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“The Foreigner’s Home” and the Racial Self: Toni Morrison, the Body, and the Seduction of Writing

Being a black woman writer is not a shallow place but a rich place to write from. It doesn’t limit my imagination; it expands it. It’s richer than being a white male writer because I know more and I’ve experienced more.

Toni Morrison

Falling in step with recent developments in contemporary critical theory, Deborah McDowell contends that the African American critical gaze has extended the boundaries and altered the terms of enquiry, initiating a paradigmatic shift that complicates, as she says “our most common assumptions about the self and about race as a meaningful category.” She is nonetheless convinced that these developments have made it difficult, if not impossible, to posit “a positive black self, always already unified, coherent, stable and above all known” (McDowell 1988, 80).

In McDowell’s opinion the skillful ways in which Toni Morrison expands and vitalizes her literary world with dynamic force, her ways of transgressing all deterministic structures of opposition, liberate possibilities that were previously unthinkable.¹ Starting from *The Bluest Eye* to *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison’s development has led some critics such as Aoi Mori and Gurleen Grewal, to locate the core of her novels in thematic circularity. As a matter of fact, the writer herself recalls how in her first two novels the movement, the rhythm, is circular, even though the circles are broken. As she maintains in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” in *The Bluest Eye*, a seasonal mishap (“no marigolds”), outlines the little protagonist’s disturbed identity and her alienation from the nurturing circle. Morrison also recalls the broken lines between sharing and rejecting, inner and outer circles, complicity and secrecy, and, finally, reader and text. When in *Sula* she invokes opposition of good/evil, virgin/whore, self/other, she at once and as eagerly moves

beyond them, avoiding, as McDowell underlines, “the false choice they imply and dictate,” questioning any assumption of the unity of the ego-centered individual self (McDowell 1988, 80).

On the one hand, Morrison dis-articulates African American experience from its marginal place (what she calls the American “Africanist” discourse), and on the other, she re-articulates the concept of black American experience around the diversity, not the homogeneity, of its historical forms. She proceeds from a discursive map that is inscribed in the wild zone of marginality and difference, where the lines of discrimination are set by radical dissidence and linguistic revolution, to land in a space where the boundaries created by the opposition between self/other are blurred to such an extent that we are made “others” to ourselves.

A good example of inner distance in terms of self might be provided by the old lady Morrison mentions in her Nobel Lecture: she is offered as irretrievably *other* to the gaze of the young fellows who, unable to sidestep any cultural spatial logic, question and challenge her because of her blindness, age, and solitude. Morrison, for whom cultures do not exist exclusively within specific boundaries but easily migrate beyond them, (cfr. McDowell 1999) materializes the woman in her discourse through a series of oppositional though significant markers: “Blind but wise, black, the daughter of slaves, American, living alone in a small house outside of town” where she is “both the law and its transgression.” Morrison prefers to imagine the lady as “a practiced writer” who conceives language “partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences” (Morrison *Nobel Lecture*, 1993), a political² commitment to the crucial role of cultural memory, where individual difference is seen not as detracting but as enriching.³ If, generally, African American artists need to affirm who and what they are, and what they are not, the irony of their attempting “to posit a ‘black self’ in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence”, cannot be overlooked” (Gates 7). Morrison’s old lady’s piercing perception testifies to both her presence and her radical distance. The very fact that many critics continue to deny that black writers are, (or have been) *de facto* excluded from the U.S. literary canon on the basis of race, demonstrates that race still remains an unspeakable topic even in contemporary American culture. Morrison, however, refuses to allow

race to be relegated to the margins of literary discourse, disseminating her fictional universe with thematic, expressive traces of diversity and uniqueness. Through her unflinching gaze the very definition of authenticity in American literature stands out as essentially inauthentic, where narrative is radical, "creating us," as she maintains, "at the very moment it is being created" (Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*, 1993). The marks and bodies of the African presence creep through the American texts, "through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts; it is easy to see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to the writers' sense of Americanness" (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 6).

Though earlier stigmatized with anonymity, facelessness, or invisibility, African Americans can now find in her writing, for the first time, a credible cultural identity. Morrison skillfully modulates the degrees of the delicacy or intensity of her approach, leaving nothing behind: "There is no place here where I can go, or where you can go, and think about, or not think about, or summon the presences of – or recollect the absences of – slaves. ... Something that reminds us of the ones who made the journey, and those who did not make it."⁴

The story "Strangers" published in 1998, followed by the program "The Foreigner's Home" that she put on at the Louvre in November 2006, are eloquent examples of how Morrison plays with the notion of "home," shifting from the traditional acceptance of survival and shelter to an essentially ambiguous and at times threatening notion of "place of estrangement" that becomes the necessary space of engagement. For a writer who conceives survival as transition, learning to survive in a new landscape of identification is not a free choice. There always remains the question of *the body* – enslaved, estranged, displaced, and liberated, finally becoming the real storyteller, the real home (what is defined in Deleuzian terms as a "sensation"), more than as an object. The beautiful ways in which Morrison dramatizes the relationship between the value of woman's physical self and philosophical concepts about society's definition of the good and the beautiful find appropriate response in the words of Barbara Christian. In "Being the Subject and the Object," Christian outlines how societies are fixated on "the Body" rather than considering the fact that there are many bodies. She also regrets how we create hierarchies of worth based on "'the Body' as a manifestation of class, wealth, virtue, goodness," and concludes that with Morrison, black women's

bodies, lowest in hierarchy and the object of systematic abuse, the margin of the margin, suddenly migrate *to* the center of the narrative (Christian 124).

The whole epistemology of “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” is centered, as we have seen, on the notion of exclusion, foreignness, and familiarity, as it is subsumed by a black American woman writer. Here Morrison debates the intricate modalities through which the consistent Africanist presence in American literature and culture is perceived as a haunting absence. And since there is no suitable memorial that she is aware of to attest this absence, “the book has to do it.”⁵

In detailing the upward movement she wishes to initiate in order to counteract the massive effort of excluding black writers from the U.S. canon so that race is made “speakable,” she suggests the development of a theory of literature that truly accommodates African American literature, a theory that responds to the tradition’s indigenous qualities “one – she says – that is based on its culture, its history and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things” 11). In her work we face a complex matrix of reality in which the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements becomes the very possibility of opening up a new space of cultural practice. The writer announces her intention of introducing “an outside-the-circle reader into the circle, to translate the anonymous into the specific, a ‘place’ into a neighborhood, letting a stranger in through whose eyes it can be viewed” (25). African American experience is represented not simply as how it has been measured by dominant norms, but also as how it has emerged in terms of a multi-leveled and different struggle over meaning. “A void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum. Certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves. They arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them” (11).

It is said that Morrison fuses “aural music,” rather than spatial in its architecture and that her major characters are spiritually and physically fragmented individuals who are disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from the community. True, she acclaims the need to squeeze the specificity of difference, history, and the violence it has undergone and the consequences of that violence. She questions herself on how to be as a writer “both free and situated: how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet

non racist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling" (Morrison, "Home" 8).

Her attitudes about gender and race have shifted throughout the years, and it is not infrequent to find recurring moments in which several narratives repeat, revise, and even contradict one another. Sometimes, as Lucille Fultz points out, her fiction invites her readers to be directly and self-consciously involved in the writing, at other times she is more evasive and invites indeterminacy (Fultz 4). If her approach to writing is a "process of entering what one is estranged from," a process that neither "means looking or looking at, not taking oneself intact into the other. It is becoming," (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 4) then her use of the terms stranger/home, appears as her defining moment, a vivid metaphor of estrangement. In a world strongly affected by massive phenomena of displacement and exile, Morrison's "home" is conceived as a metaphor leading towards different stages of existence and transformation. For the personae represented in her novels, the very concept of freedom sounds paradoxical, and choice can only be the contingency of claiming one's subaltern presence as it is projected in and through the power of another's possession.

"Whose house is this? Whose night keeps the light in here? Say, who owns this house? It is not mine. I had another, sweeter, brighter. With a view of lakes crossed in a painted boat. Of fields wide as arms open for me. This house is strange. Its shadows lie. Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?" (Morrison, "Whose House is this" 12c). To choose to fit in and belong to in this peculiar state of mind, with this split identification and double consciousness is also to commit oneself to one's community and to an existence of endless engagement and fight.

This girl, beloved, homeless and without people. He wanted her out, but Sethe had let her in and he couldn't put her out of a house that wasn't his. It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless colored girl out in a territory infected by the Klan. Sitting at table, chewing on his after-supper broom straw, Paul D decided to place her. Consult with the Negroes in town and find her own place. (Morrison, *Beloved* 66)

In relation to the issue of double displacements, of African Americans being foreigners even at home, as Christian contends, exclusion can be attained at many levels, a linguistic level: whenever the metaphysical critical

language in Euro-American discourse threatens and excludes other languages as inferior; a critical level: whenever black writers, especially women, are excluded from the established literary practices in America; and a social and a political level: when, as Morrison herself points out on almost every occasion, this separate confinement of African American, Chicano, or Asian or Native American literature is still carried on unashamedly.

Through her attempt “to shape a silence while breaking it, an effort to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of that culture,” (“Unspeakable Things” 23), Morrison’s use of suppressed popular communication, be it oral, visual, or musical, is an integral part of her uncovering of discredited knowledge. Her perilous and dark regions bring to mind Derrida’s argument in *The Specters of Marx* when he not only questions the notion of an ideal justice, but also claims that violence and discrimination are inextricable from the very possibility of justice. Derrida concludes by arguing that the machinery of exclusion is at the core of any identity. For Morrison, too, exclusion, both as a notion and as a practice, has represented the gist of any human relationship and is a marker of our modern reality. In giving voice to black female identity, she writes against silence and within silence, thus reconceptualizing not only American literature, but our own approach to literature *tout court*. She likes to call herself “a saboteur,” an author who continually challenges her readers because she sabotages expectations and masks her intentions. The verb “sabotage” that she utilizes puts in motion the several mixed attitudes, the continuous skillful crossings between the authorial self and her readers, the irony reflected on her mirrored implied selves, but also, and above all, the magnetic attraction she casts out when she seduces her readers into breaking down the boundaries between them and the text, “to shift gears, change perspectives,” as McDowell says, and yield, trying and accepting to be included into the circle of the community.

But what does “foreign” mean? It is the idea of place itself that draws frontiers between domestic and foreign when it can no longer defer them. The name of a place is not a metaphysical matter but an historical and a political one. Invited by the Louvre in 2006 to curate an interdisciplinary exploration of how artists confront identity and belonging, from French hip-hoppers to writing expatriates, Morrison calls her program “The Foreigner’s Home,” explaining:

'The Foreigner's Home' is an idea I've been working with about how American writers have encountered and confronted and imagined 'the other', or imagine who was 'the foreigner' – a particularly interesting query because the American themselves were foreigners historically in this country. So there is a great deal of excitement and a great deal of dread about what 'home' means to Americans. But as I did that, I found it was more layered than I thought, much more complicated – what does it feel like to be a foreigner in one's own home, to live here, to be born here and have no citizens' rights?

As Said has shown, the attitude and ideological condescension of a culture that insists in defining itself as superior and dominant in fact configures another whose canons and standards are invisible to a degree that they are natural, objective, and real. When culture tries to separate the elite from the popular, there is a tendency to move from the height of power and privilege downwards in order to disseminate and expand in the widest possible range.

At the Louvre, Morrison is attracted by Théodore Géricault's famous painting, "The Raft of the Medusa," (1818-1819). Géricault's subject is the tragedy caused by the foolishness of an incompetent Captain, of a classist officer's choice to abandon the crew, of the desperate search for survival of the 147 men left adrift on the coasts of Mauritania for 13 days, migrating from desperation to hope, from death's *souffle* to life's. By then only 15 men are still alive, the others have been killed or thrown overboard by their comrades, died of starvation, or thrown themselves into the sea in despair. Géricault isolates the instant in which the men see safety. Starting from the prostrated dead bodies, to the dying ones, the composition is constructed according to the movement of the raft itself. One's gaze is concentrated on the black man on top who announces the coming boat. There is a sort of democratic link connecting people who are totally unknown to each other. In such an impressive painting, where art exceeds the frame, Morrison is spurred to detect gestural implications of race, sensibility for the politics of adventure, a call for the awareness of *désespoir*, destruction, and sadness of human condition. The emphasis cast on the body and the charm that the marginalized possess strengthens the writer's deep conviction that the basic place of belonging, the ultimate territory of identity or home, is the human body. What attracts Morrison in viewing "The Raft" is, as she admits, the rapture between the self and society, a hint to the reclamation of the

promise of what America is supposed to be, to the inspiration provided by silence and absence.

The short story "Strangers" appeared in 1998 in *The New Yorker*. It was republished under the title of *The Fisherwoman* as the introduction to *Kind of Rapture*, Robert Bergman's photographic book. The feeling of foreignness/solidarity stirred by the contemplation of these unusual portraits anticipates Morrison's commitment to "The Foreigner's Home" almost a decade earlier. But already in the 1981 short story "Recitatif," Morrison elaborates a motive so dear to her sensibility: the thought that behind the exterior physical markers, the color of one's skin, the shape of one's body, the absence of one's ability to speak – is a human subject, which may be masked by viewers/readers' focus on such surface markers.

Maggie, an old deaf and dumb lady, with bow legs, works in the orphanage where the two young protagonists, Twyla and Roberta, live. "A figure of racial undecidability" because neither protagonist can clearly state her race, she is also a metonymic figure for those stigmatized and cruelly treated because of their physical differences. Maggie is more than a figure of difference. She is a warped mother figure who fails to respond to the girls' need to be nurtured. Through the distinguishing features of these characters' behavior, Morrison throws into question a system of difference that demands serious considerations about how we can come to judge individuals on the basis of observable features. In Roberta's brief statement about Maggie "I really did think she was black ... But I can't be sure. I just remember her as old, so old. And because she couldn't talk – well you know, I thought she was crazy. We didn't kick her. But well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day – wanting to is doing it."⁶ Morrison harnesses an array of prejudices directed toward the elderly, the disabled, and those perceived to be black. The narrative confounds both characters and readers to the extent that what they think they know about race turns out to be an epistemological exercise in indeterminacy.

In "Strangers," the woman narrator spots, in the idyllic rural peace of her garden, an old fisherwoman sitting on the river pier, next to her house, trying to catch some fish. She opens up to the stranger with a feeling of welcome. "I walk toward her, right up to the fence that separates my place from the neighbor's, and notice with pleasure the clothes she wears: men's

shoes, a man's hat, a well-worn colorless sweater over a long black dress" (68). She starts a friendly conversation. The foreigner depicts a long habit of fishing sessions on the pier, a gracious benevolent courtesy on the part of the pier's owner, the narrator's neighbor. "She is witty and full of the wisdom that older women always seem to have a lock on. When we part, it is with an understanding that she will be there the next day or very soon after and we will visit again. I imagine more conversations with her. I will invite her into my house for coffee, for tales, for laughter" (68). But the following day the woman does not show up as promised, nor is she seen for the whole summer. The space the narrator is unwilling to declare void causes her bitter disappointment for all the unanswered questions and the implied deceit.

I feel cheated, puzzled but also amused and wonder off and on if I have dreamed her. In any case, I tell myself, it was an encounter of no value other than anecdotal. Still. Little by little, annoyance then bitterness takes the place of my original bewilderment. A certain view from my window is now devoid of her, reminding me every morning of her deceit and my disappointment. What was she doing in the neighborhood anyway? She didn't drive, had to walk four miles if indeed she lived where she said she did. How could she be missed on the road in that hat, those awful shoes? I try to understand the intensity of my chagrin, and why I am missing a woman I spoke to for fifteen minutes. (Morrison, "Strangers" 69)

Here the narrator's concern is to distance, focusing on the notion of limit, property, border. Just as in one of Poe's tales, the attraction of danger and the impact of liminality, of the unknown, is finally formulated in her unsettled conscience.

I get nowhere except for the stingy explanation that she had come into my space (next to it, anyway – at the property line, at the edge, just at the fence, where the most interesting things always happen) and implies promises of female camaraderie, of opportunities for me to be generous, of protection and protecting. Now she is gone, taking with her my good opinion of myself, which, of course, is unforgivable. Isn't that the kind of thing that we fear strangers will do? Disturb. Betray. Prove they are not like us. This is why it is so hard to know what to do with them. The love that prophets urged us offer the stranger

is the same love that Jean-Paul Sartre could reveal as the very mendacity of hell. *'L'enfer c'est les autres.'*" (69)

As Morrison states at the end of the story, the occasion to elaborate this peculiar encounter was offered by the American photographer Robert Bergman's pictures, which may have forced her narrator to reconsider her own attitude towards herself. Bergman's pictures collected in the book *A Kind of Rapture*, of which Morrison's story becomes the introduction, are powerful portraits of people on the margins of society. The book is not simply a great work of art, but a visual social critique of the effects of the frustration of the need for meaning and love. The nature of Bergman's portraiture appears to defy the use of the face as a commodity, and to unhinge received notions of one's gaze. The photographer forms an alliance with his subjects to such a point that they seem to attempt a sublime meditation between the particulars of physical existence and that transcendent inner life which we want to call "the soul." Thus, as Del Rey asserts, "he elevates color portrait photography to a technical level and thematic stature equal to art history's acknowledged masters, bringing the reader through an experience that re-humanizes the face by evoking the unique and irreducible Otherness of each depicted person."⁷

With similar intention, Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totalité et Infini*, maintains that the face is a fundamental notion through which men meet other men, where appearance ceases to be its mode of being. The face is rather "the frailty of the one who needs you, who is counting on you" (Levinas 172). It is this divine, asymmetrical glimpse that Morrison seeks in this story, as in many other first person narratives, where voice, real or imagined, is character, where the constant tension towards the other becomes a desire to remain in company of the speaking "I." The feeling of extraneity, of foreignness leads one to search for what is outside, reflected in other faces, other possibilities of being, to nourish curiosity, to detect what is distant, to perceive the fracture between the self and the world. The narrator's feelings toward the stranger show that what she is missing are only some aspects of herself. "Why would we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why would we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?" she questions. Seduced by the beauty of Bergman's portraits, Morrison/narrator, finally admits her unreasonable claims on the fisherwoman, whom, as it is now clear

to her, she was tempted to own, to direct. She adds: "I suspect she glimpsed it. I had forgotten the power of embedded images and stylish language to seduce, reveal, control." Facing Bergman's odd faces, Morrison realizes that there are *no* strangers, and that it is we who just want to possess, to orient the others. "Strangers," concludes the writer "are only versions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from. For the stranger is not foreign, she is random, not alien but remembered; and it is the randomness of the encounter with our already known selves that summons a ripple of alarm. Bergman's radiant portraits of strangers provoked this meditation" (Morrison, "Strangers" 70).

Notes

¹ Morrison views all figurations of black otherness by white writers as crucial evidence of whiteness as a cultural construct, specifying that when writers "deliberately exclude from their conscious world the subjective appraisal of groups perceived as 'other,'" they are performing a "surgical removal of legs so that the body can remain 'enthroned, immobile, static.'" Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 13.

² What Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari maintain in their discussion on the connection between the political and the marginalized or minor literatures, is quite kin to what Morrison contends in her survey of African American plural epistemologies and spiritual locations. In the philosophers' opinion, in fact, the so called "minor" literature does challenge dominant ideologies and representations by claiming a different epistemological and ethical space.

³ In this regard see the elaborate discourse woven by Mori in *Morrison and Womanist Discourse*, especially the chapter "Making an Eloquent Crazy Quilt;" here Mori sketches out a broad map of the rising and affirmation of Black Feminist critical theorists such as Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, bell hooks, up to Toni Morrison. Mori's points offer a subtle confrontation with white feminist positions and their notions of normative and deviant, mostly anchored to a binary oppositional perspective, while African American critics are seen as playing with unpredictability and movement (Mori 10-28). Patricia Hill Collins, on her part, appropriately brings forth the powerful metaphors embodied in the creation of African American quilts, whose symmetry "does not come from uniformity as it does in Euro-American quilts. Rather, symmetry comes from diversity" (Hill Collins 170).

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Lecture*. Frederick G. Melcher Book Award. Unitarian Universalist Association. Cambridge, MA, 12 October, 1988. *Cambridge Forum*. WVTF, Roanoke, VA. 5 April, 1991. Qtd. in Rody, 98.

⁵ Thus Morrison theorizes the African American artist's passage from the margin to the center, from being a passive object to being *the subject* of one's own narrative. She says:

“Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been ‘discovered’ actually to exist ... it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We are the subjects of our narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact.” In moving to the center, the African American artist can now effectively choose to confront centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare them “with the ‘raceless’ one with which we are, all of us, most familiar” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things” 8-9).

⁶ *Ibid.* 109.

⁷ Loven Del Rey, Humanities Conference, Cambridge UK, Aug. 2-5, 2005. What is almost epic is that Bergman, having always taken, developed, and printed his own pictures since the age of five, has now, in *A Kind of Rapture*, created his own color separations using high-resolution digital equipment in an effort to exercise more control over the quality of reproduction than photographers have ever had.

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