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Representation, Race, and the “Language” of The Ineffable in Toni Morrison’s Narrative

bell hooks has made the insightful remark that “images of race and representation have become a contemporary obsession,” yet “little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking” (4-7). This essay argues that Toni Morrison brings together the art of story-telling and questions of race in a decisively political and ethical relationship centered in a language of felicity and liberation. Morrison’s use of suppressed popular communicative forms—visual, oral, musical, and more—is, as Trudier Harris has pointed out, an integral part of her uncovering “discredited” knowledge.¹ While this reactivation of local memories is certainly among Morrison’s cultural objectives, it is the grounding of her outlook in a “race-specific yet race-free prose” that molds a literary form to the exigencies of racial difference: “My vulnerability,” she says, “would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it” (*Playing* x-xi). In Morrison’s narrative project, these cautious remarks take shape in two principal ways: She both dis-articulates African American experience from its place in a system of negative associations in the cultural imaginary of what she terms the American “Africanist” discourse, and she re-articulates the concept of black American experience around the diversity, not the homogeneity, of its historical forms.

In what follows I will elaborate on these points, first, in the context of the new cultural politics of difference, drawing on Morrison’s criticism itself with regard to her own positionality as a black woman writer, and, second, in the act of her narrative writing, which participates not only in an historical struggle among subaltern communities but also in forging a new non-hegemonic realm of being and meaning. Morrison, I will argue, negotiates a very 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. To give the past a different reading, to represent black American experience not simply as it has been measured by dominant norms but as it has emerged in terms of a multi-leveled and differential struggle over meaning and subjectivity since slavery, involves a re-invention of tradition and of dominant language tropes. Positioning herself in the tradition of African American writing, Morrison states that for her—“a writer who is black and a woman”—writing fiction is “very different” in that, more than the authors of slave narratives did in the past, she is interested in “how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’ The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we

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were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" ("Sites" 110).

First, where the tradition of slave narratives is concerned, Morrison is attentive to silences and gaps in these narratives. She is concerned with things unsaid or unsayable in those narratives of struggle, with how a particular sexual economy and masculinity underpinned the writings of black authors, and with these writers' inability to mine the recesses of memories deemed shameful. We may note in passing the scene in *The Bluest Eye* in which Pecola is raped by her father, though this scene is related to an earlier one in which the latter was exposed to ridicule by two white men who happened to run into him while he was having his first sexual experience as a boy. Morrison is, in other words, offering a new kind of cultural positioning that is more attentive to black women and their role in the larger racial struggle. Cornel West is right to point out that the recent decisive move toward a new cultural politics of difference has been made more powerful by "the black diasporan womanist critique," which has led to the end of "the innocent notion of the black essential subject" (*Keeping Faith* 19).² As a black woman writer, Morrison represents suppressed realms of social experience from a "womanist" perspective which "engages rather than suppresses *difference*," and which aims "to represent a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity" (Hall, "New" 29).

Second, Morrison's new cultural politics of representation also displaces the term *black* from its position of dismissive "othering" in the dominant conception of "Americanness" which historically has posited itself as a transparent norm.³ Speaking of "Africanism" in American literature, Morrison discusses how the construction of a certain "Africanist persona" has been used as a surrogate for meditations on the nature of white social identity (*Playing* 6). As she further explains, by the time black characters

enter the plot, their race has already become "metaphorical": It no longer demarcates solely ancestry or racial background, but instead becomes "a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was" (*Playing* 63). Textual strategies such as stereotyping, displacement, condensation, fetishization, and allegory overtermine, reify, and subject the racial identity of African Americans to a process of dismissive "othering," so that a social construction of race is achieved wherein, on the one hand, Americans of European descent are seen as "non-raced," while, on the other hand, African peoples are "raced" and thus bounded in identity to the associative meanings of their darker skin.⁴ Morrison's cultural politics of narrative proposes a rewriting of black experience that can truly represent African Americans—not as the invisible presence of American Africanist texts, but as an active presence that has shaped the choices, the language, and the culture of America. For Morrison race matters, as it does for Cornel West, because "the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*" (*Race Matters* 6)

What the above critical debates bring to the fore of culture and identity is the problem of affirming a specific racial identity without claiming supremacy. The main thrust of the argument here is to conceptualize new meanings of difference as an historical-political choice. This kind of conceptualizing difference is able "to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities" ("New" 28).⁵ Morrison has called this creative deployment of the past an act of remembrance, to whose achievement in her act of writing I turn below.

In a discussion of the novel's relation to black popular forms of knowledge, Morrison emphasizes the significance of the novel as a form of cultural expression for black Americans in the present, because of the need to reconstruct "those classical, mythological, archetypal stories" of the diasporic past ("Rootedness" 340).⁶ Her use of black popular and folkloric elements, I will argue, is strategic in that it does not restore a sense of the foundational, fixed, and autonomous subject of tradition, but rather displays a notion of a multiply located black subject whose authentic positions arise from specific histories of survival. Using *Beloved* as a main instance of the narrative form that Morrison aimed to achieve, I will discuss how she developed the art-form of her fiction from a dualistic perspective in *The Bluest Eye*, where projections of African American consciousness are portrayed in terms of a clear-cut and binary division between the dominant values of American consumer culture and the suppressed values of black Americans, to a more complex double vision in *Beloved*, where the problem of affirming a specific racial identity without claiming supremacy is mediated through the more fluid, more intricate, and unaccountable language of the ineffable. This involves the creation of a narrative text that radically opens the literary canon to counter-discursive strategies of re-memory, as well as a grounding of the cultural politics of difference in the language of the contingent and the provisional. This does not mean a weakening of her politics, but rather the need to shape a more open-ended form of cultural politics. For Morrison, narrative is radical. The vitality of its prose lies in the ability to suggest rather than to imitate, and to seduce rather than to force. Language that liberates, for Morrison, is the opposite of the kind of "master" and reductive discourse that appears in the Dick-and-Jane reader in *The Bluest Eye* and circulates in the language used by Schoolteacher in *Beloved*.

The situation that Morrison explores in *The Bluest Eye* is that of a working-class urban black family during the 1930s and 1940s. The novel focuses on the disintegration of this family, and particularly on the plight of a young black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Growing up in the midst of a white-dominated culture, Pecola is eventually driven mad under severe assimilatory pressure. Cultural assimilation through school primers, movies, and almost every other cultural item from cups to candies shows the violence of Sameness. Toni Morrison singles out the figure of Shirley Temple as a dominant icon of this white, consumer culture, and examines the psychic devastation to which Pecola is subjected as she imagines herself miraculously transformed into a Shirley Temple with blue eyes.

The Bluest Eye shows, in a manner reminiscent of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, how the epistemic violence of the Other is both outside and inside; it operates through the internalization of the self-as-other. Pecola exists only in the image reflected by the Other. "Sealed into that crushing objecthood," as Frantz Fanon said about the stereotyping of "Blackness," Pecola finds herself "fixed" through "the attitudes, the glances, of the other" (Fanon 109-11). The black person's consciousness of his/her body is "a negating activity," because it is mediated through the mechanisms of a supremacist discourse: "In the white world the man [sic] of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema," because superimposed upon "the corporeal schema" is "a historical-racial schema" fabricated "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (110-11). Unconsciously the black person distrusts what is black in him/herself, and desires what belongs to the white person. *The Bluest Eye* deals with this unconscious desire, and shows how under severe white cultural imposition the black person can undergo, in Fanon's words, "a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness" (194).

As Morrison puts in the "Afterword" to her novel, *The Bluest Eye* copes with "racial self-loathing"; the novel "pecks away at the gaze that [has] condemned" Pecola (210). Not only is Pecola exposed to cultural stereotypes common in all multi-ethnic societies, but through her Morrison dramatizes "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (210). The fantasy of the blue eyes projects the self-denying identification of black persons who unconsciously have introjected or internalized the aggressive images of a racist culture which visualizes itself as the norm.

Pecola's fantasy that her life would be worthwhile if only she could have blue eyes is an extreme example of the common delusions of other black women. Confronted with the dominance of cultural stereotypes arising from the imposition of the racist norms of a middle-class white American society, the black community reverts to the logic of the dominant group. For example, the schoolteacher Geraldine is described as one of those women who have been schooled into the white middle-class ethos of "respectability":

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding hearts: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, and the funkiness of a wide range of human emotions. (*Bluest Eye* 83)

What can be seen here is the depiction of Geraldine as a type of woman modeled on the image of the white "respectable" lady whose life is inane, "the funkiness of a wide range of human emotions" being repressed. Such a portrait emerges in parallel to

the kind of saccharin family life that the "Dick-and-Jane" primer represents. In fact, the narrator says about Geraldine that, while she is "reading the 'Uplifting Thoughts' in *The Liberty Magazine*, the cat will jump into her lap" (85). Geraldine's life is reified into

a series of role-playing acts: "She built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior" (86).

Susan Willis, in

"Eruptions of Funk," sug-

gests that the "problem at the center of Morrison's writing is how to maintain an African American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural south has been stretched thin over distance and generations." Willis goes on to say that "Morrison's aim in writing is very often to disrupt alienation with what she calls 'eruptions of funk'" (265). Willis interprets "funk" as "nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present," such as juxtaposing "a not so distant social mode to those evolved under bourgeois society" (280). While Willis's interpretation is relevant to the different places the novel depicts and to their social and cultural implications, it tends to idealize the culture of common black life: "Reification, while never attained by any of Morrison's characters—not even those drawn from the white world—is, instead, embodied in a number of figural images. These are the celluloid images of Shirley Temple or her 'cu-te' face on a blue-and-white china cup, and the candy-wrapper images of Mary Jane" (267-68). It seems to me that Willis uses reification to mean a commodity object, an ambient aspect of American consumer values. However, Willis's reading does not ground Morrison's politics of culture so much in a popular African American tradition as in an idealized version of the working-class ethos, and so fails to deal with the complexities and difficulties that Morrison's writing raises. One of these difficulties is the absence or, at least, the difficulty that Morrison has

Reading Toni Morrison is an unsettling experience.

with grounding *The Bluest Eye* in an African American group memory.

Certainly Morrison uses Claudia as an oppositional voice in this novel; Claudia can even be seen as a center of double-consciousness. The novel has a double structure: On the one hand, there is the dominant codification of reality whose legitimacy is asserted through the Dick-and-Jane school primer, and on the other hand an alternative re-presentation of this rosy reality is developed through Pecola's story. Irony in the novel stems from the contradiction and discrepancy between these two discourses, often accompanied with comments from Claudia about the racial victimization of Pecola, which creates a space for dual signification. Morrison uses Claudia to identify the injustice at work and to elicit some understanding for Pecola's cause: "I felt a need for someone to want the black baby [Pecola's baby] to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (*Bluest Eye* 190). Early in the novel, Claudia refuses the idealization of girlhood or motherhood through the culture of dolls, and resists the indoctrination of white standardized values. She reflects that "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured," but she "had only one desire: to dismember it" (20). However this insurgent need to counter the oppressive forces of assimilation is not only short-lived but is not extended to the rest of the community. Morrison stresses the failure of perception: "We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word" (205-06). In this sense, what the parable about Claudia's marigolds—a botanical aberration—stands for is the lack of a life-sustaining sense of community for black Americans. In the social world that this novel depicts the cultural values of American consumer industry are

totalized to a degree that what we are left with are various ways in which the distortion and denial of the black self are produced. As a result of this, *The Bluest Eye* is built upon a dualistic perspective of the "dominant" versus the "dominated," leaving little space for resistance.

Put differently, the central problem remains that African American culture and values are depicted as helpless in response to external assimilationist pressure. In *The Bluest Eye*, black folk culture survives through disparate, single memories, such as when Pauline remembers Ivy, "who seemed to hold in her mouth all of the sounds of Pauline's soul. Standing a little apart from the choir, Ivy sang the dark sweetness that Pauline could not name; she sang the death-defying death that Pauline yearned for" (114). Poland, one of the three prostitutes, is another folk figure in the novel who, we are told, "hummed mostly or chanted blues songs, of which she knew many" (53). In her "sweet strawberry voice," Poland sings of "a boy who is sky-soft brown" (58). Blues and folk tales, the sites of group memory for blacks, will constitute a strategy of re-memory in later novels like *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, but what seems to be at work here is the contrived and fake ritual of Soaphead, who perversely lets Pecola believe that her eyes have changed into blue!

In the "Afterword" to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison, discussing the difficulties that the writing of this novel involved, says that one difficulty was "centering"—an issue that has to do with perspective and narrative construction. Morrison particularly mentions that she was not fully successful in leading readers into "an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" that Pecola undergoes but instead allows us "the comfort of pitying her." Pecola, she says, does not handle effectively "the silence" at the center of the novel, and lacks the "deft manipulation of the voices around her" (215). The two points Morrison mentions here—

“the silence” and “the manipulation of the voices around” Pecola—are salient features of her novels and are crucial, in my view, to any critical discussion that takes these novels seriously. They involve language and narrative construction, and display Morrison’s persistent interest in what she calls “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (*Beloved* 199), a phrase that resonates for her with the silence surrounding many things repressed in the African American unconscious, or distorted beyond recognition in the American Africanist discourse. The question becomes how to break off this silence and in what form.

As I briefly noted earlier, the novel as an art form is one of the most important ways to transmit and receive knowledge. The way the novelist organizes this knowledge is socially and politically important. While Morrison is aware that, rather than music, “the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before,” she also insists on incorporating into this traditional genre “unorthodox novelistic characteristics” to create a narrative form which “uses the characteristics of Black art” (“Rootedness” 340). As she is right to point out, historically the novel emerged in Western societies when “there was a new class, a middle class, to read it”; it was an art form designed for this class, not for the lower classes, who “had songs, and dances, and ceremony, and gossip and celebrations” (342). Morrison’s reconceptualization of the novel, on the other hand, seeks to incorporate precisely those elements that have been excluded from or repressed in this traditional genre. These elements belong to the oral tradition of African Americans and are, as she reformulates them in the “Afterword” to *The Bluest Eye*, “my choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full com-

prehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it.” Morrison seeks, in these ways, “to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture” (215-16) and to produce points of anchorage or rootedness for the author’s sense of her black community. (I say *the author’s sense* because Morrison’s positionality as a woman writer bears closely on her view of women in this community.)

Commenting on this phenomenon, Houston Baker has argued that what Morrison “ultimately seeks in her coding of Afro-American PLACE is a writing of intimate, systematizing, ordering black village values out of a woman’s consciousness, a writing conscious always of black woman’s self-possession” (136). Moreover, Morrison’s narrative accounts of the “village” or “community” or “ancestral” figure represent a counter-discourse to the story of American progress, a story that is rewritten from the perspective of its diasporic, womanist subjects. The form that Morrison’s narrative takes is that of art as antiphony; it is an act of narration that problematizes the relation of knowledge to power as a hierarchizing, categorizing gaze.

In *Beloved*, Morrison’s act of writing becomes the site of such a problematization through a creative process of remembering and reconfiguring. Stuart Hall, in a discussion of black popular culture, mentions three distinctive aspects in black diasporic traditions—style, music, and the body—as forms of cultural capital. Within black cultural repertoires of the diaspora, these signifying cultural practices have constituted the performative spaces of resistance under oppressive conditions. As Hall has put it, “displaced from a logocentric world—where the direct mastery of cultural modes meant the mastery of writing— . . . the people of the black diaspora

have, in opposition to all that, found the deep form, the deep structure of their cultural life in music . . . [and] the body . . . as the canvases of representation" ("What" 470). *Beloved* articulates these performative spaces through Sethe's marked body, through Baby Suggs's preaching in the Clearing, and through the women's choral singing. Crucial to the remembrance of these spaces of resistance is above all Morrison's resignification of the logocentric world, the world of Logos and the corollary mastery of Writing, which displaced her diasporic subjects.

In *Beloved*, we can see that Schoolteacher's *letter*, the imperial tool of his authority of naming, defining things and people, is juxtaposed in relation to Sethe's *body*, and to the *spirit* of "the disremembered and unaccounted for" that *Beloved*, through her ghostly presence, represents (274). The inscription of "Beloved," carved on the headstone as the trace of Sethe's "mother-love," haunts the text with meanings that speak to the terror of slavery. The thrust of Morrison's ambivalence here lies not in seeing that slavery was a "racial" given pertaining to black Americans, but an integral part of the Enlightenment heritage of Euro-American ethnocentrism. If "whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle," as Stamp Paid is made to reflect, Morrison shows that it "was the jungle whitefolks planted in them" (*Beloved* 198). *Beloved* copes with "the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks' jungle [that] was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumblings in places like 124" (199). The problematic, for Morrison, is how to approach these "mumblings," how to narrate the history of the anonymous slaves, and shape the silence at the heart of this history while at the same time giving it expression.

Morrison has confessed that, when she wrote the novel, she feared that it would be her least read book because "it is about something the characters don't want to remember, I don't want

to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia" ("Pain" 120). Morrison's grappling with the "unspeakable" for her characters—namely, the fear that to evoke a past degradation may diminish them, humiliate them, and shame them—is clear from the way in which they try to force forgetting into a willed activity. Sethe couldn't bring herself to talk about her past "because every mention of her past life hurt.

Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries" (*Beloved* 58). The sense of shame arising from this painful past is even more concretized in the image of "that tobacco tin buried in [Paul D's] chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (72-73). But Morrison turns this very impossibility of telling for her characters into a possibility of narration. As she turns the self-censuring re-memories of her characters into a rhetoric of silence which points to the abysmal experience and missing details in the life of her characters that escape inscription, she demonstrates that confronting the past is liberating.

In other words, Morrison transforms the reservations of her characters into a narrative prose in which silence becomes a protest against assimilationist tendencies. This kind of silence is different from the dropping of "a veil" that Morrison speaks of in relation to traditional slave narratives. Whereas old slave narratives exercised a willed omission of trauma as a defensive armor against humiliating or embarrassing memories, Morrison's strategic silence seeks to disrupt the very forces of assimilation and cultural hegemony that would lock others into helplessness and sanctioned ignorance. Sethe's circling around the subject becomes a narrative problematic of "pinning" down her story:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the

subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Nonono. (163)

The issue here, in my view, is that language that is life-sustaining can only gesture toward understanding experience; it cannot master experience. In fact, this passage is an example of Morrison's conception of the stirring, seductive language whose "chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction" ("Nobel" 7). The purpose of this textual intransigence is to question the will to knowledge and power, allowing difference some space.

Morrison's intimation of unspeakable thoughts is often suggested through Sethe's "picturing" things. For instance, Morrison describes Sethe's memories as "pictures" drifting in front of her face. Remembering "Sweet Home," Sethe tells her daughter Denver: " 'Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not in my rememory, but out there, in the world' " (*Beloved* 36). Such a language bears no pretense to universal or essential human experience. It points to its limit of expressiveness, implying that experience exceeds the violence of language.

Only an imperial subject can mistake its specificity for universality. This is the subject-position that Schoolteacher assumes. Through the portrayal of Schoolteacher, Morrison indirectly voices her critique of modernity and Enlightenment thinking. Schoolteacher is represented as a caricature of rationalistic thinking, going around with "a notebook" in his

hands, in which he writes things about the slaves with the very ink that Sethe mixes for him, and advising his nephew " 'to put [Sethe's] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right' " (193). Schoolteacher's divisive logic and pseudo-empirical scientism is an example of what Morrison considers to be the language of control and surveillance. With his monopolistic learning, his ruthless will to mute the suffering of others, and his arrogant rationalism, Schoolteacher seeks to fix others into inferiority and helplessness, to use their bodies as a free labor force, in order to preserve his privilege. Hunting after Sethe, who has run away from his cruel enslavement, Schoolteacher is shocked, not at the human wreck he himself has caused, but at realizing that the children he had hoped to take back to do the work at his place are all bleeding as a result of Sethe's attempt to take their lives:

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four—because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one—the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. (149)

Schoolteacher is worried about the deplorable state Sethe and her children are in only because his selfish interests are at stake: "There was nothing there to claim." He also regrets and reprehends his nephew for having maltreated Sethe, not out of compassion for the her, but out of self-pity: Sweet Home is being deprived of "at least ten breed-

ing years" from Sethe. The prose here is dehumanizing, denying Sethe her human subjectivity and revealing the power-wielding gaze of Schoolteacher's white surveillance. Words like *pickaninnies*, *cut*, *gone wild*, and *horse*, spoken in relation to Sethe, reveal Schoolteacher's sense of superiority and arrogance. In representing this scene through Schoolteacher's eyes, Morrison calls attention to how white imperialistic discourse has persistently posited the English language itself as racist.

Aware of her position as a black American writer using an imperial language as a means of expression, Morrison uses it to unsettle the arrogant, imperial domain of language use. Sethe's simple, monosyllabic words—no, no, no—ring deeper than Schoolteacher's bombastic speech. The repetition of the single sound expresses the inarticulate but protective response that compelled Sethe to attempt taking her children's lives rather than allowing Schoolteacher to force them back into slavery. Calling attention to an unknowable—i.e., incommensurable—reality, Sethe's words re-mark her own cultural difference. Thus, Morrison tries to forge the consciousness of her black characters into an English language that exiled them from themselves.

Instead of inviting conquest, interpellating readers into an imperial subject-position or the comfort of an epistemologically privileged position of knowing, Morrison undertakes narration as a communal act, deftly manipulating the voices around her subject. Morrison's narrator does not subsume other voices into a single, univocal, and authoritative voice, but instead acknowledges the possible differences among members of the community. In *Beloved*, Morrison introduces oral narrative techniques—repetition, a shifting narrative voice, interactive re-memory, and an episodic retelling of the past—that contribute to the shaping of the aural/oral and participatory dynamics of ritual black folk culture

within the private, introspective form of the novel.

Through the depiction of Baby Suggs, who acts as a spiritual guide for others, Morrison launches the book's major choral aspect and introduces its ritualistic dimension. Here religion is elevated to ritual and spiritual healing. Baby Suggs's healing rituals in the Clearing, where she becomes an "unchurched preacher" (87), offer members of her community advice and help without making it static or rule-bound. Her morality is based on love rather than on rigid moral dictates. Baby Suggs rejects the definitions of formal religions, preferring the guidance of perceptive imagination:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (88)

The group of women who gather as a community outside of Sethe's house at the end of the novel reiterate the ritualistic dimension of the Clearing. "In the beginning was the sound," Morrison writes of this gathering, "and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (259). Alerted by Denver to Sethe's suffering, they have come together to help Sethe cast out the trauma of her murdered baby, Beloved. Sethe experiences a repetition of the Clearing ritual when the women burst out in song:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

What Morrison emphasizes here is a ritualistic method in which the workings of spirit and kinesis join sound to break "the back of words." The wom-

en's voices, perceived here as kinetic more than just abstract concepts, carry Sethe to a beginning of voices without words. Just as Baby Suggs rejected religious dicta, the spiritual power of these women's ritualistic singing, arising from sound and sensation, lies beyond the meaning that words can "pin" down. The singers attempt to sustain a yearning for freedom: "The black religious ideological response," in Cornel West's words, "was to deploy weapons of kinetic orality, passionate physicality, and combative spirituality to survive and dream of freedom" ("Black Culture" 93).

Morrison's struggle, as can be seen from all this, is for a kind of "writing" that can be "indisputably black" without the vestiges of essentialism. It is a struggle for a mode of writing that can "shape a silence while breaking it." From *The Bluest Eye* to *Beloved* Morrison has developed a narrative text that is aware of the limits of (its) authority. It is a text which seeks to ground a sense of cultural identity in the negotiation of irreducible difference. Morrison's comments on the opening phrase of her first novel ("Quiet as it's kept") exemplify the qualities of this writing: It is speakerly, familiar as an idiom to black communities, and is particularly indicative of women conversing with one another, suggesting a "conspiratorial" tone. For Morrison, this phrase has "a female expressiveness" that is not sustained throughout *The Bluest Eye*: "I was not able to secure throughout the work the feminine subtext that is present in the opening sentence (the women gossiping, eager and aghast in 'Quiet as it's kept')," Morrison insightfully says in retrospect (*Bluest Eye* 215). In *Beloved* this "feminine subtext" is sustained throughout the narrative, and is most eloquently captured in a late chapter which describes Stamp Paid approaching 124:

Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken. (199)

This sentence, written from the external perspective of Stamp Paid, preserves the feminine subtext as a mark of difference. It hints at the "unspeakable thoughts" of the women of 124 without invading and preempting that difference. The language here exemplifies Morrison's notion of that "stirring, memorializing language," a "seductive, mutant language" that she identifies with women's "own unsayable, transgressive words" ("Nobel" 6). Such is the language of the women of 124 and of the blind woman whose story with the aggressive visitors Morrison relates as a part of her Nobel Prize Speech.

Vital, stirring, and seductive language, she contends in her Speech, refuses to be complicit with the monopolistic and unambiguous clarity of official language, a pseudo-empirical clarity that is designed to smother difference:

Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the "final word," the precise "summing up," acknowledging their "poor power to add or detract," [life-sustaining] his words signal deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns. It is the deference that moves her [the blind woman], that recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable. (7)

This kind of language refuses to sanctify, for to do so means to reproduce the policing mechanisms of official discourses. It strives to say the unsayable, and for this reason it may not always be verbal. It can be verbless, as well: "Whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the chosen word, the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction" ("Nobel" 7). The essence of Morrison's double vision is

that she goes beyond binary thinking by locating the heart of this more stirring, more seductive language within the language of surveillance itself. Buried in the language of surveillance, with its monopolistic idiom, its ruthless will to mute the suffering of millions of people, its arrogant pseudo-rationalistic scientism designed to conquer and control, there is the possibility for change stirring in other stories and other narratives. It is these *other* narratives, *other* views dominated but stirring and life-sustaining that *Beloved* rewrites.

Reading Toni Morrison is an unsettling experience. For she occupies a position in the African American tradition which is similar to that of the post-colonial writer who, in Salman Rushdie's words, re-appropriates for himself or herself a place "outside the whale" in order to get beyond the imagined history of one-way or inside stories:

Outside the whale is the unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, the dialectic of history. Outside the whale there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. Outside the whale we see that we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics; we see that it can be as false to create a politics-free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or hate or love or sleep. (Rushdie 100)

In Morrison's narrative project, literary discourse espouses a political-ethical perspective that brings past memories of an historical struggle among communities and the exigencies of new cultural politics into a fruitfully creative relationship. In this project, the novelist assumes the mantle of a non-hegemonic practice in which the creative tension among the different kinds of power/knowledge that discourse can wield is recast as a part of changing ways of looking and thinking.

1. See Trudier Harris for a discussion of Morrison's deployment of folk tradition-bearers and the transmission of popular memory.
2. See also Stuart Hall's "New Ethnicities," in which he argues that the new cultural politics of difference "acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" (29).
3. "Americanness" is regarded as a transparent norm insofar as it is visualized, as Stuart Hall describes "Englishness," in terms of a transcendental presence—something that "does not represent itself as ethnicity at all" ("New Ethnicities" 29).
4. For an analysis of how various techniques of "othering" in American literature are operative, see the last section in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (63-91).
5. From this perspective, the negotiation of cultural identity, as Stuart Hall also shows in his discussion of Caribbean diasporic experiences, is always between "the specific roots of identity" and "the future to be constructed." The subject of cultural identity is fundamentally a matter of representation and the historical play of power/knowledge; it is not so much the "rediscovery" of some essentialized past, but the "production" of identity in the present. See Hall's "Negotiating Caribbean Identities" for a discussion of these points.
6. Referring to black vernacular cultural practices, Morrison points out that these practices have "a very strong place in [her] work" and adds that "those things were 'discredited knowledge' . . . only because Black people were discredited" ("Rootedness," 342). Morrison's critical narrative performs its cultural critique through what Michel Foucault has referred to in the context of his genealogical inquiry as "the re-appearance of . . . these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges" once suppressed "within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory" (Foucault 81-82).

Notes

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