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## RUNAWAY WOMEN SLAVES: FROM *SLAVE NARRATIVES* TO CONTEMPORARY REWRITINGS

PAOLA NARDI

When thinking of people on the run or of images of flight, one of the first things that comes to the mind in an Anglo-American context is that of the runaway slave so admirably and painfully evoked in the widely quoted lines from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. These 'journeys of flight' have been chronicled by a few of the slaves who made it for the North and for freedom in the literary genre of the slave narrative, whose "purported goal [...] is to reveal the 'truth' about slavery by describing a representative personal history, one which might stand in for the experiences of all slaves"<sup>1</sup>.

Extensive research has been conducted on runaway slaves since the institution of the Negro History Day in 1926: however, few studies deal exclusively with the case of the runaway woman slave, a point that Professor Freddie Parker discusses in his speech unequivocally entitled *They Fled Too: Female Slave Runaways in North Carolina, 1775-1840*, delivered during the 2012 celebration of the African-American History Month<sup>2</sup>. This lack of information and data on a historical level parallels a delay in literary studies specifically focused on slave narratives written by women. However, this void has been recently filled with the publishing of an increasing number of commentaries treating extensively women's "personal account[s] of life in bondage and their struggle to be free"<sup>3</sup>.

In this essay I will primarily deal with the theoretical treatment of slave narratives written by women through an overview of the recent debate on why women had "a different story to tell from those of formerly enslaved black men"<sup>4</sup>. I will then consider two texts, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, published in 1861 and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in 1987, both exemplary texts respectively of the autobiographical writing by slave women and of the 'neo-slave narrative', contemporary novels that "represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences"<sup>5</sup>. Critical analyses have recently widely investigated the complex relation between slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, expanding Bernard W.

<sup>1</sup> K. Drake, *Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs*, "MELUS", XXII, 1997, 4, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2012/3/inside-honors/index.htm> (last accessed June 30, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> F.S. Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> R.S. Levine, *The Slave Narrative and the Revolutionary Tradition of American Autobiography*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, A.A. Fisch ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> V. Smith, *Neo Slave Narratives*, in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, p. 168.

Bell's initial definition of this new genre. Within his analysis of the contemporary African American novel, Bell lists neo-slave narratives as an example of black postmodernist fiction, "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom"<sup>6</sup> that reject "the arrogance and anachronism of Western forms of conventions"<sup>7</sup> and that, at the same time, rediscover and reaffirm "the power and wisdom of their own folk tradition"<sup>8</sup>. Neo-slave narratives profoundly differ from slave narratives being the former fictional renditions and the latter autobiographical accounts of supposedly true events. Their differences notwithstanding, neo-slave narratives testify to the unending vitality of one of the first and most influential traditions in African American literature and culture, and to the centrality that the history and the memory of slavery still have in molding United States' "individual, racial, gender, cultural and national identities"<sup>9</sup>.

Researchers have documented that more than 6,000 slave narratives are known to exist, although only a small number were published<sup>10</sup>: "Black women wrote about 12 percent of these total number of extent slave narratives, but none of these is as well known as the narratives by men"<sup>11</sup>. This implies that slave narratives create an image of the runaway slave as primarily, if not exclusively, male, which becomes evident in the choice of the pictures accompanying narrations or critical studies always portraying the representative slave as a man<sup>12</sup>. The recent critical commentaries on slave narratives written by women have however revealed both the existence of the runaway slave woman and, more in general, a new image of the slave woman, subverting common stereotypes and associations<sup>13</sup>.

In male-authored slave narratives, slave women are portrayed as helpless victims and objects of sexual abuse from the perspective and the psychology of the black man. Frederick Douglass, William Bell Brown, Henry Bibb or William Craft, just to mention a few, explicitly tell stories of slave breeders and forced prostitutes. The generic beginning "I was born", that opens the narratives of both Douglass and Brown, not only declares the vagueness of their origins, it also obliquely tells of the violations of their mothers, which implies the authors' awareness of being conceived through an act of violence and not of love. In contrast, when women relate their stories the abuse endured in bondage never constitutes the core of their narration: forced and violent sexual relations do not represent "the most

<sup>6</sup> B.W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1987, p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>9</sup> V. Smith, *Neo Slave Narratives*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> J. Olney, 'I Was Born': *Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature*, in *The Slave's Narrative*, C.T. Davis – H.L. Gates Jr. ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> M.H. Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*, Virago, London 1988, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of this issue see: F. Foster, "In Respect to Females...": *Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators*, "Black American Literature Forum", XV, 1981, 2, p. 66; F.S. Foster, *Written by Herself*, p. 105; D.D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature, 1638-1867*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992, p. 134.

profound aspect of [her] existence”<sup>14</sup>, and they barely mention their sexual experience. Women see themselves as active agents, able to transform their defeats and difficulties into triumphs through resistance, strong, courageous, spiritually tenacious heroes fighting for their personal survival and that of their close relations. Telling her story from bondage to freedom, Sojourner Truth remembers one of the saddest moments in her life, when her family dissolves and she is sold at a slave auction “struck off, for the sum of one hundred dollars” together with “a lot of sheep”<sup>15</sup>. Instead of being overwhelmed by fear and desperation on this very day she states: “Now the war begun”<sup>16</sup>, a declaration that starts her unyielding battle for freedom careless of the violence and difficulties that she would face to achieve her goal. Similarly, in *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in The White House*<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Keckley portrays herself as a determinate, self-assured and competent woman. Keckley harshly criticizes slavery and defines her condition as a “curse”, “a wrong”, “a cruel custom that deprived me of my liberty”<sup>18</sup> but she does not submit or wallow in self-pity. Feeling she has been robbed of her “dearest right”<sup>19</sup> she affirms “I would not have been human had I not rebelled against the robbery”<sup>20</sup>. An intelligent woman, Keckley turns her adverse condition as a slave into an advantage and instead of being crushed under the weight of oppression she finds in slavery a source of power and confidence: “The precepts that I then treasured and practised I believe developed those principles of character which have enabled me to triumph over so many difficulties. Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one thing – youth’s important lesson of self-reliance”<sup>21</sup>.

This disparity in representation might have originated from the new role of women who change from silent objects into protagonists with a voice when they come to tell their stories, overcoming “monolithic characterization of slave women as utter victims”<sup>22</sup> through “stronger and more complex portraitures of their sex”<sup>23</sup>. Women slave narratives testify to how female experience in slavery was radically different from that of male slaves, which resulted in autobiographical writings with their peculiar form. These “nonstandard” texts have been for a long time dismissed and rejected as not authentic as they did not comply with the conventions of male-authored slave-narratives, defined in terms of quest

<sup>14</sup> F. Foster, “*In Respect to Females...*”, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> S. Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave*, Yerrinton and Son Printers, Boston 1850, p. 26.  
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/truth/1850/1850.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> E. Keckley, *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in The White House*, G.W. Carleton & Co. Publishers, New York 1868.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XII.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>22</sup> F. Foster, “*In Respect to Females...*”, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

for freedom, literacy and the establishment of manhood: "It is taken for granted that this experience, which is both unique and representative, is also male"<sup>24</sup>.

In male slave narratives the main character is usually an isolated hero who wins his freedom with a man-to-man physical confrontation with his master, that becomes the public event through which he declares his fight to be free. Although sentimentally linked to their homes in bondage where they might have, if lucky, some relatives, male slaves accept the possibility of cutting their familiar bonds and of leaving their plantations, an attitude that is blessed by the women of their families willing to sacrifice themselves on their behalf as for example William Brown's sister who declares: "Brother, [...] I see no possible way in which you can escape with us; and now, brother, [...] I beseech you not to let us hinder you. If we cannot get our liberty, we do not wish to be the means of keeping you from a land of freedom"<sup>25</sup>.

In order to value black womens contribution to American autobiography, and thanks to the contemporary critical interest in black women's autobiographical writings, scholars like Joanne M. Braxton have strongly recommended "reconsidering the criteria used to define the genre in such a way that the works of women"<sup>26</sup> might be included. Slave women inevitably build their narration from bondage to freedom around experiences specific to their gender, such as body exploitation and maternity. Female slaves shared the experience of racial authority with slave men but were apart from them as women were also affected by sexual authority, "bearing the burden of white patriarchy on their body"<sup>27</sup>.

In the new research on slave narratives scholars have elaborated some sort of gender-related generalizations, attributing to slave narratives written by women specific traits different from those pertaining to slave narratives with a male author<sup>28</sup>. Binary oppositions are always limited and arbitrary attempts to oversimplify life complexity. However, if conceived not as a rigid scheme but as a flexible and far from exhaustive approach, these differentiations might offer interesting glimpses into this specific kind of autobiographical writing: "The shape and texture of their stories differ as a result of the differences between

<sup>24</sup> H.V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Oxford University Press, New York 1989, p. 46. For a reading of heroes in slave narratives in masculine terms see W.L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana/Chicago 1986, pp. 240-242; J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1989, pp. 19-20; V. Smith, *Introduction*, in H. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, V. Smith ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. XXVIII; M.H. Washington, *Invented Lives*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> W.W. Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*, Anti-Slavery Office, Boston 1847, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, p. 18. For a discussion of female slave narratives and authenticity see: Id., *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, pp. 18-38; H.V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, pp. 46-48; M.H. Washington, *Invented Lives*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> R.S. Levine, *The Slave Narrative*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> This issue is discussed in: N. Bosnicová, *Lonely Fighters and Communal Talkers: A Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Slave Narratives*, "Brno Studies in English", XXX, 2004, 10, p. 125; R.S. Levine, *The Slave Narrative*, p. 109; N.Y. McKey, *The Narrative Self*, pp. 97-101; V. Smith, *Introduction*, pp. XXVII-XXXVI; M.H. Washington, *Invented Lives*, pp. 3-4.

men's and women's experiences. Women writing slave narratives and spiritual autobiographies developed common themes and archetypal figures, establishing an enduring tradition within the genre of black autobiography"<sup>29</sup>.

One of the differences in how men and women see themselves in autobiographical texts deals with the strategies men and women enact in order to perform their act of rebellious flight. Runaway slave men are usually seen as solitary heroes, leaving behind family and community and attaining their freedom through their intelligence, hard work and perseverance. Referring to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, seen as representative of slave narratives by men, Valerie Smith affirms that the author decides to define himself according to the values of the white mainstream culture, and in particular with the myth of the self-made man<sup>30</sup>. For runaway slave men the quest for freedom coincides with the quest for their denied manhood. Through public acts of heroism men slaves intend to show that they had the qualities – like courage, rationality, strength – admired and expected of other men and to demonstrate how Western cultural definition of manhood could also apply to them. The experience of slavery does not irreversibly deny their possibility to “recuperate the manhood they lost to white patriarchy as slaves”<sup>31</sup>.

If only for the strong bondage that link them to their children, women rarely enact flights in autonomy or solitude: their escapes are the result of effort and cooperation of entire communities. In her psychoanalytic analysis of identity construction in slave narratives Kimberley Drake asserts that “women's more ‘relational’ identity has been used against them: both psychoanalytic and cultural norms for women emphasize their ‘dependent’ and ‘caretaking’ natures as reasons for their submission to men and their restriction to the home”. But to objectified subjects, the community represents a shelter, a place that protects women from the violence of patriarchal culture helping them simultaneously “to become somewhat whole or autonomous”<sup>32</sup>.

It is the relation with their children that make slave women endure the horrors of slavery and give up opportunities of escape without children, and it is also their concern with children freedom and well-being and the fear that they, especially daughters, might undergo what the mothers have undergone which gives slave mothers the ultimate reason for fleeing. Motherhood becomes one of the defining traits for women, a way to regain one's self respect and an “avenue to identity”<sup>33</sup>. Thus, as female counterpart to male lonely heroes Braxton proposes the archetype of the outraged mother: “She is mother because motherhood was virtually unavoidable under slavery; she is outraged because of the intimacy of her oppression”<sup>34</sup>.

It is precisely this ‘unavoidable motherhood’ that makes it impossible for slave women, differently from slave men, to comply with the standards of womanhood conceived for

<sup>29</sup> J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> V. Smith, *Introduction*, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> N.Y. McKey, *The Narrative Self*, p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> K. Drake, *Rewriting the American Self*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.



white women<sup>35</sup>. According to the cult of the “true womanhood”, the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal woman was the one who cultivated the qualities of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. Based primarily on chastity and sexual ignorance, this notion excluded black slave women whose bodies were properties of their masters and consequently could not maintain a control on their sexual life. As a result, black slave women were forced to re-think their identities and they did it “out of the only reality that they could claim: their experiences and their need to survive”<sup>36</sup>.

Gender influences the development from passive slaves to conscious human agents, too. In male slave narratives slaves usually assert their independence through a public physical confrontation with the master. The male slave’s flight starts with this act of one-to-one confrontation as after this moment the slave starts to conceive of himself as a free being, at least on a psychological level, and to prepare his solitary flight. Women, instead, exerts their power through “wit, cunning, and verbal warfare”<sup>37</sup>: language becomes their form both of rebellion and self-defense, a weapon that women use to preserve their self-esteem, maintain a psychological distance from the master and thus endure their daily existence. It is through these daily and constant verbal blows that women build their flight, which is not the result of spectacular acts but the outcome of more subtle and clandestine exertions of power.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave girl, Written by Herself*, is undoubtedly the most famous of the slave narratives written by a woman. First published in 1861 and then rediscovered in the 1970s, it was written by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym Linda Brent. In this autobiography Harriet Jacobs details her escape to the North, from her experiences as a slave in North Carolina to her struggle in New York as a liberated woman to free her children and be re-united with them.

Harriet Jacobs addressed the theme of the victimization of African American women slaves by their white masters so directly and extensively as never before. In revealing personal details about her story of enslavement, degradation and sexual harassment Jacobs risked her reputation, and she did it in the hope to appeal to a northern female readership that might sustain the anti-slavery movement and sympathize with the plight of black mothers in bondage. Jacobs acknowledged her embarrassment about her unorthodox sexual life to her friend and anti-slavery feminist Amy Post, who had suggested her to reveal her story as a way to struggle for the millions of black people still in bondage<sup>38</sup>. Another abolitionist, Amy Child, accepted to write an introduction to her story that “was intended to influence white Northern women to accept her story in spite of its ‘indecorum’”<sup>39</sup>. Jacobs documented the sexual abuse she suffered, but more impressively she explains how she

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion on this point see L. Tanner, *Self-Conscious Representation in the Slave Narrative*, “Black American Literature Forum”, XXI, 1987, 4, pp. 415-24.

<sup>36</sup> N.Y. McKey, *The Narrative Self*, p. 100.

<sup>37</sup> J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> On the importance of the letters by Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post recently discovered written to establish the long-questioned authenticity of Harriet’s *Incidents*, see J.F. Yellin, *Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative*, “American Literature”, LIII, 1981, 3, pp. 479-486.

<sup>39</sup> M.H. Washington, *Invented Lives*, p. 10.

decided to use her body as a weapon against her master, doctor Flint. Finding no other way out, Linda Brent decides to choose a lover, Mr. Sand, as a means of avoiding physical exploitation by her master and finds in motherhood a means to regain her lost self-respect: "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant, even in that small way"<sup>40</sup>.

The lack of heroic deeds and spectacular adventures is what characterizes Linda's escape to the North. Her journey from slavery to salvation is not even a real journey as the bulk of her story deals with the seven years spent concealed at her grandmother's house, in an uncomfortable tiny garret where she could neither sit nor stand and was continually bitten by rats and spiders, just a few kilometers away from the house of her harasser, Mr. Flint. What gives her the courage to carry on is the sight of her children that she can safely watch through a peephole in the wall. Motherhood is also what prevents her from fleeing North alone: but it is also what gives her the final determination to flee, terrified by the idea that her children, especially her daughter, might suffer what she had suffered in bondage: "I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery"<sup>41</sup>.

However, Linda is not a lonely mother fighting in solitude for her personal survival and the survival of her children. Linda's final escape is a goal achieved through the patient, silent and unflinching effort of an entire community, represented first of all by her grandmother that Jacobs defines as being "at the beginning and end of everything"<sup>42</sup>. The Grandmother is for Linda the sustaining force, her primary role model that gives her an example of courageous resistance to white men's oppressive manoeuvres: "Aunt Marthy is, in short, the bearer of a system of values as well as the carrier of the female version of the black heroic archetype. Aunt Marthy teaches and demonstrates the values and practical principles of sacrifice and survival; without her example and her brilliant organization of Linda's support system, escape for Linda would have been impossible"<sup>43</sup>.

About 125 years later, nobel-prize winner Toni Morrison published a novel, *Beloved*, that both recalls and sets apart from Harriet Jacob's *Incidents*, adapting the classical genre of the slave narrative to contemporary sensibility. Both works chronicle the experience of a woman in bondage and tell the story of a runaway mother concerned with her and her children's survival while attempting to escape to freedom. However, the linear and chronological plot of *Incidents* revolving around a single protagonist presenting her story from her unique perspective is transformed in *Beloved* into a multivocal portray of parallel lives through the use of modernist techniques within the framework of the American gothic.

Free from the expectations, dynamics and desires of the white audience to which *ante-bellum* slave narratives were mainly addressed as powerful tools in the hands of the aboli-

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<sup>40</sup> H. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p. 85. Subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> J.M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, p. 30.

tionists' propaganda, Toni Morrison gives voice to the many thousands gone, as highlighted in her dedication, to those who did not write their history, "which does not mean they did not have it"<sup>44</sup>. She brings to the foreground the emotional and psychological experience of runaway women slaves in search of "social freedom and psychological wholeness"<sup>45</sup> basing her novel on the historical account of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, escaped from slavery in Kentucky across the Ohio river and murdered her baby daughter to avoid her the horrors of slavery once her slaveholder tried to take her and her children back to Kentucky.

What emerges through Morrison's sophisticated narrative technique and sagacious use of magic is that *Beloved* follows *Incidents'* strategy in the depiction of the runaway woman slave, with its blending of lack of heroism, community and motherhood. Sethe's flight towards freedom is an inglorious journey of a sexually abused, objectified, disheveled, woman unable to make it by herself. When Sethe finally manages to escape from the horrors of the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky she is in her "sixth month of pregnancy"<sup>46</sup>, a lonely, feeble, humiliated creature, walking "for standing still"<sup>47</sup>, so physically and mentally prostrated that the thought of death "didn't seem much a bad idea, all in all, in view of the step she would not have to take"<sup>48</sup>, if not for the unbearable thought of her baby living on "an hour? A day? A day and a night? – in her lifeless body"<sup>49</sup>.

Like Linda, Sethe owes others her life, first of all Amy Denver, a white indentured servant girl, she herself running away from the abuse of her master, who helps Sethe deliver her baby, then named Denver after the white girl, and crossing the Ohio River. When Amy meets Sethe – "The scariest-looking something I ever seen"<sup>50</sup> Amy says – she can no longer walk and she accomplishes her act of flight "crawling"<sup>51</sup> alongside Amy. But then Amy "did the magic"<sup>52</sup>: lifting Sethe's feet and massaging her feet "until she cried salt tears"<sup>53</sup> she takes care of Sethe, anticipating the function of the black community in Morrison's novel, which is "the ability to care, to heal, and to shield its members"<sup>54</sup>. Morrison's black community is not a perfect community without any drawbacks: out of envy it does not warn Sethe and her mother-in-law of the imminent arrival of Sethe's old master, which consequently makes the entire black community guilty of infanticide. However, in the end, it is always the help of the community, together with the love of Paul D and the spiritual support of

<sup>44</sup> B.W. Bell, *A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past*, "African American Review", XXVI, 1992, 1, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> T. Morrison, *Beloved*, Vintage, London 1997, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>54</sup> C. Hamilton, *Revisions, Re-memories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative*, "Journal of American Studies", XXX, 1996, 3, p. 439.

her mother-in-law, that restores Sethe to her physical and mental wholeness and helps her come to terms with Beloved, the ghost of her unnamed murdered baby girl that haunts Sethe's house all along the narration.

Visualizing her mother's flight, Denver has this image in front of her "There is this nineteen-year-old-slave girl – a year older than herself – walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away. She is tired, scared maybe, and maybe even lost. Most of all she is by herself and inside her is another baby she has to think about too"<sup>55</sup>. Once again the runaway woman slave can't move independently and her act of flight is not one if it is not performed with and for her children. Motherhood is what gives her the force to face once again the pain and anguish of labor and the inglorious hero is "on her knees again, crawling"<sup>56</sup> to give birth together with Amy to her fourth child on a broken boat by the Ohio river. Ironically, the heroic act of giving birth is carried out by the two most wretched persons, "two throw away people, two lawless outlaws – a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair"<sup>57</sup>. The love for her children that first prevents Linda from running away and then gives her the final courage to perform her act of flight is transformed in Morrison's novel into monstrous, "thick"<sup>58</sup> love, the desperate act of a trapped mother that through infanticide gives access to her daughter to the final flight towards permanent freedom.

In conclusion, as Toni Morrison effectively narrates in her unromantic history, the flight of a slave woman is not a steady, progressive, successful, "journey of transformation from object to subject" of an independent hero<sup>59</sup>. Rather, it is the choral accomplishment of an entire community, a painful act of ultimate survival in the attempt to compose life in bondage and freedom as the past will always intrude on and shape the present. In Sethe's words: "I got [...] the daughter holding in my arms. No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took my journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something: [...] it cost too much"<sup>60</sup>.

### *Keywords*

Jacob Harriet, Morrison Tony, Neo-slave Narrative, Autobiography.

<sup>55</sup> T. Morrison, *Beloved*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>59</sup> B.W. Bell, *Womanist New-Slave Narrative*, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> T. Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 15.