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Unspeakable Things Spoken at Last

I saw a girl, about the same age my daughter was then, seventeen, combing the hair of someone else with much carefulness; she was combing through her familiar's thick head of straight hair because it was riddled with lice. This was all done with a loving fierceness, as if something important depended on it. The person combing the hair used a comb that was fine-toothed and carefully went through the hair again and again, making sections and then dividing again the sections into little sections. This engagement between the delouser and head of hair made me think of *love and intimacy*, for it seemed to me that the way the person removed the lice from the head of hair was an *act of love in all its forms*.¹

FEW WRITERS HAVE ENJOYED a life as illustrious and a career as versatile as Toni Morrison—an artist who has melded ancient myths as they manifest themselves in contemporary situations and has exposed the tensions that fuel her anguished *dramatis personae*: Sethe, Violet, Pecola, Heed, Christine, to name but a few of her heroic divas;

victims *without any defense* against violence or against the cruelty of the usual interpretations i.e., the philosophical, metaphysical, idealist, even dialectic and capitalistic scrutiny. This laying bare of *defenseless victims*, stripping them of all power, this vulnerable *Ohnmächtigkeit*, could just as well be dream, language, the subconscious, as the child, the Jew, the foreigner, the *woman*.²

¹ Jamaica Kincaid, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2005) 42–43. Emphasis added.

² Jacques Derrida, *Fichus* (Paris: Galilée, 2002) 29–30. This work should be read in conjunction with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Emphasis added.

What troubles us most deeply about this view of alterity is the fact that, though our desire is always the desire of the *Other* (i.e., drawn from the *Other*, as well as directed to it), we can never be entirely sure what it is that the *Other* is demanding of us, since any demand has to be interpreted, and so to be garbled by the duplicitous signifier. For Morrison, the signifier points the way to one direction: How can we read her *disfigured* narrative and not share the pain the various protagonists experience in their quest to discover who they *really* are? On this score, she offers no respite from our responsibility as readers. As a matter of fact, she hollows our being *into* the darkness, but does *not* place us inside it. Nor do we find ourselves wanting her to jump off a cliff like Pecola or drown herself in a river like Sethe or starve herself to death like Violet.

A self-taught writer and author of a dozen essay collections—among them *Birth of a Nation'hood*, *Race-ing Justice*, *Playing in the Dark*—Morrison appears to have it all: she has edited books, written for children, appeared regularly on the Oprah show circuit, and known many of the last century's major figures from James Baldwin to James Brown, from Muhammad Ali to Edward Said, from Norman Mailer to Susan Sontag. But Morrison is perhaps more celebrated for her disturbing, brilliantly provocative, and often-trenchant narrative on the plight of black people in America, which has earned her accolades, awards, prizes, insults, and established her as one of the fiercest critics of what Gore Vidal has aptly called the “United States of Amnesia.”³ In some ways, though, it is difficult to think of her apart from her sources and subjects, which are never powerfully on display in her novels and/or essays. They are a kind of Toni Morrison reader—populated by women and men who are desperate to belong and thereby claim an identity. There is no tension in the language she uses, no architecture—her narrative breaks seem arbitrary—and yet the splashy all-over-the-page freedom still works through phrasing, bold juxtapositions, and emotional daring. It could be said that the collective unconscious willed her into blossoming, the work appearing at a moment when there was a sudden revival of the black soul among poets, artists, and critics.⁴ Even so, there was nothing so eye-opening to me as beginning to read her and encountering a mind as shrewd, subtle, and foresighted as any I had come across. Her writing, crisp and intrepid, moves with an almost unparalleled swiftness among myths,

³ This notion is explored with extraordinary subtlety in Gore Vidal, “Montaigne, Ben-Hur, and JFK: Gore Vidal Talks with *Bookforum*,” *Bookforum* (December/January 2007): 23.

⁴ I discuss this possibility in *Signifying with a Vengeance: Theories, Literatures, Storytellers* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002) 1–13.

idioms, and contemporary life, casting a semiological eye on those things that exemplify our culture's obsession with surfaces.

Any theory of signifying which takes on board Morrison's provocative evaluation of it as the distinctive feature of African-American language must begin by accepting that it involves a deliberate disruption of the apparent sequential coherence usually implied by the process of signification. Its mode is figurative. This frontal oral challenge to literate black notions of the linear, incremental generation of meaning is, as Morrison notes, the distinctive black trope of tropes, the "trope-a-dope," the central rhetorical principle of a vernacular discourse with its own material history, as in the case of the "personal statement" the young Henry Louis Gates Jr. included with his application to Yale University:

My grandfather was colored, my father was Negro, and I am black . . . As always, whitey now sits in judgement of me, preparing to cast my fate. It is your decision either to let me blow with the wind as a non-entity or to encourage the development of self. Allow me to prove myself.⁵

In 1929, in 1949, or even 1959, what would have been the result of such brashness? Fortunately for Gates, it was 1969, and a new America, and "they let [him] . . . in."⁶ Still, the attempt to recover the *subaltern* subject-position by submitting to the final question of who speaks in the Morrisonian narrative is risky insofar as her work takes us to a mediated but unmitigated place where women and men, with the stress on the former, are enmeshed in nature and culture. There is something challengingly counterintuitive about such claims for us heirs of the so-called Enlightenment, since it is well-nigh impossible not to see the implacable victimization that is active in her narrative, yet these tortuous turns are also seen coolly as the price of being alive; and her "pain and pleasure," a subject she investigates in all her novels and essays, allows her to stand outside herself and present the raw material on a large scale to her readership.

The questions therefore that preoccupy those of us who take her seriously can be put as follows: How does Morrison go about it to sink her teeth and hands into her stories and who does the talking: Is it her, her characters, or both? Are the writer and her narrative sites for and spaces and times in which voices of a subaltern consciousness are constantly made anew? Are

⁵ Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, "The Biggest Brother," *The Observer* 20 July 2003, 4.

⁶ Quoted in Christopher Lehman-Haught, "Colored to Negro to Black: A Journey," *The New York Times* 16 May 1994, 5.

race and language as illuminating categories as gender and class? If so, what are the points of contention and intersection? Having said all that, crucial to the culture of the global age is the ethic of individualism, an understanding of the world that the Western European tradition takes for granted as part of the natural order of things but that in fact represents the fairly recent historical development of a consciousness or sense of self that remains strange and even incomprehensible to people *outside* the tradition. For those of us sitting on the margins of Western culture, or those of minority groups, or culturally deprived social classes within them, does the novel, as celebrated by Morrison, provide access to a liberating understanding of the cultural forms that oppress us? What gives her the ability to isolate details so that a single phrase or paragraph can carry the weight and heft of a novel like *Song of Solomon* or *Jazz*? Will the wounds, “holes,” and “mouths”—to use terms from an essay on the female voice in antiquity and the “gender of sound” by Anne Carson⁷—heal? How far is Morrison willing to dip her readers in energies that existed before and will exist *after* the novel? In *Love*, a dense and knotted near-novella, when she clears a path to the untainted, it rages, froths, and foams; it is informed by an energy verging on madness.⁸ And finally, what are we to make of her aesthetic which posits a reality where primal energies are still present, even if repressed, in everyone who is alive in her narrative? To obtain the results Morrison wanted she had to turn insults, abuses and hard slaps into strengths, reminding us along the way of how human natures are seldom clean.

Much the same can be said of her celebrated shafts of wit, those exquisitely studied takes on the way writing race has represented the world in which she lives. For the formal properties of the African-American idiom as represented by Morrison are clear: properly wary of the establishment of black writing on the white Western model, she is also aware of the extent to which only the master’s tools will ever demolish the master’s house. “I wanted to make black vernacular audible,” she intones, “not as illiterate but powerful. But I was as guilty as others who made black speech ungrammatical or dropped the ‘g.’ I tried to get away from that.”⁹ One can observe this assault in *Beloved*, which achieves a startling representation of the historical meaning of the racist exploitation under slavery in the US as it remembers

⁷ This is described at length in Anne Carson, “The Glass Essay,” in *Glass, Irony, and God* (London: New Directions, 1995) 45–46.

⁸ Toni Morrison, “Redresser les torts faits au langage et au pouvoir des Noirs,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* 459 (Décembre 2006): 77–78.

⁹ Maya Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle,” *The Guardian* 15 November 2003, 4. I owe a great deal to Jaggi for the formulation of some of the ideas I explore in this section.

the lives of the survivors with the uncanny afterlife of the ghosts of racial violence from the past. From the eruption of the dead in the living, there arises the haunting agency and knowledge of the victims that torment the narrative of slavery recounted by history.¹⁰ Drawing on orality and cultural history as well as Jazz, Blues, and Gospel, Morrison rests the case for a distinctive African-American mode of writing squarely on its use of English, and particularly on its involvement with a range of verbal rituals. We may want to put this differently by saying that she wrote *for* and *about* black people “because that’s where the aesthetics, authority, and authenticity are.” That, she adds, is still true:

but it’s been misunderstood as exclusive. I meant I’m writing for black people’s sensibility, not for black buyers. I had trouble making people understand that my choice was as effortless as Dostoevsky’s, and if no one could ask him why he “only wrote about Russians,” why ask me why I “only” write about black people? White writers are seen as unracial—the norm. It’s a dysfunctional argument.¹¹

The end result is a narrative that announces the concept of oral roots and points to a range of elaborate rhetorical displays which make much of conspicuous, self-advertising tropes, illogical leaps, systematic lying, focus on a word’s sound rather than its meaning, “needling,” talking “around” a subject, parody, and pastiche; in fine, signifying with a vengeance. The narrative techniques also operate as a putative game, with increasingly forceful interchanges of insulating language directed at each player’s closest relatives, usually the mother who “holds the tale,” as Anita Desai once put it.¹² The first participant to become overtly upset loses the advantage. In practice, the new narrative techniques act as a kind of effective commando course, testing and training emotional strength in the face of a white, hostile world, ever poised to insult your parentage.

¹⁰ For a brilliant study of this subject, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1984). Baker explores another side of African-American vernacular—the blues—as his trope for a theory of criticism based on the black vernacular music tradition, whereas Gates explores a theory of criticism based on the linguistic and poetic traditions of the vernacular encoded in the ritual of Signifyin(g).

¹¹ Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle” 5.

¹² Anita Desai, “Introduction,” in *Eye to Eye—Women: Their Words and Worlds*, ed. Venessa Baird (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1997) 2.

I

The reader of Toni Morrison is strongly advised not to begin anywhere but at the beginning: the suite of broken and intense novels throws the wide and wild variety of texts in between into another light than the one we have been accustomed to. The stories—beginning with *The Bluest Eye*, which opens with a rewriting of the “Dick and Jane” elementary school primers popular in America in the 1940s and 1950s, and expands into a discussion of beauty and race: a girl is raped by her father; *Sula* presents diverging pictures of a close-knit community; the fantastical but earthy *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* came next, but Morrison’s status as prophet was secured by *Beloved*, which turned the slave narrative skin-crawlingly around: the past, it declared, was harder to escape than we thought; next was the self-consciously musical *Jazz*, then the extravagant, overwrought *Paradise*, which I think was a glitch reminiscent of the illusion that Magritte used in his painting *The Human Condition*, in which the image of the sky on an easel may be a painting or the world outside the room; *Love* includes something of her big themes; the position of black people in US society; the damage men do to women; the sustaining bonds between women; the power of memory and the impact of the past on the present; the corruption of innocence; redemption—are told from conflicting points of view. There are time shifts too as *Love* amply shows.¹³ Without the beginning and the ending, these novels could give the appearance of a miscellany. “Toni Morrison,” who also writes essays centering on injustice, nationhood, whiteness, remembrance, playing in the dark, and creation itself, more or less disappears in the course of these meditations. Her aim is to “undo the creature in us” in order to arrive at Godship.¹⁴ As a result, her project becomes self-effacement, verging on erasure; she is like a curator, inviting the reader to look at an exhibition she has put together, the paragraphs she has assembled. And she wants us to attend to them, *not* to her. The novels, on the other hand, reveal how she can stand at a distance from herself, an unusual capacity for a writer, but not perhaps for a writer whose knowledge or word roots derive from and drive directly into orality’s soil. As she mulls through the pain in Sethe’s story, Morrison defines the sensation, as if it were adjunct to de-creation, as *ekstasis*, as “literally, ‘standing outside oneself.’”¹⁵ It is not our first association with pain in English

¹³ For an interesting, eccentric view, see John Freeman, “Toni Morrison: Love at the Last Resort,” *The Independent* 21 November 2003, 5.

¹⁴ See John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in the Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 2006) 34.

¹⁵ A very compelling argument of this trope is made in Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1993) 45.

literature, where it is often associated with intensity; Hamlet rebukes his mother's imputation of pain with the line: "Ecstasy! / My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time."¹⁶ The effect of this way of telling is a remarkable ploy that leaves every sentence open-ended, stimulating in a way that is manifestly taut and poetic.

"The anxiety of belonging," Morrison writes in *The House That Race Built*, "is entombed within central metaphors in the discourse on globalism, transnationalism, nationalism, the break-up of federations, the rescheduling of alliances, and the fiction of sovereignty."¹⁷ Such an anxiety of belonging and unbelonging moves beyond both the black American and the national contexts to become embedded in particular forces at the heart of the old empires and the thresholds of new ones. The language of the narrative enacts the conflicting movements of memory within the cultural history of those who were slaves and their descendants in the global village, people who have wrestled with that past and with its endlessly destructive consequences. Some of the richest and most finely controlled prose of the twentieth century re-creates a culture and a history characterized by illiteracy and by a speech spun out of resistance. In Morrison, illiteracy is not experienced as a deprivation in itself, but as a symptom and symbol of the ultimate deprivations of a slave's life. When Paul D in *Beloved*, an ex-slave, is shown an old newspaper cutting with a drawing of a black woman he tries not to recognize, he is whipped by fear, "because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear."¹⁸ Of Morrison's four earlier novels only *Tar Baby* leaves the Ohio town which contains the black communities of her other novels; and *Tar Baby*, which is arguably Morrison's least successful novel, oddly avoids "la rafale de l'Histoire" as Hélène Cixous would have it.¹⁹ In fact, a part of the novel's intention is to propose as characteristic of an undifferentiated present dilemmas about identity which have been uncomfortably learned from contemporary white culture. The first three novels (*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*) recall linked pasts. *The Bluest Eye* occupies the twenty years between the remembering of Claudia's childhood in the 1940s and her adult disturbance of these neat "years folded like pocket handkerchiefs" during which another child of the neighborhood, Pecola,

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale U Press, 2006) 36.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998) 25.

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987) 155.

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Benjamin à Montaigne: Il ne faut pas le dire* (Paris: Galilée, 2001) 129.

driven mad by her longing for blue eyes, by her father's raping her, by utter hopelessness of a family destroyed from within by its own self-loathing, is allowed to become "all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed."²⁰ Pecola's madness is a form of flight; a form Morrison can explain but does not condone.

Our lives have been lived in what has got to be one of the world's most violent countries. Everyday violence is apple-pie in the United States, an everyday possibility. How people respond to that would, in many instances, be with peace, love, religion, or defense, or attack. What was interesting to me about the women was—in these days of focus on battered women and how helpless women are before the strength of men, it occurred to me that in my own recollection of the way people talked about themselves, Black women always felt themselves to be the most vulnerable in that society, and some of them prepared themselves and refused to be lightly attacked, refused to be—I think the word in the book is "easy prey." It may happen because rape, abuse, sexual assault was understood to be the *menu* of Black women, in particularly a slave or post-reconstruction society. There was no protection. Black women who wanted to protect them were all strung from trees, so you have to make decisions about these things. People understand that. Black women took it upon themselves, and therefore not be easy, easy prey.²¹

A murderous ruthlessness becomes an alternative form of flight in *Sula*, a novel which moves from the end of the First World War to the Forties, following the generations of women within one family clinging for its life to an arid hillside and a life which denies men the possibility of supporting their families or even of finding a place in them. The novel contains one of Morrison's most extraordinary moments, when the matriarch Eva, who has already had a leg amputated in order to claim insurance on it, burns her beloved son to death because she can no longer bear his defeats and addictions. Women's capacity for survival, their expectation that the men they love will not "measure up" and the lengths to which they will go to protect their children from the despair which waits for them, are present. All this is seen to have its source in a complete separation of men and women, which has produced a disabling and disastrous imbalance. The history which priced men, women, and children in terms of their potential productiveness depended on their developing no attachments to one another.²²

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, 1970) 23.

²¹ Salman Rushdie, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Brick* (Fall 1992): 37.

²² Morrison sees *Sula* as "a masculine character. . . . She really behaves like a man. She's adventuresome and will leave and try anything." See Jan Furman, "Understanding Toni

Song of Solomon begins and ends with flight. At the moment of its hero's birth in 1931, Mr. Smith, the insurance man, crashes to his death on a pair of wide blue wings. Thirty years later, Milkman Dead flies from the deadly order and the self-delusions of his home and heritage to the source of his own history in the South. He too leaps into the unknown and discovers that "if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it."²³ With each of these early novels, Morrison has been inching her way back beyond twentieth-century experience of racism, poverty, and injustice toward their origins in the history of slavery—a history which she has likened to "having World War Two for two hundred years."²⁴ *Beloved* is set in Ohio again, on the edges of Cincinnati. It begins in 1873, with Sethe and her adolescent daughter, Denver, alone at No 124 Bluestone Road, a house haunted by a dead baby. Remembering starts at once, gingerly backing away from the present to repopulate the house and recover its past as a refuge for escaping slaves, and its brief apparent heyday, when Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, seemed able to hold together the remnants of her family and preached powerfully to the members of a black community so damaged by their lives as slaves that they had to learn from scratch to attend to their own bodies:

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them." (189)

Slowly, delicately, and shockingly the narrative picks its way backward to Sethe's girlhood as a slave, to her escape, to her isolation, which is never allowed by Morrison to be more appalling for those who suffered it than the subsequent mutilations they were to commit on themselves in the wake. Time and time again the narrative appears to recoil from its own destruction. The novel tells us about implements of torture, imaginatively designed to cause the greatest pain, to curb movement, speech, and sleep. It alludes to the viciousness, the unending and inhuman cruelty of white slave-owners in cold, brilliantly-lit asides. It does not forget that there were kinder white people, that there are pleasures for Sethe to remember too.

Morrison," in *Toni Morrison's Fiction*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Charleston: U of South Carolina Press, 1995) 13.

²³ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 112.

²⁴ Catherine Argand, "Morrison, la rage d'écrire, *Lire* (Décembre 1993): 39.

But the story of slavery it tells is always from within the heads of those who experienced it.

Paul D, the only survivor of the male slaves Sethe knew years ago on Sweet Home Farm, arrives at No 124. It is eighteen years since he last saw Sethe, whom he had loved and generously relinquished to his friend Halle. Now he becomes her lover and they begin to be happy. They do not discuss the past very much, but we learn that Sethe herself arrived at this same house in 1855 with four small children, the youngest only just delivered with the help of a runaway white girl in a boat during her flight North. Sethe's back had been suppurating then from the beating she was given during the last month of her pregnancy, during which she was also raped. Her back, with its branch-like weals and blossoming pus, has since become an elaborate tree of scarred flesh, made bizarrely beautiful by Paul D's love of her, and standing for the secrets her body contains and emits in a gradual gathering of voices. Then Beloved appears. A young woman fully and strangely dressed walks out of the water and waits for Sethe and Denver. Her skin is unlined except for three minute vertical scratches on her forehead. Her simplicity and unworldliness are disconcerting, blandly, and mysteriously malevolent. Sethe and Denver are drawn to this needy young woman. Paul D is on his guard. We have no difficulty in recognizing Beloved as the baby's ghost which has haunted the house for so long, now grown up. We learn that Sethe's two sons left the house, unable to bear the ghost's manifestations. We learn too that Sethe had a baby daughter, not the youngest, who died. Her gravestone bears only the word "Beloved," for Sethe could not afford to put "dearly" as well. By the time we are told the truth, harshly and as seen through the eyes of hostile outsiders, we have experienced Sethe's choice, her decision, the life she has made for herself for the last eighteen years. We witness the greeting of Sethe's sadistic old master, known as "schoolteacher," as he arrives on horseback to reclaim his runaway slave and her children, who are legally his.

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing.

Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. (22)

Beloved has come back to punish Sethe, her mother, but also to elicit her love. She is on the point of strangling her when her stroking hands are stopped by tenderness, by her delight in her mother's neck, the "damp skin that felt like chamois and looked like taffeta" (45). There is no master, no system of allure here. But if anyone knows how to be alluring, it is Morrison the storyteller.

Sethe's story is based on a true one, of an ex-slave who killed her children to prevent their recapture. Morrison clarifies the motive behind the story:

How to own your own body and love somebody else. Under historical duress, where one fights for agency, the problem is how to be an individual, how to exert individual agency under this huge umbrella of determined historical life. In the case of Sethe, the story was based on the real story of a slave woman who did indeed kill her children rather than have them go back to slavery. Her claim is grotesque, but it comes out of a determination to nurture and to be a parent. So the beloved for her was the best thing she was, which were her children. In the jazz age, in the large city, where people now were in a position *not* to marry who was next to them, who lived next door, or to whom they had been given, but to actually choose to fall in love, it's an overwhelming passion. It's a wonderful expression of how one inhabits the flesh that now is yours. Therefore it becomes, again, excessive. I like to look at what happens at the outside, pushing characters.²⁵

The experience of slavery which the novel so extraordinarily gives us begins from this act of reclaiming one's freedom and from the compelling need to understand it. The lives of people who are denied their own names, denied the marriage ceremony, denied the right to love their children as parents is explosively compressed within such an act. When Paul D learns that Sethe, this "sweet sturdy woman," has murdered her own child he is moved to leave, but is drawn back by love. He recalls a dead friend saying of the woman he loves, she "is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (145). Sethe construes her murderous actions.

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it

²⁵ Rushdie, "An Interview with Toni Morrison" 36.

happen to her own. ... Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (197)²⁶

And finally Paul D gently says to her: “You your best thing, Sethe. You” (199). The mother’s absence in Sethe’s life is the most palpable presence in the novel. Morrison feels that loss most acutely when she performs the simplest acts that she used to do in tandem with her mother who helped thwart moves to segregate the town. “When they opened a theater, if the usher led her one way, she’d go the other. They were early in the swimming pools. It wasn’t like the sit-ins of the 60s; these were individuals who took it upon themselves to dare somebody to move them.” Her family, she adds, “were all arrogant; poor as we were, there was a feeling that we were right and they were wrong.” But her parents were at odds. “My father was adamant: white people didn’t come in our house. My mother thought they had to prove guilt not innocence.”²⁷ Though she might jibe at the “integrationist” label, Morrison is certainly at ease with the idea that says: you can be white and fair-minded about race and social justice. No wonder she instills a beautiful contrast between her strategy in the narrative and Sethe’s plight as an ex-slave. She hopes her quest for survival will be purgative. This way of narrating brings her closer to an invaluable sentence by Simone Weil, who writes: “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”²⁸ It is work, not love, that keeps her from thinking about her childhood as a black girl wanting simply to get ahead with her life.

²⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1989) 3. Chapter 8 looks at another tradition, namely, the Nobel Prize, which has kept together the idea of world literature. It also examines the Nobel syndrome. After all, the Nobel is only the most celebrated of the literary prizes, and the richest—now worth more than a million dollars. How can the prize not matter to a subaltern writer like Toni Morrison, for example, the first African-American and black woman to win it since 1901? What should be the attitude of the subaltern writer toward a cultural institution like the Nobel, which obviously represents Western political embodiments of state authority? Is the history of the Nobel Prize a history of circulation and negotiation? Can the Nobel laureate find the means the morning after to resist, the way Beckett did, and repel the glare of publicity? These questions do not stand alone. They are strung on a chain that may be described this way: the cultural presuppositions, historical excavations and literary representations of the dominant—insofar as they are shared by the emergent post-colonial—also trace the emergence of a worldwide debate about the Academy’s decisions, motives, intellect and ethics in awarding the prize. The cultural politics of the Nobel seem to contain a coda. In the telling, it seldom appears to be above the fray.

²⁷ Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle” 6.

²⁸ Simone Weil, *The Notebook*, trans. Arthur Wills (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 78.

Beloved is dispersed by love. She disappears and is gradually forgotten. Her need to understand her own death, to know for certain that her mother killed her because she loved her, has been met. That painful, paradoxical love is matched by the discovery Paul D makes during his eighteen years of desperate escape. He “could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his” (201). Love is the capacity to be moved by beauty and pleasure, to recognize human beings as always human. Out of what Morrison has called “a survivalist intention to forget certain things,”²⁹ she has created a frightening, haunting, and intensely exciting narrative about America and its past; a past that is once again celebrated in *Jazz*, which embodies what Gates has perceptively called the “language of blackness . . . The sign of the successful negotiation of this precipice of indenture, of slavish imitation, is that the black critical narrative refers to two contexts, two traditions—the Western and the black.”³⁰ To explore black cultural difference, Morrison tells us about an eighteen-year-old girl who has been shot dead by her middle-aged lover, and his wife has been manhandled from the funeral after attempting to cut the dead girl’s face with a knife. Both events are witnessed but kept secret by a community which has reason to distrust the police and to look kindly upon a hitherto gentle, childless couple, whose sudden, violent sorrows they recognize and are able to forgive. As the spring of that year, 1926, bursts a month or two later upon the “City” of *Jazz*, its all-seeing gossip of a narrator is moved to declare, if only provisionally, that “history is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last.”³¹ Like Zora Neale Hurston whose collecting and championing of black folklore tales when others were predicting its demise, Morrison weaves “a new black aesthetic.” She plays on that “double consciousness so often spoken about by Du Bois.”³² It is in this sense that she reminds us of how gratifying an understatement can be when it is not a form of hedging or holding back. Her natural reticence allows her to keep a steady tension through all the literary forms that she uses in most of her novels, but especially in *Jazz*.

Beloved is set fifty years before *Jazz*, and *Jazz* is set more than sixty years before the present. The latter’s theme tune is spun out from these contrasts and whirled through a series of playful improvisations by a sto-

²⁹ Toni Morrison, “J’ai toujours tourné autour de la même idée,” *Le Magazine Littéraire* 459 (Décembre 2006): 77–78.

³⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1987) x.

³¹ Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Knopf: 1992) 44.

³² *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Anthony Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 54.

ryteller who admits to being—and, as it turns out, expects the reader to be too—“curious, inventive, and well-informed.”³³ It is impossible to resist the seductions of this novel as it announces its own fallibilities, mourns its distance from some of the events it will therefore need to invent, boldly revises its own speculations, even as it recalls, replays, and retrieves them for us before our very eyes and with our assumed complicity. Of course this voice undertakes to guarantee both tale and telling as truth, history, music known and shared by all who have roots in the black urban communities of America in the 1920s. And for readers with quite other roots? Well, the narrative is no more prepared than Morrison is herself to “footnote the black experience for white readers. I wouldn’t try to explain what a reader like me already knows”³⁴ There is no real, serious, true interaction, other than the power relationship of slavery, between a white and a black character. Even the fantasy of the gaze is a kind of power relationship in that world.

I think I was very much aware of the gaze of white people, in a lot of books written by African-Americans. They always—frequently, not always—seemed to be addressed to a white person’s readership, talking just over my shoulder and not really to me. When I first began to write, I didn’t want to clear away those things, but I certainly wanted the book to be free of major white characters, and that confrontation which destabilizes the narrative I wanted to tell.³⁵

In *Jazz* too there are obscure, dense, and elliptical passages, the consequence, perhaps, of a language drenched in speech and therefore off-hand at times with secrets and avowals.

My effort in writing in a language which, in the United States, is wholly coded and highly racialized ... is to liberate myself, as a writer, from these codes. I want to merge vernacular with the lyric, with the standard, and with the biblical, because it was part of the linguistic heritage of my family, moving up and down the scale, across it, in between it. On some occasions, when they were saying something very very serious, they were sermonic, rhetorical. And sometimes they invented words and sometimes they simply used the current street language. All of that was an enhancement for me, not a restriction. It made me feel as though there was an enormous power in the way in which language could be handled and was understood. There are all sorts of *double entendres*, all sorts of associations that standard English, or even lyrical

³³ Adam Langer, “Star Power,” *Book* (November/December 2003): 40–44.

³⁴ Rushdie, “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 34.

³⁵ “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 37.

language, did not provide me with. I was interested in that linguistic play always. Also it was the language that could restrain me, because I'm bound by those twenty-six letters, but at the same time there were doors that I could open and open for the reader to step through onto nothing, to sort of float free there and not know what the visceral or the intellectual response should be. It operated both as a rein and as a kind of Pandora's box.³⁶

And yet the lyricism and elasticity of her writing come in part from her absolute faith in the fruits of a tension between what it is she knows and could know if readers used their heads.

All Morrison's novels have been crucially concerned with readers and with manipulative uses of literacy in racist societies. Her characters' reading of newspapers, letters, "other people's stories printed in small books," are watched as signs of political attitudes, a whole way of reading the world.³⁷ Her narrators too are always conscious of their readers, and in *Jazz* the musical elaborations are composed around the most flagrant toying with readerly expectations. At one moment there is a shameless reveling in what an imagination, forged through the minutest observation of physical detail and by the ordinary repetitiveness of life, can come up with; followed at once by a refusal to yield to the pull of either the inevitable or the apocalyptic. The novel's quietly happy ending comes as a triumphant countering to the imagination's more clamorous tendencies as, in a final aside, the narrator shrugs off the characters' evasion of authorial vigilance as they put it: "their lives together in ways I never dreamed."³⁸ Joe (the murderer), Violet (his wife), and Dorcas (the murdered girl) are all, though differently, orphans and people collected by the City, "that urban present moment," through a series of migrations from the 1870s onward. Joe and Violet, the grandchildren of slaves and themselves members of a generation which shared a repertoire of horrors (beatings, lynching, rape, evictions, riots, near-starvation) while rarely if ever choosing to talk about these things, are driven by the poverty and violence of their Southern lives, not just to Baltimore, but further, to the City, the capitalized City. Here Morrison

wanted to create a migratory experience, an immigrant's experience of movement to cities, when they were the places to go, when there were

³⁶ An Interview with Toni Morrison" 38.

³⁷ The point is made with force in Toni Morrison, *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) 7.

³⁸ *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* 35.

... infinite possibilities. Seeing oneself in numbers, so that you felt the security of one's own family or kind. At the same time—I use the word danger, not so much in its bloodletting sense, but you can't be urbane outside the city. You can be clever and brilliant and shrewd and a guru, but you can't be sophisticated and urbane, unless you confront the variety of difference, strong difference, the mix in a city.³⁹

The journey Joe and Violet make to the City by train in 1906 may be cramped and occluded by a “green-as-poison curtain” from the obsequious services lavished on the white passengers. Yet they experience it all as a dance of the most exhilarating anticipation and release, prefiguring the promise of the City itself: “They were hanging there, a young country couple, laughing and tapping back at the tracks, when the attendant came through, pleasant but unsmiling now that he didn't have to smile in this car full of colored people.”⁴⁰ Other aspects of their lives are characterized by a similar doubleness. Names and nicknames become witty creations in the jaws of a history which actually deprived people of names and that includes Toni Morrison, *alias* Chloé Anthony Wofford (the white planter's name who once enslaved her family).⁴¹ Joe also has a second name: Trace, the mistake he made as a child on hearing that his parents had “disappeared without a trace,” and Violet is quickly renamed “Violent” by her astounded neighbours.

The dead girl, Dorcas, was orphaned by the riots of 1917 in East St Louis. Now she listens to the City's siren songs of glamour and sexual bliss from the locked and neat apartment of her guardian aunt, who dreads above all for her niece the provocations of black music and the dancing it inspires. Dorcas bides her time. She has not yet flowered into beauty, and now never will. Her skin is still bad, tiny hoofmarks speckling her lower cheeks. Though Joe is by no means what her dreams are made of, but a cosmetics salesman in his fifties with a wife, he loves her hopelessly, hoofmarks, callowness and all, and he showers her with gifts and promises. Even Dorcas's disbelieving friend is bound to concede that “I think he likes women, and I don't know anybody like that” (112). Dorcas, however, longs for Acton, the cool young man who lets her dance with him. She dies marveling at his fastidious attention to his jacket, now spattered with her blood. Even so, *Jazz* dwells less on the reasons for the murder, or even on the grief suffered in its wake by the murderer and his wife, than on a past which might be thought to have foretold these events. “I *was* more interested in black people's reality,”

³⁹ *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* 34.

⁴⁰ *Jazz* 79.

⁴¹ Argand, “La rage d'écrire” 40.

Morrison tells Salman Rushdie.⁴² Spirited and consolatory lamentation provides an accompanying counterpoint, rich in echoes, remembered if unrecorded, of similar moments of desperation, pain, and incomprehension. Joe has been haunted all his life by thoughts of his mother. He had grown up thinking her dead, but discovered at eighteen that she is the wild woman he has learned to laugh at and even torment. Violet, the third of the five children of a woman who drowned herself in a well, suppresses this and other terrors in her vigorous determination to survive in the City. But neither she nor Joe wants children. They, however, have good memories: a grandmother who laughed in the face of disaster, a friend called Victory, who listened. Like the City that they come to accept and even love, for its skies, its noise, its people, its blackness, the past is alive with contradictory energies, with kindnesses as astonishing as the cruelties. Morrison's quest is to unearth the shame that colors white history.

What is a black child/woman/friend/mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many things that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions, is being Miles Davis *and* Louis Armstrong *and* Bessie Smith *and* Kathleen Battle. All of those things are encompassed in what it means to be black. It's the excitement, I think, that makes me want to do this sort of archaeology about the history of black people in the United States.⁴³

Morrison strives to rewrite that history while denouncing the imagery of the oppressors “who used Blacks in order to find out how really white they were,” she exclaims. “Slavery magnified freedom—if it did not create it.”⁴⁴ In one prefiguring episode of *Jazz* a young man, golden in beauty and in name, learns that his father was black and goes in search of him. Golden Gray, as his Southern belle of a mother has named him, stumbles upon the wild woman, just as she is giving birth to Joe. When he recoils from her, the narrator wavers:

That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore. (189)

⁴² “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 37.

⁴³ “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 34.

⁴⁴ Argand, “Morrison, la rage d'écrire” 39.

Racism is the accumulation of particular moments for her characters, experienced from earliest childhood, never an abstraction. For Joe there is the memory of “two white men ... sitting on a rock. I sat on the ground right next to them until they got disgusted and moved off” (204). Golden Gray is learning about this reality through his own well-tended finger-tips, and he is forgiven for the moment.

Jazz is a shorter novel and its beauties are more contained than those of *Beloved*, which is so unbearably painful to read at times that readers need to gather strength to go on. If the pain is less intense here, that may be because it is absorbed into the poetry, in a way that the blues reverberations make possible. The novel’s vocation is to tell us about the grim miasma of a culture that has been degraded for so long. This, in any case, is how the reader should understand it: what happened to African-Americans in their meeting with Europeans was devastating. “Our people need to be healed,” Morrison seems to hint. To do so, *Jazz* subtly relies as much on the processes of history and urban life as *Beloved*. There is supporting evidence for such a claim. A voice which hears the chorus of “slow moving whores, who never hurried anything but love” chronicles the human part of the city beneath skies which separate and join the visible and the invisible.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which are the work of stone masons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. (187)

The poetry is grounded in fact. Violet dresses heads of hair and feels a shift in the demand for her services like a drought directed at the nape of her neck. The watching, listening narrator is beguiled by more than music and light. She reflects people’s lives are very much their own business as well as other people’s. They have money to earn, meals to cook, apartments to furnish and clean. They think as actively while washing as while reading. The details of a particular life are only to be understood as part of the pitfalls and aspirations of whole communities, even in the City. As Morrison makes abundantly clear: “One thing that’s really interesting to me, about the characterization of the city, in the novel—you could characterize the city as being jazz. If the countryside is blues, the city is jazz. That’s to say, the city is energy and possibility. It’s the place where you can renew and make yourself.”⁴⁵ More than in any of her other novels, the connections between

⁴⁵ Rushdie, “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 34.

country and city are preserved, as history, memory, and loss.

This is also the great lesson of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*. His illuminating discussion of the seventeenth-century English country-house poems does not concentrate on what the poems represent, but on what they *are* as the result of contested social and political relationships. Descriptions of the rural mansion, for example, at bottom do not entail only what is to be admired by way of harmony, repose, and beauty; they also entail for the modern reader what has been excluded from the poems, the labor that created the mansions, the social processes of which they are the culmination, the dispossessions, and theft they actually signified.⁴⁶ Morrison too turns realism which has gained its durable status as the result of contests involving money and power, into representation of the excluded and marginalized. Violet, it turns out, has had other lapses, or "cracks." She once took someone else's baby, though she returned it before any harm was done. The narrator clarifies:

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done.⁴⁷

Yet none of this explains the intensity of the novel, the relentless and clear-eyed versions of spiritual suffering and abject despair set beside tiny instants of pure social embarrassment and nuanced social observation.

Morrison addresses all her novels to the need for black people to see themselves within a culture that does not encourage them to be part of its fabric:

As a writer (if we think of novels historically as the building of a nation, actually constructing it, making it original) I felt very strongly identified by my culture, which is to say my race, but not by the state, not by the country. I wanted, very very much as a child, to *be* American, to *feel* that way. Everything was designed to prevent me from that. Because of my race there were parts of the lake I could not enter. There were shops I couldn't go to. I was always a marginalized person within the

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1973) 56–59. I owe this finding to Edward Said. For more on the subject, see his *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1984) 34.

⁴⁷ *Jazz* 134.

context of the mainstream, the major civilization. I began to value more the marginality, the sort of peripheral existence, because it seemed to offer so much more. It was deeper, more complex, it had a tension, it related to the center but it wasn't the center. So of that sense of feeling American, I was deprived. I was deprived of that, and I felt bereft. I had never felt American.⁴⁸

Such unpleasing moral complexity does not last, however. Pretty soon, Morrison is hard at work, striking the set of messy human conflict that she has put in place and substituting for it an unflinching, profoundly sentimental contest between good and evil. This is a familiar trajectory. At some point, all her major novels seem to lose patience with the finicky business of recording moral blur, choosing to swerve off into the realm of moral fable and preacherly uplift. Often, as in *Paradise*, the change is marked by an onset of gloomily “miraculous” events. In *Jazz*, Dorcas’s young friend remembers the love scenes the two girls used to invent together and discuss, and she tells Violet:

Something about it bothered me, though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did it. Nothing like me. I saw myself as somebody I'd seen in a picture show or a magazine. Then it would work. If I picture myself the way I am it seemed wrong. (199)

Jazz is a love story, indeed a black romance, “*un paysage intérieur*,” to borrow a formula from Cixous.⁴⁹ And romance and its high-risk seductions for young women come with special health warnings when it is poor young black women who may succumb to it. For romance has always been white and capitalistic in its account of love as transactions voluntarily undertaken between class, beauty, and money. But the romance which is a snare and a delusion has also spelled out a future for young women, a destiny, significance, and pleasure—and particularly when there was little enough of those possibilities for them or for the men they knew. The older women of Morrison’s novels know that sex can be a woman’s undoing, that men, “ridiculous and delicious and terrible,” are always trouble. The narrator in *Jazz* is generous with warnings: “The girls have red lips and their legs whisper to each other through silk stockings. The red lips and the silk flash power. A power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated” (110). The historical background is clearly that of “power-knowledge-pleasure”

⁴⁸ Rushdie, “An Interview with Toni Morrison” 36.

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Benjamin à Montaigne: Il ne faut pas le dire* (Paris: Galilée, 2001) 56.

which Michel Foucault expounds in *The History of Sexuality*. In practical terms, this means a reassessment of what the excluded are left with, the “impression,” as Foucault writes, “that everything took place in a world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness.”⁵⁰ The world of feelings Foucault evokes with verve turns into a measure for despair in Morrison. This is the universe of what usually happens when a novelist appears to write with the weight of the community behind her. Roland Barthes called this style of omniscient narration the “reference code,” alluding to those moments when a writer appeals to something consensual that everyone knows.⁵¹ Morrison uses it with great simplicity and force.

Though critics have described Morrison’s work as transgressive, she prefers to call herself “a saboteur,”⁵² a writer who continually challenges her readers and her own preconceptions about some of the defining issues of American culture: racism, civil rights, slavery, patriarchy. Emerging in an era when black writing was seen as a predominantly male endeavor and women writers were perceived as largely white, she redefined the role of a “black woman writer. I didn’t want to be an honorary male or an honorary white person,” she observes:

When people complimented me, saying, by implication, “You’re better than a black or a woman writer,” I would always counter with “I am a black woman writer,” and that was not a narrow field. Because of those two modifiers [“black” and “woman”], I felt my imaginative world was wider and deeper, that I had some access to and some sensibilities about worlds that may not have been available to white men.⁵³

All this high-toned, heroic stuff comes down in the end to the way patriarchy is painted in her *oeuvre*. The mighty march of the human spirit from Milkman to Paul D culminates in the central character in *Love*, Bill Cosey, a beguiling entrepreneur, who dreamed of providing a pre-integration playground and haven for blacks. He is dead by the time the novel opens. But his charismatic spirit haunts the narrative. He ran a hotel and resort that was once the “best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast”;⁵⁴ that was back in the 1940s, before the place was ruined by the

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. Vol. 1. La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 7.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1990) 56.

⁵² Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle” 7.

⁵³ “Solving the Riddle” 6.

⁵⁴ Toni Morrison, *Love* (New York: Knopf, 2003) 34.

stench of the canneries and the onset of integration. His old home is now occupied by the women he left behind, two of whom are in love with him. Even a newcomer to the household, Junior, falls for him; since she never met him this calls for impressive powers of persuasion, powers that Morrison would like to have. Each of the women closest to him—L, his friend and the hotel cook; May, his daughter-in-law and dogsbody; Heed, his widow; Christine, his granddaughter—has her own version of the man, and fights to claim him as her own. But we see him chiefly through the eyes of Heed and Christine, who live as enemies in his house. A portrait of him hangs above Heed's bed. Christine, expensively educated and angry, had run away from home. When Cosey died she returned after years on the road to claim her inheritance. Heed consented to share the house with her: "With very few words they came to an agreement of sorts because May was hopeless, the place filthy, Heed's arthritis was disabling her hands, and because nobody in town could stand them. So the one who had attended private school kept house while the one who could barely read ruled it" (77). Most of the time they keep out of one another's way, have done so for twenty years, but "once—perhaps twice—a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped" (91). The apparent cause of the hostility is Cosey's "will": doodles on a 1958 menu "outlining his whiskey-driven desires," a just-legible scrawl declaring that his house should go to the "sweet Cosey child" (111). But which was the sweet child, wife or granddaughter? The judge ruled in favor of Heed, but Christine's lawyer believes she has grounds for reversal on appeal, and she has spent years looking for evidence of a proper will.

Despite the financial quarrel, it is hard to see why the two women hate each other so intensely. There are slanted, partial glimpses into their past:

Once there was a little girl with white bows on each of her four plaits. She had a bedroom all to herself beneath the attic in a big hotel. Forget-me-nots dotted the wallpaper. Sometimes she let her brand new friend stay over and they laughed til they hiccuped under the sheets.

Then one day the little girl's mother come to tell her she would have to leave her bedroom and sleep in a small room on another floor. When she asked her mother why, she was told it was for her own protection. There were things she shouldn't see or hear or know about.

The little girl ran away. (122)

The Bluest Eye began: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty . . . Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane.

They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play” (3). In *Love*, the evasiveness is more flamboyant: we are told that something is being withheld. The little girl Christine ran away—but from what exactly? The answer is revealed two-thirds of the way through the novel (there are earlier hints—Heed called her husband “Papa” and “was so little she had to stand on a stool” to shave him). When Bill Cosey took Heed as his wife she was eleven years old and his granddaughter’s best friend. Christine puts it like this: “One day we built castles on the beach; next day he sat her in his lap. One day we were playing house under a quilt; next day she slept in his bed. One day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather” (129). Morrison has compared the narrative technique in *Love* to peeling an onion: you pull back the layers to get to the heart. That is fine in theory, if a terrible cliché, but the layers come away in little chunks and fragments and it takes patience, concentration, and a certain amount of willpower to get there. By the time you do, it is hard to care any longer. At the end of the novel the two old women return separately to the derelict hotel. Heed is up in the attic dictating a new will to Junior when Christine arrives. Heed falls through a trapdoor. She lies on the floor, broken: “Her bones, fragile from decades of stupor, have splintered like glass” (122). Junior, no longer necessary, runs away. She drives home and has sex with her boyfriend, abandoning the two women seven miles from help. The conversation between Heed and Christine, when it finally comes, is spoken as though by one voice. They turn back to their childhood and talk as if they have never been separated. Junior, it turns out, was evil: a horrible visitant, a figure familiar from other Morrison novels, in particular the character of *Beloved*. Throughout the narrative she keeps her boots on, in order, we discover, to hide a foot that “looked ... like a hoof” (133). This is an old pairing of devices in one person, the narrative eye and the devil; it is too parsimonious. Her boyfriend, Romen, is a device of another familiar kind: he repudiates Junior’s frozen-heartedness, and goes to rescue the two women.

Thirty-eight years have passed since Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*. One might have thought that in that time she would have added to her repertoire of pre-integrationist family disasters and their terrible legacies, widened the frame of reference and perhaps mentioned what has changed since 1970, but it seems the themes are here to stay. *Beloved* is a novel full of horror, but it makes sense. In *Love*, the horror returns—the mangled foot, the creaking, leaky old house—but as gothic, nothing more than the imprint of something that was expanded elsewhere. It is self-reflexive: it contains sketches and harried recapitulations of the detailed portraits of the earlier novels. Morrison is a shaman for her readers. At one point she provided answers for a generation of black women. *The Bluest Eye* was a

redefinition and a re-centring, making the margin the heart. They had never had a spokesperson, a voice, like this. There was something masterful about her, or about her pose. For her, a quality such as beauty or honesty lies not in the words on the page, but in our response to them. A case in point: when Junior first arrives in the Cosey household her behaviour hovers, in Christine's eyes, between a "pose" and an "act." Christine eventually decides that it is an act rather than a pose, something that is worked up but has a genuine impulse similar to the one we find in the afterward to *The Bluest Eye*, written in 1970, in which Morrison said that the effect she had been trying to achieve was the "speakerly, aural, colloquial," the familiar tone of "black women conversing with one another, telling a story; an anecdote, gossip about someone or event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood." She was telling "our" story and "our" secrets, effecting the "public exposure of a private confidence."⁵⁵ Even so, this is something *Love* fails to convey, even if each character gets a unique voice and set of grievances, angles of influence in their claim over the deceased Bill Cosey, a self-made millionaire who owned a once-posh complex called Cosey's Hotel and Resort. What the novel articulates is an infamous Faulknerian epitaph: "The past is not dead. It is not even past."⁵⁶ And if the women marinate in memories of old slights, recriminations, and sexual imbroglios, it is because "they are just entangled," Morrison observes. "They are totally entangled in this man who helped them or hurt them, whom they permitted some of these outrages because of the largesse accompanying it."⁵⁷ True, insofar as there is Heed, the widow, a whippet-tempered woman who wants to tell her family story; Christine, a former prostitute determined to get her inheritance back. Vida used to work for Cosey and now her grandson is helping out Heed around the house, that except he is backing into trouble with Junior, a woman recently out of "Correctional" with a dangerous past and a yen for kinky sex.

Overlooking the action is L, a cook who worked at the beachfront resort near the town of Silk, where all these women cross paths at one time or another. L is a Greek chorus to Morrison's rotating cat-fight. "If I wanted to, I could have stayed with her," Morrison says. "L could just tell that story without any characters. But I wanted her to function as witness, as someone with judgement."⁵⁸ She leaves no doubt that she is the master

⁵⁵ "Afterword," *The Bluest Eye* 112.

⁵⁶ William Faulkner, *New Orleans Sketches* (Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 2006) 66.

⁵⁷ Jaggi, "Solving the Riddle" 5.

⁵⁸ "Solving the Riddle" 6.

of this text, and that she holds its keys. In this sense, *Love* seems to have sprung entirely out of her head, which is unusual because most of her past novels grew out of news stories. The germ of *Beloved* was a newspaper item about Margaret Garner in Cincinnati, a black slave who murdered her own daughter.⁵⁹ *Paradise* emerged from the old black newspapers in Oklahoma that encouraged freed blacks to settle there in the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ *Jazz* was inspired by a photograph that Morrison saw of an eighteen-year-old woman murdered at a party by her lover out of jealousy. This life-and-death brand of jealousy is everywhere in *Love*, the title of which grows more layered as one reads deeper. The love she writes about both warms and devours, and her characters have yet to find the balance between the two. As a result, the language is taut, but passionate, full of spoken idioms and the whirl and whoosh of hurricane weather, which ravages the part of Florida where the action unfolds. She takes great pains to achieve this symphonic quality to her prose. “The language has to have its own music—I don’t mean ornate because I want it to work with no sound, while you read it. Still, it also has to have that spoken quality: it’s oral: a blend of standard English and the vernacular, street language.”⁶¹ Such technique with flashbacks, times-shifts, multiple points of view, and L’s teeth-sucking voice-overs is rife in the novel, which has a structure to match its complex language. Information leaks out like clues in a murder case; it is not until some time into the narrative that the characters’ precise roles come clear, a deliberate strategy. This “deep structure” is where Morrison finds the art in novel-writing. “Plots are interesting, characters are fascinating, scenery can be totally enveloping,” she intones, “but the real art is the deep structure; the way that information is revealed and withheld so that the reader gets to find out things appropriately, or in a time frame that makes it an intimate experience.”⁶² Her hide-and-seek game with key information forces the reader into Silk’s fetid atmosphere, where people think that they know about one another, where envy, avarice, and passion

⁵⁹ This is discussed with flair in Gwen S. Berger, *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2005), chapter 2 in particular.

⁶⁰ For substantiation of this claim, see Danielle Russell, *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space, and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 25–40.

⁶¹ Quoted in Arnold L. Weinstein, *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison* (New York: Random House, 2006) 88. The chapter on *Beloved* and *Sula* is disturbing and sustaining.

⁶² Quoted in Shirley A. Stave, *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 56. The account of Morrison’s debt to the Bible is brilliant if eccentric at times.

mix but find no release.⁶³ As always, what Morrison loves most comes back to language. “English is a polyglot language,” she says, “that’s what makes it exciting to write in; there are so many other languages in it, so many levels. When you get novels that pull from that, or another tradition, for me it’s a delight, an absolute delight.”⁶⁴ Or, to put it differently, the dialectic at the heart of her narrative is one between dream and nightmare, which she rightly takes to lie also at the root of the idea of writing itself. Otherwise, how can we explain her quest to expose the instability of the houses men build from their dreams, destroyed by the passions of their inhabitants, living and dead? The emphasis on telling by some other way, for all that, is much to be welcomed. Sensibly enough, Morrison wants to show Cosey’s limitations in that he “didn’t understand: a dream is just a nightmare with lipstick.”⁶⁵ As the lipstick washes away, we discover how Christine’s fierce territorialism was once a little girl’s desire to reclaim her bedroom, and why her mother, May, develops kleptomania; she must vigilantly protect—or steal—her space in the world. These relationships fail because language has lost its power to tell tales. As eleven-year-old girls, Heed and Christine were too ashamed to articulate the trauma of Cosey’s sexual energy. Only real conversation, though, can restore understanding between the old women. Morrison shows “how precious the tongue is”—it may reconstruct confused narratives, rebuild broken homes, and tolerate their unbearable pain.

The stylistic stripping away of love (referred to only once in the novel) leaves this narrative lacking in the sustained intensity of *The Bluest Eye* or *Beloved*. But Morrison compellingly exploits the silences to reveal the possibility—and necessity—of linguistic transparency: “Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after 21 years on hold.”⁶⁶ On this score, *Love*’s power lies in the luminosity and energy of its poetic images, set off against the narrative obscurity and laced with horror and beauty: crayon-colored dreams, cotton-mouth snakes, collapsing hotel attics, the pervasive smell of cinnamon and citrus. It is a tale full of abandonment: the places where love should be are haunted instead by desolation and longing to belong. But *Love* is also about the gradual disclosure of secrets, the filling in of gaps; when their scattered bones are finally pieced together,

⁶³ As the product of a small town twenty-five miles out of Cleveland, Ohio, Morrison finds this rich territory, natural territory. In small towns, she says, the “hatreds are severe, ancient, the passions and extraordinary silences are deeper; they matter so much because you can’t get away.” For more on the subject, see Toni Morrison, *Au Louvre* (Paris: Bourgois, 2006) 67.

⁶⁴ Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle” 4.

⁶⁵ “Solving the Riddle” 3.

⁶⁶ “Solving the Riddle” 6.

the skeletons in the closet have terrifying tales to tell. Still, one of the most striking aspects of the story is how Morrison refuses to judge her characters, how they develop lives of their own, despite what even the author herself may have envisioned for them. The original title, *A Sporting Woman*, took its inspiration from a character whom she originally saw as a personification of “free-floating malice,” someone both “wanton” and “rootless.”⁶⁷ But as Morrison continued writing, she grew to understand her *dramatis personae* more thoroughly. That character, Junior, still plays a significant role; her callousness and peculiar brand of morality strongly impact the plot’s outcome. But now, she is only one of a passel of memorable characters, nearly all of whom get equal attention as Morrison spins her tale. “These are not people that I would go on vacation with,” she intoned. “But they are fascinating to me, compelling to me, even the minor ones. And my eye is rather calm when I examine them because I can’t do them justice if I’m judging and condemning”⁶⁸—a telling sign of her generosity in the face of adversity.



So much for what might be called (though inappropriately) the underpinning of Morrison’s texts. But why her, and this obsessive fastening on *her* way of telling in particular? In the play of sense opened up by this chance conjunction of interpretation we are able to read her attempt at representing the question of race and typecasting. The essays she wrote on O.J. Simpson and Clarence Thomas come to mind.⁶⁹ It is no accident that she is fascinated with victims who were once icons commanding an incredible presence in the society they live in. The space that they inhabit and often feel compelled to deny reflects their personal despair. Both Simpson and Thomas are defined more in terms of an environment where they are caught scraping themselves back and forth over the rocks. In “Dead Man Golfing,” she likens the Simpson trial to that of slave mutineers in Melville’s fiction, and has always believed O.J. innocent. “Acknowledging the predatory nature of a psychotic cadre within the police force would necessitate the suppression of the ultimate social nightmare: one in which pockets of gestapo turn their ‘commitment to law and order’ on to *them*; break into *their* houses without warrants; manipulate evidence against *them*; handcuff *them*.”⁷⁰ The essay captures “dead moments” during the shabby and highly-

⁶⁷ Love 45.

⁶⁸ Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle” 7.

⁶⁹ See the call to action articulated in Berger, *Taboo Subjects* 89–100.

⁷⁰ Toni Morrison, “The Official Story: Dead Man Golfing,” in *Birth of a Nation’hood: Gaze,*

advertised trial. It also paradoxically represents the victim (in this case O.J.) when he was most alive and sincere. Such moments allow for the echo effect that is part of what transports individuals beyond the self, until they are beside themselves and undergoing another form of pain, namely, how to belong again. But where Simpson and Thomas foam with an elemental fury, Morrison is content with telling the tale, naked though it may be. It is loss that engenders the transformative state of mind which enabled her to embark on a journey in search for what only the imagination can uncover. The root and origin of art lie here, ready to be taken unaware even if at times she has to subvert her writing in order to demonstrate an overarching point instead of following a process of discovery. Given the weight of the racial argument used in *Race-ing Justice* and *Birth of a Nation'hood*, the reader is hungry for surprise, for something just to happen outside the frame of a larger discourse. And it does, though clearly Morrison fears its approach, which is disarming.

We have been deceived. We thought he [O.J.] loved us. Now we know that everything we saw was false. Each purposeful gesture, the welcoming smile, the instant understanding of how we felt and what we needed. Even before we knew what was in our best interests, he seemed to anticipate and execute it right on cue. He gentled us toward our finer instincts; toward the medicine that would cure us; toward the rest we needed. He imitated our language in structure and content. And all with the most charming good nature—joy even. So obvious was his fidelity we had no doubt he would lay down his life for us. It seemed inherent, in his nature, so to speak. It was what he was born for.⁷¹

This aspiration is consistent with that of Virginia Woolf, who also longed to catch the “feeling of the singing of the real world”⁷²; it is this hankering that provides the link in most of the novels, except perhaps for *Sula*, where we witness someone in the middle of a violent emotional storm, working her way through a mounting terror with reflections on language. This capacity to stand outside herself separates Morrison from sources and subjects that end in ruin. Her view of black women as “both the ship and the harbor,” both the engine and the steam, both the adventurers and the nurturers, and of

Script, and the Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case, eds. Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky (New York: Pantheon, 1997) xxii. See also Jaggi, “Solving the Riddle.” I owe a great deal to Jaggi for the formulation of the ideas I explore in this section.

⁷¹ “The Official Story: Dead Man Golfing” vii.

⁷² Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Harcourt, 1985) 111.

her heroines' rights to exist for themselves alone led C.L.R. James, another champion of freedom and social justice, who found *Sula* both astonishing and revealing, to announce that the "real, fundamental human difference is not between black and white but between men and women."⁷³ Morrison, who has seen it all, mourns the collapse of many historically black institutions. "I happen not to think it's either/or: you could have black schools and integration at the same time. It should be about increased freedom, not identifying the one road."⁷⁴ And if her fiction still grows from small-town passions, social classes, generations, or women and men, it is because she is determined to tell us why all ideas of paradise, our nations, idylls, havens, should be built on separation and rejection. She has no answers, she says, "just maps and questions—an awareness of the journey and the loss."⁷⁵ An abiding preoccupation has been with restoring intimacy across social chasms. Through its central tale of two girls pulled apart and forced to hate one another, not only *Love* but also the previous novels hint at such rifts between groups of people and their bodies.

One can see the point, then, of dropping talk of having a body and substituting talk of being one. If my body is something I use or possess, then it might be thought that I would need another body inside this one to do the possessing, and so on *ad infinitum*. For Morrison, the body which lays her people open to exploitation is also the ground of all possible communication. It was Marx who ticked off Hegel for equating objectification with alienation.⁷⁶ Lacan, on the other hand, recalls us to the "inruption" of the "power of blackness" into our signifying systems, which is a so much crasser affair than language itself.⁷⁷ But because it can be signified, seen head-on, it is also a sort of nothing, detectable only through its effects, constructed backward after the event, say, slavery. We know it only from the way it acts as a drag on discourse, as astronomers may identify a heavenly body only because of its warping effect on the space around it. For the African-American body and/or persona to take on tangible embodiment, to crop up in the shape of voices, is for us to become aware of its "extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing,

⁷³ C.L.R. James, *Memories and Commentaries* (New York: Associated Presses, 1997) 117.

⁷⁴ Jaggi, "Solving the Riddle" 6.

⁷⁵ "Solving the Riddle" 4

⁷⁶ There is an interesting, if eccentric, analysis of this trope in Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 45–48.

⁷⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire—T 16 D'un autre à l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 2006) 45.

of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity.”⁷⁸ For Morrison, the real meditation on what Gates aptly calls “figures in black,” especially “not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated” stands for the *signature* that means nothing but *itself*. Granted, but if we keep failing at representation and trying again, if the repression was lifted and the meditation burst to the surface, history too would instantly begin to fail, only better this time around. It is in this sense that the sheer (im)possibility of desire to tell of pain, dislocation, and rejection; the fact that we can only ever plug our lack of understanding with one poor fantasy object after another, is also what keeps us up and running. Or, does it? That fissure or hindrance in our being is what props up our identity as ex-colonials and/or ex-salves. For Morrison, and presumably for us, the “tacit agreement among literary scholars” that American culture and classic American literature can be considered “without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States,” is blinded by its own insight. “This agreement,” she writes:

is made about a population that preceded every American writer of renown and was, I have come to believe, one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country’s literature. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.⁷⁹

We may put this another way by saying that when it comes to realigning the angles from which we view American literature, changing the very color of its shadows, showing whites what they look like in black mirrors, one must surely as a stout Morrisonian take a certain vigilance, a persistent facing up to history; a history that not so long ago had no place for a Baldwin, or a Wright, or even a Morrison whose brooding, haunted *oeuvre* is full of dark forebodings. All that holds out against the abyss, in the end, is art—her art. But what also fends off the demons is her style—all those rich, rhapsodic metaphors by which she maintains a precarious edge over darkness. That at bottom is her quest for telling the tale. In the process of going forward, a note sounds. Then it sounds again. But everything has changed to uphold a world of sound unfamiliar and unrepeatable. Its relevance persists, even if

⁷⁸ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 23.

⁷⁹ *Playing in the Dark* 34.

we are frequently left uneasy by the way in which Morrison tells the stories and ties the conceptual knots. It is one of those *oeuvres* about which any conclusion we may reach, no matter how considered, never seems quite adequate, never quite adequate, never quite explains the hold it continues to have on us.

