist perspectives on motherhood and space. How does Atlanta, as one of the few economically stable Southern cities which would rather not espouse crime and murder, re-produce certain maternal practices

[3] Boneva-Kamenova, Bozhidara. "Finding a Space to Call Home In Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*". *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2024. 15 – 24.

and decisions? Toni Morrison's famous essay "The Site of Memory" would serve as a starting point to explain the exhausting but necessary effort at archiving the present. Reviewing slave narratives (called freedom narratives by Toni Cade Bambara) Morrison reaches the conclusion that writing resembles literary archeology. "On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (Morrison 1995: 92). This journey to uncover remains is very similar to the one Zala, the main character in *Those Bones*, undertakes to find her son, Sonny, who suddenly disappears one day and is presumed to have been taken by the raving murderer of black children. We would trace one woman's archeological journey to fill a loss, to fight injustice and help in the creation of a new community to show how collective action in the face of familial or group organizations outweighs individual campaigns but might be detrimental to private life.

Zala as a dominant maternal presence inscribes her story to the pages of the book by literally and figuratively digging into paper, flesh and bones. While sorting mail, for example, she finds the story of a young boy who was returned to his family through the efforts of a parent organization, but they are unable to recognize him, and he is disassociated from them and his surroundings. A seemingly positive story about success still burdens Zala because she is reliving their loss and the painful path back to normality. "The more she read, the more disturbed she'd felt" (Bambara 2021: 325). Her work, though, is necessary because it might lead to such bittersweet successes. Carole Anne Taylor explains that "in the attempt to go beyond the lists of information to sifting, sorting, analyzing, organizing, and connecting, parents try to make an archive that will help them form connections among the multiple files, boxes, groups, murders" (Taylor 2002: 266) and later this archive "enables the recovery of found love, the remembrance of suffering recognized as still ongoing in others, and radical action connecting the personal and local causes of suffering to its more global, systemic causes" (ibid. 269). In many ways, Zala's involvement with the investigation exposes the rotten heart of the ineffective American social and political system. Race still affects decision making – black kids are supposed to have run away, to have been 'hustlers' in the first place. Zala explains these double standards to her children: "For example, if you look a certain way and live in a certain part of town and you're a kid who rakes leaves and carries groceries, then people say, 'Isn't that nice. What a fine, industrious child to be helping out.' Understand? But if you live in another part of town and are doing the same thing– […] and you're Black, with not

much money–then people say, 'Why don't their parents look after those kids running around neglected? They're little hoodlums, street kids, hustlers.'" (Bambara 2021: 200-201). There are certain expectations out of a particular group of people, even in progressive Atlanta that hails its first black mayor. Blame falls on parents and children who are perceived as secret abusers and hustlers, respectively. Popular stereotypes deter the investigation as police are looking for an easy solution. Blackness becomes synonymous with crime and neglect. Disillusioned, abandoned by the responsible institutions, the community has to fend on its own by creating their own archival database, full of private and public data. In that way, they find not only different new leads, but also a way to deal with the disappearances, supported by other people. Similarly to the time of slavery, African Americans mostly rely on themselves to enact change and survive.

Inability to solve the case is another reason why policemen and reporters resort to familiar discriminatory/racist practices. "In a racist culture", as Andrea O'Reilly explains, "black children" are deemed "inferior, unworthy and unlovable"; their mothers' love is an "act of resistance" (O'Reilly 108), a way to teach them to survive and endure; to that list of negative adjectives media and police add 'runaways', 'invisible', 'sly', 'silent', 'prone to crime' in the novel. Rebecca Wanzo finds fault with the general tradition and history that "constructs black boys as invulnerable to the kinds of violence that afflicts white children" (Wanzo 2007: 252). They couldn't have been kidnapped, they must have abandoned their families because they are poor, black and untrustworthy. The parents are the ones who keep their children's memory alive and use their archive to fight dominant widely spread narratives. During one of the many police interviews, Zala stresses: "He's not a runaway. He's not a wayward child. He's not a delinquent. He's a missing boy" (Bambara 2021: 67), but her words do not reach officials as they are not open to hearing them. Zala defending Sonny exemplifies her unconditional maternal love and the anger she harbors for the existing misconceptions about black children.

Mothers (especially black mothers) themselves have also been subject to a number of delimiting stereotypes and misconceptions. Susan Chase and Mary Rogers believe that there is a very strong fantasy of the 'perfect mother' – the one who can protect her child from all dangers and fulfil their every need. When it turns out that the mother is not perfect, she receives only blame (Chase and Rogers 2001: 208) and in turn becomes a 'bad mother'. This pervasive image of perfection has been taken one step further in the African American community. Black men in particular have inadvertently nurtured the idea of the "superstrong Black mother" who is

"endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love" (Collins 150). Patricia Hill Collins explains that the norm for mothers is to live a life of sacrifice without self-individuation or side projects. Zala does appear superstrong when we first meet her at the beginning of the novel – she holds down three jobs to financially match the standard of living in fast-developing Atlanta, takes care of her three children mostly on her own, lacking a network of othermothers willing to help her in their upbringing and she has stood by Spence while he was recovering from his time in Vietnam, a process that never came to completion for him. Urban lifestyle void of a strong community pushes caregivers to the edge of their abilities. The cracks slowly start to show. When Sonny disappears, while Kenti is looking for the source of a weird smell, "she sure smelled something. And it wasn't just the bottle pushed down in the trash. Mama call herself hiding it under a bread wrapper. If Daddy came by he would get on her about that. But Daddy wasn't coming by so much no more" (Bambara 2021: 31). Zala has started drinking and even though she is intent on hiding it, her children are aware of her struggles. She is devoted and loves them unconditionally but that does not make her 'superstrong'. Besides all else, the father also appears absent and unable to foster a better environment for their children. In a city intent on fast gain, overburdened parents have a hard time surviving and persevering. In the end, the mothers are the ones who are blamed for the failure to be 'perfect'. Critics claim that "African-American mothers wield unnatural power in allegedly deteriorating family structures" (Collins 2005: 149). For many policemen and reporters, Sonny's and other children's disappearances end up being the last evidence needed for demonizing the parents. It also proves that mothers are not all-powerful or able to save their offspring from every trouble.

From a narrative point of view, Zala as a mother struggling with loss is the driving force of the novel. Her maternal perspective guides the reader from the personal to the political. She is characterized as a study in contradiction as she seems to lessen her engagement with her other children in favor of finding her first-born son and helping the parents of other missing children. His loss is so detrimental that she feels her life has become "uninhabitable" (Bambara 2021: 127). She becomes the mother who is unable to mother. For most of the story, readers follow in her footsteps to uncover clues, remnants and faded traces of lost and kidnapped children. At some point, her public journey to fight disorder and chaos by mailing and transcribing important recordings and film footage (by archiving) takes precedence over the comfort of her family at home and the upbringing of her son and daughter (e.g., her daughter ends up in a half-sedated state after

eating paste). In an especially revealing chapter, Kenti pines over normality. She wants to go to church and eat Sunday food, but her parents are constantly busy redrawing/reworking/rearchiving the victims' map. "She didn't want cereal. It was Sunday. And Sunday was supposed to be bacon and pancakes" (Bambara 2021: 240). Children, even though aware of loss and the reason for the altered environment, are not ready to subscribe to a new reality of confinement and disregard. Kofi goes as far as to suggest running away: "He didn't have to stay around where nobody combed his hair or smiled at him" (Bambara 2021: 203). Trying to be a good mother for the *missing* child, Zala becomes a bad mother to her *present* children. It is only when she loses them as well that she realizes the depth of their dissatisfaction and how difficult it is to keep all of them not only safe but also content.

Without warning, Part IV of the novel starts with Zala separated from her family. Spence has taken their children away because his ex-wife is unable to nurture them in a way that would make them feel seen and heard; he is further afraid that they would become victims to the unnamed killer(s). Zala, alone in her big house, throws herself into her STOP duties. In her examination of what makes a home, Iris Young writes that "The home is an extension of and mirror for the living body in its everyday activity" (Young 2005: 131). In other words, the things you engage yourself with on a daily basis are reflected in one's living arrangements. If Zala does not feel at home, when her children are not there, then she, first and foremost, considers herself a mother. This association becomes even more poignant when she continues to find 'images' of her children in all her daily activities. At an ice rink, she thinks: "Zala turned and elbowed her way through the shoppers to the railing, leaned way over, sucking in the blue-mint chill of the ice rink below, where her three children should have been skating" (Bambara 2021: 326). Whenever she starts thinking about a particular topic, she always returns to her inability to mother. Her interest in the greater cause takes a step back when Sonny is found alive and she can be a mother of three again. Hers and Spence's main occupation then is to help Sonny return to himself not only physically but also psychologically. Mothering becomes even more central to her. As we read later on: "she no longer cared about the children's case. It was this child's case she had to crack" (Bambara 2021: 583). She further strengthens this point in the last pages of the novel. "The case, I mean–the children, the others. I didn't care about anything but my family" (Bambara 2021: 660). So it would seem that her involvement in the political/communal is only temporary and greatly inspired by the personal. When her family is complete and she dons the mother coat, the cause, pain, and strife of the wider community fades into the background. The city

gathers together and the city separates. The rural ideal of communal life seems inapplicable to the Atlantan environment.

When Sonny reappears in Miami, Zala is unable to recognize him. She is so used to viewing *other bones* that her mind is unable to comprehend the fact that her son is alive. "'That is not my boy,' she had told them. […] 'Those bones are not my child.'" (Bambara 2021: 517). He appears to be one more decaying body lacking Sundiata's vivacious rebellious character. Overwhelmed by death, the heroine has a hard time recognizing life. She has to relearn his name, nurse him as if he was a baby and help him find his voice. She starts talking to him so he would experience the power of language and expression. "She measured her words to teach him how it was done […] so she continued, slowly teaching him how he should tell his story" (Bambara 2021: 519). Zala attempts to assure him that he has the ability to tell them his story – something that he appears fearful to do. Kelley Wagers believes that the opposition speech (Zala) and silence (Sonny) is indicative of African Americans' inability to "shape the story" of racialized violence (Wagers 2016: 229). In that sense, they need one another as a way not only to survive racism, but also to find the right language to express it with[4]. From an alternative perspective this may be further understood as a mother passing on the archival knowledge she has accumulated to her child. The fruits of her painstaking efforts to record violence and lack are evident because she has the words to speak the unspeakable. Sonny, who does not have such specific knowledge, is silent. Zala helps him in time. Following Sonny's recovery, the family has to decide whether they would return to Atlanta and finish their long journey home. "How could they go back to Atlanta? And how could they not?" (Bambara 2021: 551). For them this is not simply a geographical or spatial move, it is an attempt, as Martyn Bone proposes, to capture the Atlanta they "knew before Sonny went missing" (Bone 2003: 234); to reach a different reality, devoid of violence and death. Such a return is impossible and undesirable. It would involve forgetting the existence of racialized violence and police/media indifference to it. The family would have to learn to live and survive with the help of their archival knowledge rather than without it. The novel ends ambiguously, with Zala and Spence bringing Sonny to the supposed house where he was held captive. They attempt to reclaim the scene of the crime so that Sonny would

[4] The speech-silence dichotomy also appears when it comes to the approach to the disappearances. Silence is the preferred method of solving them so as not to ruin the imagined gilded version of Atlanta.

be able to let go of his fear. Atlanta would once again be a home and not a space, associated with trauma.

Those Bones Are Not My Child, Bambara's magnum opus, continues to function as a detailed encyclopedia of the Atlanta child murders. It provides rich statistical and documentary information that is made more palatable with the inclusion of the fictional story of one family who lost their son. The present exploration focused most extensively on Zala's maternal journey as well as on her attempts to archive the past and the present. Collective action that she gives herself over to furthers the greater cause by doing the job of the police and gathering together people who share the same suffering and the same racial-specific stereotypes. However, this endeavor negatively affects her domestic life. Her archival work does help one member of her family to learn again the language of dominant American discourses. Be it as a good or a bad mother, Zala's existence in the novel is presupposed by her maternal role.

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