

# Maggie and Meaning in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

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In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Toni Morrison confronts both reader subjectivity and opening her texts to that subjectivity. She explains that her "language has to be quiet; it has to engage your participation...[it] has to have holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it." Morrison's short story "Recitatif" is remarkable for the deliberate gaps created by an absence of narrative resolution and the intentional holes Morrison leaves in her characterization of the protagonists Twyla and Roberta; although Morrison introduces the two girls--both left at an orphanage by their absentee mothers--with the suggestion that one is black and one is white, she never identifies which is which. Instead, Morrison engages reader participation and subjectivity in asking how we might locate characters' identity in a story in which the coded language of racial difference has been erased. Morrison similarly demonstrates through the racially ambiguous character Maggie, that our fabricated notions of race exist only as categories of difference rather than as positive entities. In these ways, "Recitatif" asks how its characters and readers alike might negotiate questions of identity, history and trauma in the absence of false social binaries.

Much in "Recitatif" resists deterministic reading. This foregrounding of reader subjectivity is perhaps most immediately apparent in Morrison's refusal to re-

veal the race of the story's narrator Twyla or her counterpart Roberta. In her essay "The Color Fetish," Morrison identifies "Recitatif" as her first attempt at "this technique of racial erasure:" rather than relying on the coded colorism that exists in American literature as "the ultimate narrative shortcut," Morrison describes her choice to withhold racialized physical descriptions as an effort to "annihilate and discredit the routine, easy, available color fetish." In place of rote references to complexion, Morrison employs a meticulously ambivalent system of class and social signifiers that, depending on reader subjectivity, can be read as indicating the protagonists' race, but never definitively. True to Morrison's sociological commentary, the story's existing identifiers typically appear as "symmetrically functioning codes...deconstruct[ing] the black / white binary to reveal the limitations of America's rigid racial discourse" (Benjamin 89). In short, efforts to parse the racial identities of Twyla, Roberta or later Maggie "fall into the very conventional clichés of reading that the story has been so carefully crafted to challenge" (Tally 104). Morrison goes on to explain that insofar as the technique of racial erasure exists in her novels, she "theatricalize[s] the point by not only refusing to rest on racial signs but also alerting the reader to [her] strategy" (Morrison, "Color Fetish"). In "Recitatif," Morrison drama-

tizes the slippage of racial coding--and the foregrounding of reader subjectivity--via Twyla and Roberta's respective "reading" of Maggie.

Morrison demonstrates the limitations of relying on what she terms the "discredited difference" of race and disability through Twyla and Roberta's competing, racialized readings of Maggie (Morrison, "American Africanism" 1674). Significantly, Twyla describes Maggie as "old and sandy-colored" which is the only racialized physical description of any character in the story (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2155). However, it is also a description marked by ambiguity: Maggie could potentially identify as black, white or of mixed heritage. Despite its indeterminacy, the independent nature of the descriptor "sandy-colored" also differentiates Maggie from Twyla and Roberta "who have racial identity only through difference from one another," thus affirming Maggie as a positive entity existing in the space between binaries (Ioanes 118). Nevertheless, Twyla's most comprehensive description of Maggie is also markedly insubstantial: she is the orphanage's "kitchen woman with legs like parentheses," a characterization that suggests Maggie's initially "parenthetical" role in Twyla and Roberta's story (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2154). As a figure of marginalization, Maggie is both represented and obscured by the metonym of her disability: as Twyla explains, "I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2155). Maggie's position as an object of Twyla's memory reduces her to that which Twyla (and later Roberta) subjectively projects onto her--specifically, Maggie's "rocking" which Twyla later admits to associating with her own absent, dancing mother (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2164). This acknowledged process of projection is crucial to interpreting Roberta and Twyla's

racialized readings of Maggie amidst the school bussing debate.

In reuniting as adults on opposite sides of the school desegregation debate, Twyla and Roberta's competing, racialized readings of Maggie--a figure from their now-repressed childhood at the orphanage--overshadow the women's understanding of their shared trauma and their present disagreement over their children's future. When Roberta believes Twyla has "call[ed her] a bigot," Roberta shifts this charge back to Twyla by accusing Twyla of being "the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2163). This racialized description of Maggie is conspicuously contextualized as helping Roberta deflect Twyla's accusation of racism--an accusation that Roberta infers but which Twyla never makes explicit. Similarly, Twyla reflexively overlooks Roberta's accusation of violence, but is "puzzled by [Roberta] telling [her] Maggie was black," concluding she "actually couldn't be certain" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2164). In both instances, the protagonists' racialized reading of Maggie subsumes more immediate questions of violence, guilt, repression and reconciliation. Not only does Twyla and Roberta's "puzzlement over Maggie's race mirror the reader's own possible insistence on identifying the race of the protagonists," it dramatizes the "aggravat[ing]...tremor that breaks into discourse on race" (Morris 173; Morrison, "American Africanism" 1676). The fact that the women's highly personalized fight manifests in the context of a picket line and "the contest of signs...works as a self-referential moment, pointing us to the fact that the whole story is about reading signifiers" (Morgenstern 819). That the question of Maggie's race supersedes the question of Maggie's trauma illustrates how the grammar of racial difference can obscure discussions of the underlying realities of subordination and violence. Twyla's ten-

tative conclusion via negation--that Maggie "wasn't pitch black...or [she] would have remembered"--similarly affirms that such racial dichotomies "mean only in relationship to one another, not as independent positive entities" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2164; Morgenstern 819). Twyla and Roberta's eventual acceptance of Maggie's racial ambiguity represents a newly-realized commitment to "recover[ing Maggie] from the recesses of cultural memory, thus exposing the flawed ideological basis of that cultural memory"--specifically the definition of identity via racial difference (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2165; Stanley 74). In a story in which the un-fixedness of racial binaries "invite competing readings of identity markers," Morrison anticipates reader responses to "Recitatif" that prioritize determining the racial identities of its characters. Similarly, Twyla and Roberta's oppositional "reading" of Maggie's race dramatizes Morrison's strategy of highlighting reader subjectivity. However, Maggie's association with ambiguity and trauma also places her at the unresolvable center of "Recitatif's" narrative.

In addition to exposing the limitations of reifying "discredited difference," Maggie embodies the narrative inconclusiveness that punctuates "Recitatif." In this respect, Morrison forces the reader to confront the initial assumption that Maggie is "parenthetical" at all. Although she initially constitutes "a spectral presence in Twyla's narration," Maggie's literal and figurative silence also demands critical interpretation from Twyla as she recalls that "[t]he kids said [Maggie] had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute" (Morris 171; Morrison, "Recitatif" 2154). Indeed, if Maggie's limited characterization seems at first glance to indicate her objectification, Morrison continually reaffirms the need of her characters "to fill in the gaps of [Maggie's] minimally represented self" (Sklar 151). To this end, Twyla as an adult

narrator confronts the unsympathetic conclusions of her former self--that Maggie's muteness also implied deafness--stating, "I think we were wrong. I think [Maggie] could hear and didn't let on. And it shames me even now to think there was somebody in there after all who heard us call her those names and couldn't tell on us" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2155). In remembering her and Roberta calling Maggie "dummy," Twyla "instinctively recognizes the power of language to legitimate value for one group and to impose the role of social and corporeal inferiority on another" (Stanley 78). Such reflection becomes increasingly central to "Recitatif" as the narrative and symbolic significance of Maggie becomes more and more apparent in each of Twyla and Roberta's encounters where they continually "restag[e] the repressed ideological and psychological interactions that occurred in the orchard" (Stanley 80).

Although Twyla is initially elliptical in referring to the trauma on "the day...Maggie fell down," the subsequent investigation into Twyla and Roberta's repression--"the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting"--emerges as the story's central narrative drive (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2155; Morrison, "Carve Out"). Through this process, Maggie comes into view not merely as a figure of marginalization or a site for projection, but as a "parenthetical element, a person really, who challenges the supposedly superfluous quality of the parenthesis itself" (Benjamin 91). The consolidating, concluding question "What the hell happened to Maggie?" represents not only "the unresolvable narrative gap at the heart of the story," but also a means of recovering personal memory and identity for the story's protagonists (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2164; Ioanes 118).

The interrogative nature of "What the hell happened to Maggie?" provides a framework through which Twyla and Ro-

berta learn to locate their past and present selves via a shared dialogue. In her speech “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison describes the act of questioning as “an egalitarianism that places us all (reader, the novel’s population, the narrator’s voice) on the same footing,” and it is the question of Maggie’s trauma that puts Twyla, Roberta and the reader all on the same footing in considering a common past—even despite the distancing effects of race and diegesis. Even during their fight amidst the bus-sing debate, Twyla concedes that “my sign didn’t make sense without Roberta’s,” thus confirming their mutual reliance to make meaning of their world (Morrison, “Recitatif” 2163). Despite the contentiousness of Twyla and Roberta’s adult encounters, “it is only through the dialogic, the interaction, the taking of the time to address one another that the story of the exchange...represents our hope of discovering some space of possibility, of freedom” (Busia 167). After their argument at the picket line, Twyla and Roberta reconvene to reflect on their shared experience at the orphanage:

We were kids, Roberta.

Yeah. Yeah. I know, just kids.

Eight.

Eight.

And lonely.

Scared too. (Morrison, “Recitatif” 2165)

By locating the emotional reality of their past and current selves, Twyla and Roberta’s sustained dialogue illustrates the importance of investigating communal trauma even if the specific question, “What the hell happened to Maggie?” remains unanswered. Indeed, “Recitatif” “emphasizes one of Morrison’s primary themes, the assertion that shared emotional experiences, although often profoundly distorted by perceptions of difference, are the most accurate and solid foundation available for authen-

tic human connection” (Gillespie 162). As a figure that exists in the space between distorting binaries, “Maggie embodies a shared narrative that provides common ground for the protagonists to rewrite, even if they are unable to resolve their conflicting versions of history” (Benjamin 91).

In a story in which the language of racial difference has been erased, racially ambiguous Maggie embodies the elusive truth of a traumatic communal history. Morrison’s adult protagonists initially suffer under the distancing influence of a reductive racial dichotomy by refusing to acknowledge their childhood connection and trauma. By learning to empathetically investigate Maggie’s silence and trauma—a violent event that links all three characters—rather than just her race, Twyla and Roberta eventually emerge as individuals defined by their shared experiences rather than their racial differences. Morrison makes clear that these are lessons not only for her characters, but also her readers; by withholding the grammar of racial contrast from her characterizations, Morrison exposes the more pressing realities of violence and social subordination. Similarly, the story’s central yet irresolvable question, “What the hell happened to Maggie?” inspires Twyla and Roberta to overcome their repression through dialogue, thus providing an epistemic framework for a fractured society. In having her protagonists learn to negotiate identity through empathetic exchange rather than categories of difference, Morrison demonstrates the potential of recognizing our common vulnerability as a means of seeing past the distorting influence of false binaries.

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