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Opening-Up Aesop's Fables: Heteroglossia in Slade & Toni Morrison and Pascal Lemaître's 'The Ant or the Grasshopper?'

By Veronique Bragard [\[1\]](#)

1

Fables, characterized by their featuring animals and containing a moral, are among the earliest forms of storytelling. With its aim to simultaneously teach and entertain, playfully imparting wisdom, fabulist thinking has been used as a complex medium of political analysis and resistance against tyranny or royal negligence, for example (see Patterson, 1991). Although they occupy a marginal position, fables are still present in children's literature. While new fables are being written, old ones are retold in a variety of ways. "The Ant and the Grasshopper" has become a master-narrative that has been adapted throughout the ages. First written by the slave Aesop in 6th century B.C., it was famously retold by LaFontaine in a version that emphasized language playfulness, avoiding the direct moral ending. Many more popular rewritings have given it a ludico-parodic twist, even a vulgar subject (the grasshopper becomes a whore, for instance, Genette 40). This famous fable already contained eternal political oppositions between the provident one and the carefree one, the human dilemma between deep-rooted anticipation and a passionate happy-go-lucky attitude. Recent web adaptations that turn the grasshopper into the poor taking advantage of the welfare system illustrate how the fable has been used in conservative circles to convey a Manichean contrast between the hard-working rich and the lazy poor, promoting a tendency to blame the victim. More recent children's literature adaptations confirm its value. Amy Lowry Poole's version (2000) transposes it to a Chinese Emperor's palace setting to emphasize how the grasshopper can appreciate the beauty around her, something the ants fail to do. Mark White's retelling (2004) adapts it to a children's audience: "There's a time for play and a time for work," the ant says (24). Other works like Leo Lionni's *Frederick* use a similar trope and theme but with different titles. Last but not least, comics have also adapted the famous fable to the dialogue of image/text. While Jessica Abel's adaptation depicts the grasshopper walking all over her friend, Harvey Kurtzman's beatnik version pokes fun at the 1960s beat generation. The non-conformist be-bop grasshopper eventually deciding to move away from empty talking is paralleled by the ant's realization that he needs culture (or power, or women, it is not clear which).

2 Slade and Toni Morrison's *Who's got Game* [\[2\]](#) series, illustrated in graphic novel form by the artist Pascal Lemaître, engages in a playful retelling of Aesop's fables to respond to the finality of Aesop's moral ending that they (the Morrisons) felt was "frustrating" (Morrison interview NPR). The

collection, which is planned to contain six volumes, addresses different issues contemporary youth need to face: the place of art and work, the act of bullying or the significance of education. By resorting to the graphic novel and using the Black American tradition of orality and rhythm, the authors give it a modern twist to address a teenage/adult audience.

- 3 In this paper, I propose to explore, with the help of Genette's concepts developed in *Palimpsestes* (a reference work dealing with rewritings), the main differences between Aesop's "The Ant and the Grasshopper" (hypotext) and the rewriting (hypertext) under consideration: the diegetic (spacio-temporal), stylistic and pragmatic (modification of the action) transformations that operate at the narrative and graphic levels. These transformations open the text up to several voices and discourses, conferring on it heteroglossic richness. Those transformations, which furthermore interweave a great number of intertextual references that subtly address the worlds of both youth and adult readers, enable the authors as well as the graphist to invest the story with new layers of satirical humor and moral complexity. I here argue that these transformations open up the fable to three voices/discourses: the postmodern fabulist, the language of satire in the graphic illustrations, and the contesting rhythm of rap. Far from the short text of Aesop, the authors take us on a 25 page reading that engages with several issues such as the place and worth of art, the value of hard work, and the backlash to frenetic capitalistic consumerist culture.
- 4 Central to the postmodern twist on the ancient fable are the pragmatic and diegetic transformations that serve to deconstruct the moral ending of the fable. If the title of the collection *Who's got Game* probably reminds readers of the MTV reality show in which ten young men and two women fought it out on the street courts in and around Harlem, having "game" refers to someone who is very skillful at doing something, especially playing a sport. The question mark used in the title indicates how the voice of Aesop and the conventions of the fable are in many ways blurred and questioned. The language of the fable remains present in the ant and grasshopper names and the main issue of seizing the day or preparing for the winter. However, as mentioned above, "The Ant or the Grasshopper?" is not a traditional fable since, right from the beginning, moral assertion is questioned (in the title) and the animals have names as well as a very anthropomorphic appearance: Foxy G the grasshopper and his ant friend Kid A "romped each day till the sun's last ray" (10). Both friends, dressed as superheroes, have fun in a composite bug-populated city peopled by more secondary characters such as a young "pretty woman" with her cell phone and a lonely old man.
- 5 Of course, if the drawings call for attention, the colloquial vocabulary further creates surprise. Although the narrative is not explicitly situated in contemporary America (the names Foxy G and Kid A are very suggestive), the graphic part evidently transposes the story to a New York urban street location that entails a cultural subtext and temporality that was absent in the hypotext. The diegetic universe is to a great extent more specific here: the basketball courts and street corner hang-outs suggest the outdoor context of the "ghetto" of black expressive culture.
- 6 The drawings, in accordance with the text, convey a youthful atmosphere of getting together and creating music. The text itself imparts this rhythmic aspect that resonates with rap music in several ways (an aspect I will analyze later). But as the summer comes to an end, Kid A swiftly leaves his grasshopper friend, Foxy G, to return to work: "Got to split, Foxy. The summer's been fun. Time to dump this place, get back in the race. There's a lot of work to be done" (12). But Foxy stays on the streets because he has to "groove, move, prove, disprove" (15).
- 7 While the ant is heaping and piling and baking and storing, he is portrayed enjoying the power of the grasshopper's music. In Aesop's version (hypotext) and many others, the grasshopper is singing idly. Here, the impact of his art is foregrounded. Kid A, although he has rejected Foxy G's music, cannot escape it. Like the ghost of *Beloved* (to which the picture directly alludes) coming back to Sethe in Morrison's famous novel, music becomes a ghost haunting and seducing the ant. The movement conveyed by the drawings further enhances the power of music and art. The first and main pragmatic

transformation takes place right here. Though Genette argues that the pragmatic transposition is an "inevitable consequence of the diegetic transformation" (360), this does not seem true in this context. But as Genette further remarks, it is rarely practiced without another aim, (360) and that is indeed the case since the pragmatic transposition, which adds events without changing the overall plot, contains part of the authors' ideological message.

- 8 When winter howls at the door, Foxy G wakes up a "hungry artist". He tries not to collapse as he "drags his wings back to the neighborhood" (20) and knocks on Kid A's door. The ant's old house situated outside of the cold city conveys a cosy cocoon that contrasts with the wintry urban jungle where the grasshopper struggles on his own. And the story unfolds with its classic message: "I planned ahead and stored up things/ You wasted your time on those funky wings" (22).
- 9 Instead of picking up the part of doughnut his friend throws at him out of pity after telling him he should have known better (as in the original), Foxy G's here retaliates. His anger turns into a plea for the recognition of his artistic creation. The authors decenter the question of hard work and material subsistence to articulate questions of artistic creativity and how art is considered within a work ethic and a consumerist culture. Since it does not "produce" anything palpable, the grasshopper's art hardly exists as such. Yet the text further challenges the assumption that art is entertainment and play. Moreover, by creatively rewriting Aesop's fable, the text itself illustrates not only how art is work but how art contains the power to renew itself. By including the grasshopper's response to the original moral, the authors push the debate further.
- 10 Answering Foxy G's speech, Kid A's first reaction consists in smirking. By showing he is pleased by someone else's bad luck, he reduces their past friendship to nothing. Again, this hypertext emphasizes human characteristics. Disdain and pride are actually conveyed by the expressionist drawings of Lemaître. With both characters sticking to their principles, the situation does not broadcast anything good for the future. Kid A responds with a condescending monologue in which he obviously boasts about his material superiority.
- 11 Foxy G does not give up and puts the meaning of the ant's dream into a very rap-sounding question, "where is your dream?/Know what I mean?" (28). When read in the largest context of the American dream (in the meaning of ideology), the text leads us to question the values developed by American culture since the emergence of its formidable freedom dream in 1776. Is the ant doing the right thing by withholding charity from one who gave him aesthetic pleasure? If the book can be read as a critique of a society where material success has surpassed its original dreams of freedom, justice and equality, it can also be envisioned as exposing the breadth of the American dream which can and should include the individual and his or her artistic expression.
- 12 The pragmatic and diegetic changes analyzed above demonstrate that postmodern intertextuality has a "deconstructive function" (Broich 253), in this case the destabilization of the fable genre along the foregrounding of moral relativism as a result of a "de-totalizing" postmodernist approach (Hutcheon 59). In many ways, the parodic interrogation of the fable genre confirms Hutcheon's observations that it both "legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (Hutcheon 97).
- 13 The second voice of the work's heteroglossic quality is the voice of the satirical cartoonist that exposes questions of excess for instance with graphic scorn. The alternation between an omniscient and first person narrator, something that characterizes comics in general, also participates in demoting the godlike status of the ancient fabulist, replacing his omniscient voice with an interplay of heterogeneous discourses. The ultimate pictures of the story (I will consider the last two as an epilogue) evidently emphasize the focalization on the grasshopper. The book devotes eight large pictures to the grasshopper (only one to the ant), giving him a new central discursive position. This graphic double-ending brings us to focus more specifically on the

graphic aspect of the story, a voice in itself that plays a crucial role, if not THE central role in the book. It is at the level of the illustration that most diegetic transpositions take place, although they are somewhat conjured by the rap rhythm of the text. In the collaboration that unites the Morrisons and Pascal Lemaître, freedom has been the key word. The stripped down, simplified portrayal of the protagonists enhances their universal appeal and fits perfectly within the context of a fable. The fact that they are the only colored human-like ones also attracts the reader's attention while stressing the otherness of the outside world. Though most of the drawings predominantly illustrate the text, several pictures (at the beginning and especially at the end) convey extra meaning, moving further than illustration. Pascal Lemaître's Steig-influenced drawings and curved lines powerfully participate in amplifying emotional responses as well as satirical caricature. The expressive faces of the characters at crucial moments of the plot deepen their anger and distress, pride and interrogations. Some larger panels also play a role in intensifying the feelings involved in certain scenes.

- 14 The highly colored and expressive panels not only illustrate the text, they convey additional meaning as well. This is the case with the last four panels. When Foxy G kicks the doughnut hole, the picture serves as an anticipation of the grasshopper's expression of his strength of mind. He will not accept his friend's pity. He is looking for respect and acknowledgement. With the power of the graphic, Lemaître also provides the reader with some material to ponder: leaving the ant's unhappy face as open to interpretation.
- 15 The image of Kid A sadly looking at his friend out the window points to the consequences of materialistic appetite. The female figure on the couch watching three television sets reveals the ant's double: his lazy self-centered self (a very human element). One will here regret that the only representations of female characters are women lying in front of the television or the whore in the park. This image echoes Morrison's interrogation of the stereotype about blacks being lazy, as well as her frequent critique of the middle class in her work. In *Song of Solomon*, for example, Milkman's father, a successful real estate man, is shown to be shallow and materialistic. Similarly, Spike Lee critiques (at the same time as he affirms) middle class values in *Do the Right Thing*. The authors are here attempting to reverse the negative "lazy" stereotype through showing the grasshopper's creative work while critiquing the middle-class "white" values (mimicked by blacks) of the ant by showing that work and cleanliness, in themselves, do not confer a higher morality. Overly clean homes are also problematic for Toni Morrison in her novels in that she associates obsessive cleanliness with perversion.
- 16 The juxtaposition of the picture of the ant at his window and the grasshopper "stumbl[ing] off into the night" (29) recaptures the whole moral question of the book, enlarging the debate and most of all forcing the reader to get involved in the "who's got game?" question. The power of these images to induce a reflection that does not "resort to discourse [or] 'rational thought'" (Gaudy 125) and escapes didacticism confirms in many ways Hélène Gaudy's observations regarding comics and philosophy, that "it is often the image that is allowed to broaden and complexify the subject matter" (Gaudy 128). In this context, Gaudy, who examines Oscar Brénifier's *Ninon*, quotes the latter: "the more discourse states ideas, the less it questions them" (Gaudy 127). The juxtaposition of the two images directs the reader to a more nuanced response to "who's got game?" as s/he has to find his/her way between the cosy, not-so-sure, unhappy-looking ant and the grasshopper trudging through the snow with the question "who's got game?". The question also evokes Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, as what constitutes the right thing is left in doubt.
- 17 The last two pictures can be read as an epilogue that leads back to the beginning. The first portrays the story encapsulated in a snow globe, a clear distancing from the fictional world. The second picture represents a young character holding this smaller copy of the story. With this metafictional comment (yet another postmodern twist), whereby the reader is included by seeing himself/herself holding a smaller copy of the story, the graphic part

emphasizes personal moral judgment and its complexity. The character being enveloped in the snow conveys the reader's further identification with the story.

- 18 The realistic locations and details provided by the image constitute a voice of their own whose particularity establishes a satirical critique. While it illustrates the text, the picture conveys some additional meaning and thereby enters into dialogue with the words. For example, by picturing a child in front of three television sets and the ant storing goods in several fridges, the picture not only illustrates the text, it exaggerates and mocks the excesses of a consumerist society increasingly preoccupied with the accumulation of material goods. Moreover, unlike ants who always work in close solidarity, some ants here are portrayed as lazy and isolated in front of the TV set. The caricaturist here introduces the theme of individualistic egocentrism. The graphic part not only situates the action in the US, it provides the reader with a discreet critique of US capitalistic society, resonating with the questions raised in the story. Another example is when Kid A is portrayed doing the chores and at the store. Shopping becomes a race where everyone buys the same items and is dressed in a similar way.
- 19 Besides the postmodern author and the satirical graphist, a third and important voice that enters in dialogue with the fabulist's is the voice embodied in the rhythmic density of the lines, close to rap music, which creates a stylistic change, what Genette would call transtylisation. Already conveyed by the illustrations emphasizing popular street art, from the very first page and title (Game in rap vocabulary refers to some way to make money or advance oneself), the book invokes the 3 R's which form the basis of rap: rhythm, rhyme and rhetoric (Wood 1), although the latter aspect is reduced since there is no performance implied. Like rap music, the text resorts to rhymed couplets – rhymes being the structural device in rap, as Wood argues, with four beats: "Swam in the pool where the water was cool" (11). The English translation of Aesop, which typically relies on short dialogue deprived of real rhythm or rhymes, is here challenged by a very rhythmic and rhymed text that mixes colloquial English and rap/slang and thereby emphasizes the power of music/art. Next to the use of rap rhythm and inflections, a lot of music/street vocabulary as well as semantic ambiguity illustrate how the text dialogues with an Afro-American subtext. One example is "sounding" in the quarrel scene whereby both exchange ritual insults:
- 20 Sounding (Wood 4), unlike signifying, is a direct form of provocation. The "don't play me" becomes here ambiguous. On the one hand, it means "do not tick me off," but it also ambiguously refers to "take my music" and thereby evokes rap quarrels. The "I make-you fake" refers to the discourse of plagiarizing that surrounds rap in general, in which artists take from each other as an act of economic exploitation. It recalls the verbal battles that have become live unrehearsed performances (Keyes 137) at the same time as it interrogates the nature and purpose of intertextuality and borrowing in general. In many ways, this language of quarrel epitomizes and enhances the moral debate at the heart of the text. The originality of the text lies in the fact that this Afro-American subtext is conveyed by the transtylisation and not the diegetic transpositions. Both actually meet in the preceding picture: the world of rap conveyed by the narrative here enters the visual narrative. Moreover, the question of rap and the power of art are deeply intermingled since rap has often been considered a passing fad, despite being, by the end of the twentieth century, arguably "the most vital and dynamic genre of music" (Keyes 227). The persuasion rhetoric that characterizes rap emphasizes the characters' stubbornness while it accentuates the moral complexity and debate the story engages in.
- 21 Finally, through numerous intertextual references, the text establishes further dialogues with the rap and oral tradition that is characterized by rampant intertextuality. By giving the name Kid A – the title of a famous Radiohead album – to one of their characters, Slade and Toni Morrison engage from the very first page in an intertextual dialogue with contemporary youth music references. "He got game" is also a rap song by Public Enemy, the chorus of which pluralizes the question of "who's got game" in "I got game/she's got game/we got game [...]" which seems to answer the authors' question. It also

establishes dialogues with the 1998 Spike Lee basketball movie *He Got Game* that shows how the young protagonist named Jesus "got game" and is to enter the basketball professional world. In a way similar to the dilemma of the fable, the protagonist of the film has to choose between his dream to become someone and quick money. It is at the level of intertextual dialogue that the three voices examined – the postmodern author, the satirical cartoonist, and the (rap) artist – mostly converge.

- 22 "The Ant or the Grasshopper" opens up Aesop's mastertext in many creative ways. By multiplying the fabulist's voice in three different voices, the fable is here revised by three artists who subversively pay homage to while simultaneously questioning Aesop's voice as well as the traditional moral ending that used to give the ant the last word. Despite the authors' emphasis on responsible thought, something mostly conveyed in the paratext of the book (its title, its subtitle with a question mark, the last picture portraying the reader pondering the story's moral complexity), I posit here that, further than interrogating its morals, the text can be read as turning Aesop's fable upside down. The ant's aggressive attitude, and his inability to acknowledge his friend's gift of a song that has inspired him, somewhat compel the reader to side with the victimized gifted artist who inspires the ant to work harder. The "got game" expression gets closer to "got talent" which, however, cannot be measured and is consequently denied by a society in which only commodification is valued. And yet, the grasshopper has few prospects for the future. The pragmatic and diegetic transformations participate in a larger thematic and semantic transformation.
- 23 It is probably here that my postcolonial background resurges. I want to suggest that the authors in some ways "write back" to the original story in that they actively engage in a process of questioning mainstream values, giving the grasshopper a chance to respond instead of regurgitating Aesop's moral lesson ("It is best to prepare for the days of necessity" (Aesop)). The grasshopper, the one who can stick to his dreams, emerges as the one who is given a voice and who can "disprove" the values around him. Although neither of the characters explicitly loses or wins, the central pragmatic transposition in the first part of the story – namely having the ant being inspired by the grasshopper's art – turns "The Ant or the Grasshopper?" into praise for artistic expression. The focus on and interweaving of three marginal forms of popular artistic expression (visual and performative) – children's literature, hip-hop and comics – further participates in claiming the power of human artistic expression. Not only should one highlight the transfocalization whereby the grasshopper is made central, one might envision how it demonstrates Genette's "transvalorisation" (393), whereby the hypertext reverses or at least challenges the value system of the hypotext. The value of art as work is here made apparent. And as comfort discomforts, the authors urge one to reconnect with the power of the imagination.

Notes

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[2] Slade and Toni Morrison, *Who's got game?: The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (New York: Scribner, 2003). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text. The pages of this edition are not numbered. In my own pagination, the cover is page 0.

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