ROCZNIKI HUMANISTYCZNE
Tom LIV-LV, zeszyt 5 – 2006-2007

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CHILD ABDUCTION AS A PALIMPSEST OF DISCOURSES IN TONI CADE BAMBARA'S *THOSE BONES ARE NOT MY CHILD*

> [A] writer is never listening to what is being said, he is never listening to what he is being told. He is listening to what is not being said, he is listening to what he is not being told, which means that he is trying to discover the purpose of the communication.[1]

Editing Toni Cade Bambara's posthumous 'opus magnum,' *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, Toni Morrison had to reduce 1,800 pages of manuscript to over 670 pages in print. The book, on which Bambara was working on and off for 12 years, is a fictionalized response to the notorious Atlanta Child Murders, a series of black child abductions and murders that occurred between September 1979 and June 1981. It is noteworthy that the murders inspired two other literary works which purport to explore the events. In James Baldwin's essay *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, the Atlanta Child Murders constitute a point of departure for the author's critique of the American Dream, which anticipates Toni Morrison's interrogation of the relationship between Whiteness and Blackness as well as slavery and racism in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"[2] and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*[3]

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[1] J. BALDWIN, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 95.

[2] T. MORRISON, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1989): 1-34.

[3] T. MORRISON, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

The other text, *Leaving Atlanta*[4] is a novel by a black author Tayari Jones, who was growing up in Atlanta at the time the murders were committed. The atmosphere of terror and isolation as well as despair among the black children in poor districts of Atlanta is conveyed by three narratives, each told from the point of view of a different child, the narrative voices ranging from the third through second to first person.

Owing to its many insights, Tayari Jones's novel is undoubtedly appealing. Unfortunately, in each narration the writer appropriates the position of the child and thus, despite her experimentation with the narrative voice, domesticates the other by using the power and privilege of the adult's critical and historical distance, as well as "adult memories — or fantasies — about our own childhoods."[5] Neither do her neat psychological explorations of the three children's interiority allow for the irruptions of the gothic or bring into the readers' attention the abject materiality of dead child bodies, whose prominence in Bambara's novel makes it so riveting and unsettling.

The story in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* is told from the point of view of a black community activist, Marzala (Zala) Spencer, estranged from her Vietnam veteran husband. They reunite to shelter their two younger children and to search for their 14-year-old son Sonny, who reappears in a Florida hospital nearly a year after the abduction, his body and psyche bearing traces of heinous abuse. Bambara makes Sonny, a fictitious character, survive his ordeal unlike twenty-nine real black children and young males killed in Atlanta between September 1979 and June1981. The causes of death varied, many bodies were mutilated and bore traces of sexual assault. Among the victims were four toddlers from Bowen Homes Day Care Center killed by an apparent explosion of a boiler, which coincided with the convention of white supremacist organizations convention in Atlanta.

The work of the STOP-murdering-the-children-committee founded by the afflicted parents and the searches initiated by that committee were constantly obstructed or thwarted. The authorities, including the black mayor, would obfuscate the clues and evidence gathered by the community activists, the STOP committee, or independent investigators and would not protect the young people, and so the killings continued. Most of them, according to the police, did not conform to the pattern established by the officers in charge,

[4] T. JONES, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002).

[5] C. CASTAÑEDA, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 154.

therefore not all the missing children were sought for nor were all murdered children placed on the official list.

Finally, despite the evidence produced by the independent investigators and committees, evidence that pointed variously to the Ku Klux Klan, drug traffic, a pornography ring, pedophile group, as well as cult sacrifices, or possibly to all of them together, a young black man, Wayne Williams, was arrested and accused of murdering two young adults. However, as James Baldwin ironically observes, he was also tried for the remaining child murders and found guilty by the jurors even though the evidence was only circumstantial.[6] In 1985 a legal team put together by the Williams family would file for a writ of habeas corpus for Wayne Williams and demand that his conviction be overturned on the grounds that crucial evidence about a secret investigation conducted by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation was suppressed by authorities. The investigation revealed the participation of authorities of all levels in a conspiracy to cover up the links that pointed to the Klan's death-squad practice, as well as producing evidence that allowed for connecting "the paramilitary nature, the ritual cult nature, and the underground-mob criminal nature of the Ku Klux Klan and other extremists on the Right."[7]

The choice of the communal activist as the focalizer of narration determines the style of Bambara's novel, which in places turns into an impassioned political report on global inequalities, atrocities and persecution. On the other hand, the narrator's attempts to make sense of the events and their representation fabricated in the course of officially conducted investigation, as well as her participation in covert independent communal investigations, clearly place the novel in the tradition of the thriller, while by "'elevat[ing] private experience to public consciousness'"[8] the book "renders inextricable the public and historical and the private and biographical"[9] in the manner of historiographic metafiction. Aptly, Bambara employs a second person narrative in what can be interpreted as an autobiographical Prologue and Epilogue

[6] Baldwin speaks here of 28 cases, whereas other sources give the number 29, and says that accused of two murders, Williams was credited with the remaining 26: "For the Prosecution insists that there is a 'pattern' to the murders of the children, which, when Wayne Williams is found guilty of the two, will 'link' him to the other twenty-six." BALDWIN, 12.

[7] T. C. BAMBARA, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 669.

[8] R. MARTIN, "Clio Bemused: The Uses of History in Contemporary American Fiction," *Sub-Stance* 27:1980, 24; L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 94.

[9] HUTCHEON, 94.

to *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, where she expresses an anxiety about the security of her own daughter as well as summing up and assessing the steps taken by the Atlanta officials, FBI, and local police.

In questioning the stability of the referent of the pronoun you — is it the writer, the reader or any black child's mother? — the second person narration appears to interrogate the seemingly complete, individualistic and self-sufficient as well as self-contained subjectivity flaunted by corporate white Atlanta that is also assimilated by the black middle-class, and propounds instead a communal, protean and empathic subjectivity, which is sensitive to any attempts to colonize the other, whether understood in terms of class, gender or race, or, for that matter, figured as the child. The formation of this communal subjectivity in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* is fostered by the novel's belonging to the genre of historiographic metafiction which has emerged as a "sign of a desire for what Doctorow once called reading as 'an act of community.'"[10] However, in order to gauge the significance of the events for the Atlanta black community as well as interpret them not only in the light of the civil rights movement but also in the context of the overall racial history of the South, Bambara also employs elements of the gothic in her book.

African American authors employ the gothic "as a useful mode in which to resurrect and resist American racial history," Teresa Goddu observes invoking Ralph Ellison's opening to *Invisible Man*, where he insists that "the gothic must be understood in realistic terms."[11] By focusing on what Patricia Yaeger refers to as the "throwaway bodies"[12] of murdered children, Bambara follows in Ellison's footsteps and "resists the dematerializing the ghosts of America's racial history."[13] Goddu also points out that by invoking historical traumas, most notably slavery and racism, the gothic disrupts the national narratives of innocence, purity and equality.[14] Thus, the irruptions of the gothic mode in *Those Bones Are Not My Child* conjure up the 'international' Atlanta's dark double, so that "by reinscribing the materiality of black life and death through

[10] *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. R. Trenner (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983), 59. W: HUTCHEON, 93.

[11] T. A. GODDU. *American Gothic: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 153.

[12] P. YAEGER. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), xi, 260. I am indebted to Martyn Bone in whose article I came across a reference to Patricia Yaeger's book for the first time. See note 15.

[13] GODDU, 153-154.

[14] GODDU, 10.

a body politics of place, Bambara, too, reconfigures the cartography of [the city],"[15] ironically marketed as the 'City Too Busy To Hate.'

Characteristically, in *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*, the book which mainly discusses the abductions of white middle class children, Fass devotes only a line to "the heinous serial murders of as many as twenty-nine African American children in Atlanta."[16] It seems that Fass's lack of interest in the story of the black children is in itself symptomatic of one issue that child abductions and murders highlight, that is the problem of the neglect of the black child by the white society. Bambara's novel focuses on "the black child as someone who is invaluable and yet becomes white culture's throw-away,"[17] a theme invoked by Patricia Yaeger in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. Yaeger emphasizes that "African American women explore the bodies white culture has thrown away by rewriting these bodies, reinventing them in a way that white writers cannot — or at any rate have not."[18] In particular, Yaeger seeks to make the reader aware of horror inherent in the circumstances of a paradoxical shift in the black child's significance in American culture: "defilement makes a child who has been socially peripheral become symbolically central."[19]

In the Introduction to *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*, Fass observes that "[i]n the past 120 years, Americans have made and remade the crime of child kidnapping," and concludes that:

> whatever the human proclivities for sadistic abuse of children (and the tale of Gilles de Rais suggests that this may appear at any time), the modern problem of child abduction is historically specific, part of how our culture views children, parenthood, and sexuality and how it defines strangers, community, and crime. The stories that we tell ourselves about these crimes against children help us to define these issues. [20]

She stresses that the abduction stories serve as a vehicle for reflecting on many vexed social and cultural questions, and shows that the figurations of

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[15] M. BONE, "Capitalist Abstraction and the Body Politics of Place in Toni Cade Bambara's Those Bones Are Not My Child," *Journal of American Studies* 37 (2003): 237.

[16] P. S. FASS, *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 228.

[17] YAEGER, xi.

[18] YAEGER, 260.

[19] YAEGER, 70.

[20] FASS, 19.

the child do a complex cultural work without necessarily having the real child's welfare in focus. Bambara's novel explores the way in which the black child abductions and murders have become a subject of numerous interpretations and re-interpretations, rewritings and re-inventions. Located at the crossroads of different genres, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* reveals that the black child abductions too constitute a site of a multi-layered palimpsest of contradictory discourses, a palimpsest that reflects tensions tearing the American society apart. These are: a tension between the global and the local, questions of gender and sexuality, and problems of racial and class prejudice. "Like Mrs. Camille Bell of STOP had emphasized, 'It's a class thing.' No search party was mobilized to find a poor kid. A poor kid's supposed to run. Bon voyage. Case closed."[21]

According to Yaeger, "[t]he primary characteristic of the throwaway, in life as in literature, is the absence of [the] climate of mourning."[22] The missing and murdered children are of value only to the black community, who mourn the loss, whereas the white investigators' attitude is cruelly indifferent and offensively reifying. The difference of attitude manifests itself in the reaction of a mother who cannot bring herself to recognize in the remains the child she remembers alive and bursting with energy: "A tag is affixed to the toe that extends from the sheet. A mother backs away. *Those bones are not my child*. But the tag bears the name heard soaring over rooftops on summer nights of kickball."[23] The children's bodies are treated as waste, and the mortal remains of different children get mixed up in a forensic laboratory: "When it was learned that the team felt confident to identify, by process of elimination, the bones the investigators had scrambled, all hell broke loose, and the relatives were quickly removed from the area."[24] The seemingly matter-of-fact tone of narration enhances the grotesque effect these throwaway dead bodies have on the readers. The grotesque image of bone fragments left behind after forensic examination adds ironic emphasis to the rhetorical question whether anybody would be held accountable for the mishandling of the remains: "was someone going to investigate why the authorities had been in such hurry they'd thrown the bones of two bodies in one bag and left eleven teeth and a sternum behind?"[25]

[21] BAMBARA, 103.
[22] YAEGER, 81.
[23] BAMBARA, 12.
[24] BAMBARA, 361.
[25] BAMBARA, 370.

Also, the attitude of the media is instrumental and ostentatiously lacking empathy. A journalist covering the explosion of the boiler in the Bowen Homes Day Care Center asks a prostrate woman: "'And you're the mother of which dead child?'"[26] Contrary to the attempts of the authorities, forensic team, police and media to either hush the case or sensationalize it, Bambara presents the dead bodies in their horrifying materiality, and rather than offering sensational descriptions of mutilations, only registers them, because even their sheer enumeration has a traumatic effect on the readers. The writer matter-of-factly records kinds of death and instruments of harm: "A girl, she remembered reading, had been found strangled in a wooded lot not far from Spence's apartment complex. She'd been tied to a tree with an electrical cord."[27] However, by mentioning the parents' confrontation with the injured bodies of their dead children Bambara surreptitiously introduces an intimation of mourning into the coroner-like impersonal description of the remains: "Anna and Kenneth Almond had had to look at the bullet hole in Edward Hope Smith's back. Venus Taylor had had to look at Angel Lanier's mutilated face, Eunice Jones had had to look at the wounds on Clifford's head and throat."[28] Rather than commenting on the atrocity of the mutilations, the writer conveys the gothic horror of the crime by pointing out some parents' incapability of recognizing the bodies: "Angel Lenair[sic]'s body—[had] leatherlike skin, missing lower lip and left ear, [and was] so aged in appearance her mother had not recognized her."[29] On the other hand, by referring to the mortician assistant's pledge Bambara manages to bring further discussion of mutilations, in particular those related to sexual abuse, into the public discourse without sensationalizing them: "[T]he mortician assistant [swore] last fall he'd demand to take the stand and testify about the state of some of the bodies: hypodermic needle marks in the genital area, ritually carved, castrated."[30]

It is worth noting that the writer dwells longer on the casualties among the toddlers from the Bowen Homes Day Care Center that seem to be the evidence of the mindless and random racial rage. The description of the toddlers' injuries does not seem to threaten to dissolve into pornographic discourse, which an investigation of bodily mutilations is so much in danger of

[26] BAMBARA, 290.
[27] BAMBARA, 49.
[28] BAMBARA, 234.
[29] BAMBARA, 322.
[30] BAMBARA, 619.

sliding into. Instead, in making the descriptions of wounds suffered by the toddlers fade into the descriptions of destroyed toys to render the eerie atmosphere of a kindergarten turned pandemonium, the writer conveys the sense of the havoc wreaked not only on a place of innocent children's play but on the very idea of the a-political child's innocence:

> A locker and chain torn from the neck ripped the skin of a toddler running with a slashed femoral artery through hot debris, bawling babies crawled over blistered pacifiers, dropping scorched dolls on dump trucks smashed flat by scrambling knees cut on the metal edges of robots leaking battery juice. Soaked socks, torn drum skins, hands clawing at the mesh of playpens while tinny xylophones plunked eerily pinching fingers. Spines rammed by table legs busting the strings of ukuleles curling into black lumps. Teddy bear stuffing like popcorn in the gritty air where glass spattered into the wounds of toddlers. Flashcards fluttered high against Venetian blinds clattering down on brightly painted furniture collapsed on a baby boy's life.[31]

Fass warns that "[o]ur children are always at the crossroads of our desires," but hopes that the realization that what we treasure is not necessarily children's innocence and dependence, "may well lead us to understand how often we have made children work for us emotionally and culturally."[32] Moreover, she stresses that "Th[e] affection and concern [for children] does not need to be manipulated through representations of loss and exploitation. It can be mobilized for the children we have."[33] It seems that Bambara manages to balance the interrogation of the throwaway bodies of gruesomely murdered children with the affection for the non-colonized, "never entirely knowable"[34] subjectivity of the child that is there, alive. In other words, the writer complicates the palimpsest of the discourses enmeshed around the black child abductions and murders, by superimposing onto it a discussion of child's subjectivity as independent of the adult subjectivity.

In an attempt to theorize the child's subjectivity, Claudia Castañeda postulates that:

> The subject in [her] refiguration is not materially grounded in the child, but instead in the agency of nature that realizes bodies and embodiment. Even a new

[31] BAMBARA, 277.
[32] FASS, 267.
[33] FASS, 263.
[34] CASTAÑEDA, 170.

> born infant, from this point of view, is necessarily a natural-cultural body, always already formed through the semiotically and materially specific processes of conception, growth, and birthing that are constitutive of its particular making. The newborn's existence cannot be known fully by adults because the existence is the effect of an agency that is excessive to adult knowledge (though perhaps not to our experience). It is also partly the condition of adults' existence, and so too of adult knowing. Finally, to re-theorize the subject in terms that do not make use of the child as the adult's pre-subjective other means establishing an un-knowing—the impossibility of total knowledge and of a total claim on the real…—that is the condition of knowledge itself.[35]

Furthermore, what she is "reaching for is an account of subjects as subjectivities that are precisely singular, and so also never entirely knowable. To 'theorize' this subject is to inhabit a different mode of knowing, necessarily partial and situated, that works always in and through the fact of not knowing, of not being able to know fully."[36]

Bambara demonstrates respect for "never entirely knowable" child's subjectivity, and the resolve to avoid sensationalism by declining to let the reader explore the psychological damage suffered by Zala's abused son Sonny. Zala interprets psychological and psychoanalytical jargon as pervasively violent and appropriative; self-serving instead of serving the child survivor.

> She'd been adamant on the subject of psychological testing….He had a right to himself, and had a right to legal counsel as well. Who the hell did they think they were, breaking and entering, ransacking his dream life, interpreting his drawings, plastering labels on him, and for what?… Not once in all their jargonized bullshit had they acknowledged that a crime had been committed against the boy, a monstrous crime. They talked about psychosomatic disorders and coping mechanisms and so forth. Nothing about the torment that had shattered the boy's identity.[37]

Aptly, Castañeda expresses similar concern when interrogating the constructions of child's subjectivity that arise from psychoanalytical approaches: "What is problematic, for me, is … the claim, via psychoanalysis, that we can know the form that children's fantasies take. … But in claiming fantasies in and for children themselves, psychoanalytic theory more likely

[35] CASTAÑEDA, 168.
[36] CASTAÑEDA, 170.
[37] BAMBARA, 527.

imposes an *adult* fantasy of childhood on children." And she poses the question: "is it not possible that we simply do not and *cannot* know fully what children's fantasies are or may be?"[38] Sonny's parents recognition of this is reflected in his father's acceptance of the boy's silence: "'Your mother has told you that you don't owe anybody the truth, including us. …I like counting on your basic nature to help you spill whatever you really wanted us to know.'"[39]

Bambara's simultaneous focus on the materiality of the poor black children's bodies and her refusal to dwell pornographically on their mutilations as well as her reluctance to appropriate the experience of the abused child, demonstrate her denial to subject the child to the discursive, or cultural exploitation described by Fass. The writer strives to resist the positioning of the child as a blank screen onto which vying socio-political and cultural discourses are projected, because, she seems to point out, this would amount to another act of colonizing a subaltern, and therefore would compound the racial and social abuse.

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[38] CASTAÑEDA, 163-164.

[39] BAMBARA, 663.

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UPROWADZENIE DZIECKA JAKO PALIMPSEST DYSKURSÓW W POWIEŚCI TONI CADE BAMBARY *THOSE BONES ARE NOT MY CHILD*

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia wydaną pośmiertnie powieść współczesnej pisarki afroamerykańskiej Toni Cade Bambary *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, będącą reakcją na serię porwań i morderstw czarnoskórych dzieci w Atlancie w latach 1979-1981. Wymykającą się jasnym klasyfikacjom gatunkowym powieść Bambary sytuuje się w tradycji prozy gotyckiej oraz charakterystycznej dla postmodernizmu „metafikcji historiograficznej". Gotycyzm pozwala na przedstawienie historycznej traumy rasizmu i rasistowskiej przemocy. W powieści Bambary niewyjaśnione porwania dzieci, podlegające różnym interpretacjom, ocenom i innym zabiegom znaczeniotwórczym, stają się miejscem przecięcia kilku wykluczających się wzajemnie dyskursów, które odzwierciedlają konflikty rasowe i klasowe w społeczeństwie amerykańskim. Drugoosobowa narracja w opowieści ramowej wskazuje na wielość możliwych odniesień zaimka „ty". Bambara odrzuca w ten sposób spójny podmiot reprezentowany przez oficjalny dyskurs białych władz oraz czarnej klasy średniej Atlanty, zastępując go płynną, zmienną i podlegającą emocjom podmiotowością zbiorową, która obejmuje zamordowane dzieci, ich matki, całą pozbawioną przywilejów społeczność afroamerykańską, jak również autorkę i czytelnika.

Streściła Zofia Kolbuszewska

Słowa kluczowe: uprowadzenie dziecka, rasizm, gotycyzm, drugoosobowa narracja, metafikcja historiograficzna, podmiotowość dziecka.

Key words: child abduction, racism, the Gothic, second-person narration, historiographic metafiction, subjectivity of child.