The hypocrisy of completeness: Toni Morrison and the conception of the other

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There is a scene in the cultural writings of English colonialism which repeats so insistently after the early nineteenth century—and, through that repetition, so triumphantly inaugurates a literature of empire—that I am bound to repeat it once more. It is the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book.

(Bhabha, 1986: 163)

Proof like Doubt must seek the hidden wound in orders of complacency that mask opportunist codes of hollow survival.

(Harris, 1960: 7)

Many critics writing on the work of Toni Morrison continue to locate her work within a constricted frame of reference and place, that is, largely within the boundaries of the United States and specifically as speaking only to the existential realities of the African American community. These symbolic moves when initiated by radical critics are most likely informed by a desire to identify and accentuate the specificity and autonomy of black aesthetics (see, e.g., Ogunyemi, 1992). On the other hand, conservative critics deploy these territorial strategies in an effort to contain and bottle up Morrison’s muse, less its energies spill over...
the social fire-walls that divide racial groups in this society (see, e.g. Blackburn, 1973).

While there is no doubt that Morrison is deeply concerned with the contradictions of existence of black–white relations in the US, and with the elaboration of African American aesthetic form, it also true that her work registers a deep affinity with a larger global community of postcolonial writers now engaged in a project of deconstructing colonizing Western master narratives. One of the principal preoccupations of these writers is with the theme of hybridity or radical contradiction and ambivalence toward received tradition, values and identify. Morrison’s work, like that of postcolonial writers, is counter-hegemonic. Her writing is a performative act of resistance challenging the stability of the classical realism of the nineteenth-century novel, the ‘English book’, as it is reproduced and extended in the works of Euroamerican writers such as Henry James, Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway and so forth.

But Morrison’s fictive world is not a Manichean systems of signs. Performative acts of resistance are nearly always contradictory, both deconstructing and re-inscribing the hierarchical world of center and periphery. Morrison really wants to alert us to far more complex worlds than the ones accentuated by the now well-worn oppositions of the West versus the non-West. She is as concerned with the differences within as she is concerned with the differences without. In this essay we would like to pursue the topic of hybridity as it is articulated in her work. We will, where appropriate, draw attention to connections between Morrison’s work and that of African, Caribbean, and Latin American modernist and postmodernist writers, many of whom, like Wilson Harris of Guyana or Bessie Head of South Africa, see themselves as writing one book – the book of counter-memory and its reply to the ‘English Book’, the book of authorial plenitude and completeness.

Hybridity

Homi Bhabha (1986) theorizes the discourse of colonialism as a site of hybridization. In his view, hybridization offers a resistance along surfaces that are different from the Hegelian dialectic of master–slave or the phenomenological other. Here the resistance is mounted not from marginal or exclusionary positions but from within hegemonic discourses themselves. It is waged from the interstices of an unstable boundary that desires to discriminate the subject from the non-subject. Most centrally, a hybrid space unsettles the authority and power of the hegemonic language as a symbolic sign of full presence or plenitude. Bhabha argues that the repressive deployment of the sign of hegemonic language in othered spaces is vastly different from its coercive function in the European space. It is primarily this difference that provides the basis for the colonial presence being always ambivalent because it is suspended between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation in the colonial discourse as repetition and difference.
For the hegemonic sign to realize its power in the colonized space it must compromise its claim of purity through consensus, and resort to an undemocratic dictatorship in the articulation of the other while concealing its repressive actions. It is forced to include the discriminated in the very act of discrimination. The power of the sign depends not on its essential symbolism but on the spaces of difference it organizes and controls according to an arbitrary hierarchy. The effect of this paradox is to render the sign highly ambivalent and dynamic. According to Bhabha, it is 'less than one', a full presence, and 'double', as it has no choice in its exercise of power but to include that which it discriminates against. It is along the surface of this ambivalence that the hybrid situates itself to return the gaze of the colonizer and launch resistances that disrupt both colonial and national essentialisms.

Morrison and her postcolonial counterparts find the realist novel's claims to authority and completeness of knowledge, reason and ethics insufferable. It is in the text of the English Book that the non-West is marginalized, black people are denigrated, and women are consigned to traditional roles of reproduction and domesticity. In response to the received tradition of the Western novel, the hybridizing process in postcolonial fiction involves the following three dynamics. First, there is a reflexive and self-conscious attitude toward the use of language and its imbrication in narrative omniscience and surveillance. An additional concern here is the role of language in the elaboration of unequal identities. Secondly, there is a deliberate deflation of characterization and the installation of anti-heroic, flawed, or broken personas at the epicenter of the novel's discursive field (McCarthy, 1994). It is in this movement from the margins to the center that the Empire's ragged and tagged strike back. Thirdly, the subject matter explored in these novels tends to have a socio-political resonance that takes us beyond the nexus of individual adventure, fate and fortune, and toward an exploration of problems associated with the relationship of the individual to community. In each of these areas, postcolonial writers do not make a clean break with the inherited or imposed traditions that they seek to deconstruct or replace. As Octavio Paz reminds us in his essay, 'In search of the present' (1990), postcolonial literatures are engaged in a deconstructive 'reply' to Western canonical texts. But let us look at specific situatedness of the postcolonial fiction and Morrison's affiliation to it.

**Postcolonial connections**

In the introduction to *The Palace of the Peacock*, the Guyanese philosophical novelist Wilson Harris maintains that his novels depart 'in peculiar degrees' from the 'canons' of realist fiction (Harris, 1960: 7). By the classical realist novel, Harris is talking about a body of writing canonized in English Studies at the university and in the various language arts programs at the primary and secondary school levels, namely, the fiction of writers such as Jane Austen (*Emma, Mansfield Park*), Joseph Conrad (*Under Western Eyes, Nostromo, Heart of Darkness*), Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*) and so forth.
Ian Watt (1957) has argued that this body of writing emerged and reached a point of consolidation with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More recently, Edward Said (1993) has expanded the field of reference mapped by Watt. He maintains that the novel is implicated in the project of empire and the demarcation of the post-Renaissance world into the geographical and imaginary spheres of center and periphery. The structure of the novel and its contents therefore cultivate and sustain a system of values, attitudes, and reference that place the metropolitan, white European author/reader at 'the eye of power' – at the center of an ethnographic and imperial gaze that freezes subordinate groups into the role of 'other'. Said discusses the realist novel this way:

The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power. The novelistic hero and heroine exhibit the restlessness and energy characteristic of the enterprising bourgeois, and they are permitted adventures in which their experiences reveal to them the limits of what they can aspire to, where they can go, what they can become. Novels therefore end either with the death of a hero or heroine (Julien Sorel, Emma Bovary, Bazarov, Jude the Obscure) who by virtue of overflowing energy does not fit into the orderly scheme of things, or with protagonists' accession to stability (usually in the form of marriage or confirmed identity, as is the case with the novels of Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot).

(Said, 1993: 71)

For the past three decades now, postcolonial writers have been writing fiction and non-fiction that deconstructs the happy anthropological familiarities of form and theme in this inherited tradition of novel-writing in the West. Like writers such as Harris, Morrison seeks to rewrite the novel, seeks to ransack its visible structures and latent myths to activate new memories, new personas, new possibilities, and to put into play the concerns and dilemmas of those displaced to the outer limits of Eurocentric letters. This project, however, is neither straightforward nor monolithic. The position of oppositionality of the subaltern writer is fraught with nonsynchronous or contradictory interests, needs, and desires arising from dominant and subordinate communities that encroach on her passions, sensibilities and commitments. For as modernist and postmodernist African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Armah, and Yambo Ouologuem maintain, the location of the subaltern writer, the minority writer, the postcolonial writer, is always already an ambivalent one (McGee, 1991, 1993). This ambivalence is especially apparent if, in addition to belonging to a marginalized group, one writes in a dominant language that historically has served to persecute the hegemonic imperatives of a majority in an unequal society suffused by the constant play of power (Ngugi, 1986). One of the persistent difficulties faced by the subaltern cultural worker, then, is the problem of where to position oneself when the very logics of intellectual agency seem to
catapult one out of familiar spheres of group intimacy and leaves one between spheres with no place to call home. The ambivalence in such a situation is marked on the very bodies of the cultural worker who, through her or his class position and cultural and educational experience, represents a hybrid identity that is an amalgam of a multiplicity of cultural positions without fixed or settled parameters. Ambivalence here is not simply the result of unyielding antagonisms or contradictions produced from the tensions between two spheres, as, say, in the opposition of a dominant constructed world and a subordinate 'other' world. Instead, ambivalence also involves the contradictory pressures generated within the cultural workers themselves, and between those cultural workers and their solidarity life worlds. In her essay, the 'Site of Memory', Morrison, African American, middle class, woman, writer, reflects on the contradictory tensions and commitments that inform her work; for example, the tension between social-historical disclosure of atrocities visited upon marginalized black people in the US and the commitment to the imagination of the fantastical. Her commitment to the allegorical exceeds any simple role of social documentation or commentary. It is a commitment to the relative autonomy of art that conflicts with her role as a keeper of the African American historical record:

For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman . . . My job becomes how to rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.' The exercise is also critical for a person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were the topic . . . [But] fiction, by definition, is distinct from fact. Presumably it's the product of imagination – invention – and it claims the freedom to dispense with 'what really happened' . . . [So] along with personal recollection the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives. But only the matrix. What comes of all that is dictated by other concerns, not least among them the novel's own integrity.

(Morrison, 1990: 302, 305)

In this agonistic disclosure one begins to get a hint of the multifarious commitments working through Morrison's fiction. This agonistic space, transacted in a world of texts, precipitates Morrison's rich, metonymic, exploration of language. It is in language – naming and renaming – that the struggle over postcolonial minority identities and representation is engaged and fought out.

Language, identity, and the hypocrisy of completeness

[It] was . . . Adam's task of giving things their names.

(Carpentier, 1979: 33)

I envied them, silent decipherers of sacred texts.

(Walcott, 1982: 42)
Contemporary poststructural and postcolonial theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Henry Louis Gates and Homi Bhabha have deconstructed the authority of the sign by drawing its veil and revealing the hollowness of its claim to absolute presence. Morrison, in like fashion, in her novels such as The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon and Jazz, and in her non-fiction work such as the intriguing Playing in the Dark, deconstructs the trestle of signification that provides the matrix of a purported white American cultural autonomy registered in Euroamerican fiction. She challenges the language of self-referentiality that has been used to support the idea of a free-standing, self-forming white male identity and authority. As Morrison argues, the ‘new man’ that is supposed to be distinct from the European Subject is predicated not on any fundamental essence of whiteness but on the repressive relations it inscribes and imposes on the African body.

Yet Morrison, in almost all her novels, is also engaged in the transformative task of identity construction that directly parallels and responds to the identity projects of the white writers she criticizes. This process of identity construction emphasizes nuance, contradiction and variability within the subaltern black community. This hybridity is evident, for example in the novel Sula, where the two main protagonists, Nell and Sula, are what Phillip Richards [in this issue] calls a ‘folk double’. They are illustrative of a certain frustrated bourgeois wish-fulfillment that exists within the black community residing in the ‘Bottom’ of Medallion City in Ohio – the location of this spell-binding novel. That is to say, for example, that Nell’s moral and social conventionality (as indicated, for instance, in her marriage to Jude Green), is ultimately a desire for a middle-class life – a middle-class life that is frustrated by an interventionist racial order that constrains the material and symbolic movement of black people. Conversely, Sula’s sexual license and seeming amorality represents a compensatory desire for the radical alterity of the folk – a wish-fulfilling desire for a line of escape from the social density of external, self-imposing and ruling constraints of a racial order that represses the active material and spiritual fantasies of black people. In this staging of the opposition of self and other – racial affiliation divided within itself – one is reminded of Stuart Hall’s contention that ‘identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself’ (Hall, 1988: 27). In this sense, Morrison’s work can be read as proffering the very constructedness of the subaltern identity of African American people. This identity is always a hybrid identity. Nell and Sula of Sula, along with Milkman and Guitar of Song of Solomon, and Jadine and Son of Tar Baby can be read as a series of tropes that Morrison organizes in her strategy of problematizing the Manichean oppositions of mind/body, private/public, Mother/Sensual Other, order/chaos, and upper/lower class. Sula, then, is a near-philosophical elegy to the loss of an essential African American identity – Morrison’s rigorous encoding of the post-civil rights black
community, now splintered into the nonsynchronous subcultures of the 'hood' versus the 'burbs'.

Conclusion

Ultimately then, Morrison's writing, like that of postcolonial writers such as Wilson Harris, Wole Soyinka, Jamaica Kincaid and Bessie Head, is a writing situated in the crucible of cultural modernization in the West. As such, it seeks to put into the light of day the play of tensions and contradictions of the worlding of the other – half-made, flawed, subaltern subjectivities in a process of becoming. Morrison's characters and their subject matter are the products of a decentered world in which the hegemonic sign of the English book has been deeply invaded. As Homi Bhabha might say: 'not yet one, but double'. The circuit of cultural reproduction or cultural imagination for Toni Morrison, as it is for Homi Bhabha, as it is for Wilson Harris, as it is for Bessie Head, is an infinite rehearsal ... mimicry leads to parody ... and parody to satire. Resistance is always already implicated in the hypocrisy of full presence ... The process of cultural reproduction is never complete. And the circle is broken. . . .

Notes

1 See Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the 'other' in her essay, 'Can the subaltern speak?' In this essay, Spivak offers a detailed examination of the conflictual self-other economy. Specifically, she presents a searing critique of Western processes of self-production which complicate the space in which the subaltern can speak. Spivak makes a general claim that colonialism is to be understood as a process of 'epistemic violence' which is itself defined as a 'remotely orchestrated, far-flung and heterogenous project to constitute the colonial subject as "other"' (Spivak, 1988: 281-2). Within a larger investigation of the construction of an other that consolidates the self, Spivak begins to examine the construction of an other that oppositionally consolidates the self. For example, she notes that the construction of the Sati (widow burning) as victim oppositionally consolidates the self of the West as a savior. Spivak's pithy 'counter-sentence', 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1988: 297) serves to mimic and parody this construction of the self through its opposition to the other. In a similar manner, Abdul JanMohamed has formally and ideologically examined colonial power relations in terms of the 'Manichean opposition' between the 'putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native' (Jan-Mohamed, 1986: 82). He further characterizes this 'Manichean allegory' as 'a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and other, subject and object' (Jan-Mohamed, 1986: 82). Both Spivak and Jan-Mohamed suggest that the self constructs itself through the fear or derision of the other along an ideological order of differentiation and hierarchicalization. The English book therefore constructs the colonized as a 'population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origins, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (Bhabha, 1990: 75).
2 See Gilroy’s article, ‘It’s a family affair’, in which he discusses the ambivalent relationship of writers such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes to the Harlem Renaissance and the contradictory reception of these leaders of this literary and artistic movement within the black community. For instance, Gilroy makes the point that much of the literature on the Harlem Renaissance suppresses the fact that both of these writers were gay (Gilroy, 1992: 303–16).

References

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