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Author:	Iuliu RAȚIU

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TONI MORRISSON AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Iuliu RAȚIU¹

ABSTRACT:

THE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO INTEROGATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH TONI MORRISSON IS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL. FOR THIS, I WILL CLOSELY READ SOME OF MORRISSON'S ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS AND TRY TO DISCERN THE AUTHOR'S THEORETICAL MOVES THAT SITUATE HER AS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL. USING A WORKING DEFINITION OF A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AS THAT OF AN ARTIST CAPABLE TO BRING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE, I WILL ANALYZE MORRISSON'S WORK LOOKING FOR ELEMENTS WHICH CHANGE OUR ASSUMPTIONS REGARDING THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF LITERATURE.

KEY WORDS: TONI MORRISSON, PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL, AMERICAN LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is to interrogate the extent to which Toni Morrison is a public intellectual. For this, I will closely read some of Morrison's essays and interviews and try to discern the author's theoretical moves that situate her as a public intellectual. Using a working definition of a public intellectual as that of an artist capable to bring about social change, I will analyze Morrison's work looking for elements which change our assumptions regarding the social function of literature. Methodologically, I will draw on the similarities between Morrison's theoretical work and Edward Said's understanding of the function of a humanist intellectual by showing that Morrison's strategic moves in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [1] are not at all different from Said's theoretical project laid out in his fundamental work *Orientalism, Western Conceptions of the Orient* [2], in that they both argue that the Western and, respectively, American canon would not be possible without the existence of the Other. As such, I am interested in determining how Morrison's ideas about whiteness and literary imagination mirror her own project of what she calls "village literature" and how this project qualifies her as a public intellectual.

The focus of the essay will be to look for possible ways in which Morrison's "village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe" comes as a necessary addition to our traditional understanding of the functions of the novel. If classic novels were deeply conditioned by the middle class's needs to represent itself, then village literature, Morrison argues by referring to her own novels, is intended to be a "mode to do what the music did for the blacks, what we used to be able to do [...] in that civilization that existed underneath the

¹ Assistant Professor, PhD, Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, iuliu.ratiu@econ.ubbcluj.ro.

white civilization [3].” Ultimately, I will use Morrison’s theoretical work to prove that she is a public intellectual.

FROM SAID TO MORISSON

In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” a lecture she gave at the University of Michigan in 1988, Morrison lays down the groundbreaking theory that argues for a canonical re-routing by addressing the “the ways in which the presence of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture both resuscitate the study of literature in the United States and raise that study’s standards [4].” While she takes on the ‘flexibility’ and the ‘miscegenation’ of the canon, two possible strains of a re-routing proposed by other theorists, Morrison suggests that these two features are already ingrained within the canon and that the critic’s task would be to challenge the master narrative of the Eurocentric stronghold, that actually reads as white and male. She then provides three possible focuses of literary analysis from which American literature would benefit without a doubt. This pragmatic and paradigmatic move represents in fact a much needed and long awaited ‘call to arms’ and signifies more than anything, in an academic setting, the position that validates one as a public intellectual.

Following in the steps of Edward Said, whose fundamental work *Orientalism* opened up the literary discourse to serious challenges and innovations, Morrison, who mentions Said’s work in the field of postcolonial studies, performs not only the ‘call to arms,’ but also leads the battle, situation that again places her in the category of public intellectuals. By acknowledging right away that “canon building is Empire building,” she goes on to analyze the Afro-American presence by referring extensively to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and to her own novels. This move of being deconstructionist without necessarily employing a *per se* deconstructionist vocabulary makes Morrison representative for a public intellectual whose task is in fact to make available to larger audiences important literary theories. Indeed, this translation of theory into practice recommends her even more for this role: “the examination and re-interpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth-century works, for the “unspeakable things unspoken” for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure - the meaning of so much of American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine. A third is the examination of contemporary and/or non-canonical literature for this presence, regardless of its category as mainstream, minority, or what you will. I am always amazed by the resonances, the structural gearshifts, and the uses to which Afro-American narrative, persona are put in contemporary ‘white’ literature. And in Afro-American literature itself the question of difference, of essence, is critical [3].”

The search, then, for the “unspeakable things unspoken,” for the “ghost in the machine,” or for the “shadow of the presence,” becomes a real critical endeavor in line with the theoretical practice that the deconstructionists set out to perform. If we assign our full attention to language and to its power to inscribe, and therefore control the other, prevalent to the canonical literature of the nineteenth century, Morrison argues in poststructuralist fashion, we might be able to understand that “those texts have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other powers, deeper and other significances.” In other words, the trauma of a racist ideology, that erased and silenced an entire segment of a population in whose real absence white America couldn’t have called itself America, is a “severe fragmentation of the self.”

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison continues this argument. Her deconstructive approach is nowhere better expressed than in this monograph that is arguably one of the best transplants of French theory on the soil of American literature. Like Said brilliantly proved that Europeans invented the other (the Orientals) not as much in order to encode their differences, but to police

and domesticate their own class, sexual and racial representations, Morrison locates that move in the coded literary language of young America: “Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so to did literature, whose founding characteristics extended into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence - one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness [1].”

Thus, as the historical narrative suggests, in their flight from the Old World to the New World, the Americans did not only bring their European representation of the other with them, they also brought over and enslaved the real other whom they encoded in their language by erasing her history, silencing her voice, and suppressing all her resistance. As Morrison suggests critics have to really try hard not to see the relevance that the recovery of that voice, of that history, and of that resistance would bring to a better study of the American canon. At the same time, the same critics have to try even harder not to see the insidiousness of the effort writers put in inscribing the Africanist presence. The critic suggests that the white man’s freedom is contingent upon the black man’s enslavement and that once persecuted individuals can only escape persecution by exploiting others. This contradictory view of a young nation that predicated its freedom on the non-freedom of an entire disenfranchised section of its population, Morrison contends, is clearly inscribed in the literature of that nation. The connection Morrison makes between the early and later development of American literature that both undertake to deny one binary of the dramatic polarization that literary imagination encoded in language needs to come to a stop. This is Morrison’s way of performing her activism in the post-Civil Rights era and of continuing the battle that other public intellectuals fought for political, social, and cultural emancipation.

VILLAGE LITERATURE

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation [4],” Morrison introduces the concept of “village literature,” a term that represents the fundamental ingredient of her poetics when the writer is programmatically thinking of herself as a public intellectual. The opening of this essay comes in stark contrast with the underlying fear of a conflict that many of the nineteenth century writers avoided in order to shape the American literary imagination that Morrison is going to analyze later in *Playing in the Dark*. When she writes that “there is a conflict between public and private life, and it’s a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem, just a conflict. Because they are two modes of life that exist to exclude and annihilate each other. It’s a conflict that should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn’t permit harmony in a life that has both aspects [4]” Morrison is in fact addressing issues relevant to her own creative process and, at the same time, I argue, she is opening up a theoretical vista that she will later attack head on. Since the writers of young America, as she details in both “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” and *Playing in the Dark*, considered that there was a conflict between their public and private lives, where they publicly, through their writings, professed freedom, while privately they enforced slavery, the only way of rationalizing that conflict seemed to be mastered through escapism within the realm of literary imagination.

This double move, of on the one hand sanctioning a literary practice that she was going to develop in the future, while on the other signifying toward her own writing that doesn’t try to avoid the conflict that Poe, Melville, Twain, Hemingway had to struggle with, becomes more stringent when we realize that public intellectuals are in a number of ways dealing with this

irreconcilable conflict between the private and the public spheres. Without addressing herself this question of a public intellectual, I believe that this is exactly what Morrison is doing when referring to the treatment that artists, like herself, get from the people for whom they speak. Since this idea is crucial to a better understanding of Morrison's term of 'village literature,' I think that a reading of the role Morrison appropriates for herself and critiques at the same time will highly benefit the argument of this essay.

When she suggests that an artist (writers included) should be one with the people from whom she speaks, Morrison is in fact advocating for artists to act as public intellectuals, "The treatment of artists by the people for whom they speak is also of some interest. That is to say, when the writer is one of them, when the voice is not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a different kind of person but an implied "we" in a narration. This is disturbing to people and critics who view the artist as the supreme individual. It is disturbing because there is a notion that's what the artist is - always in confrontation with his own society, and you can see the differences in the way in which literature is interpreted [4]." This quote is telling both for Morrison's perception of the artist and for the distinction that she is not willing to make in her writing between the private and the public. For her, an artist, therefore an intellectual, needs to be one with the people, to be one of them, and not to consider himself as a supreme individual isolated in the ivory tower.

This understanding then makes her work, contrary to what some critics might expect, highly political. Unafraid to express her activism and, in her own way, aware that she will always be considered biased, both as a black and woman writer, Morrison goes on and addresses point blank her activism, "if anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams - which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite. [...] It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time [4]."

This *ars poetica* summarizes Morrison's entire activism - her literature is "about the village or the community or about you," and above all is both political and beautiful. Her literary imagination, Morrison argues, doesn't function in a private, closed exercise that indulges in personal dreams, like the literature of the nineteenth century she will later deconstruct exactly for this reason; rather her "village literature" performs the role that music, story-telling and sermons played in her community. In this type of literature where the author is one with the people for whom she speaks can be directly read in all actuality Morrison's understanding of the mission of a public intellectual.

MORRISON AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

While in the previous sections I tried to gesture towards some instances in which Morrison develops her own theoretical framework of "village literature," I think it is high time now to sketch a provisional profile of Morrison as a public intellectual. As stated at the beginning of this article, a working definition of the term argues that a public intellectual's function is to bring about change. Since there's no news to anybody for a long time now that Morrison did bring about enough change already, the present paper is an attempt to sum up some aspects of Morrison's work that consecrate her as a public intellectual. Even though I didn't necessarily follow a chronological order in briefly presenting Morrison's take on French

theory and her theorizing about “village literature,” I tried to emphasize the ways in which theory and theory as practice inform her work and put her in a position of a public intellectual.

First, I tried to show how in her innovative theoretical writings, especially in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” and in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison engaged herself in a deconstructivist study of the American literature. While I made the point, following her specific mentioning of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, that Morrison was influenced by Said, I tried to argue for a larger influence on her approach coming from what has been generically called French theory. But Morrison is doing more than that.

Pressing on issues like difference, omission, restriction to refer to the ways in which American writers of the nineteenth century encoded the African-American experience, something that she calls the “Africanist presence,” the “unspeakable unspoken,” the “shadow of presence,” Morrison literally calls theorists to arms in unveiling an experience that once restored would raise the standards of the American literature at large. She also makes use of terms like erasure, silencing, suppression, or resistance to talk about specific methodologies through which the study of literature can greatly be enriched.

Moreover, she employs this heavy theoretical language to deconstruct the very language that erased the Africanist experience and silenced African Americans’ history. But, most importantly, she does this in a matter-of-fact way, for lack of a better word, in the sense that she puts to work these discursive and power strategies in a manner that lacks the arid and pretentious tone of French theory. She even suggests possible routes that this practical theoretical framework can be directed towards, giving fine analyses of canonical works as well as of her own.

This way she does what any public intellectual is meant to do. Besides raising a theory and showing how it works with exemplifications from classic writers and from her own work, Morrison performs more than a call to arms. She also leads by example. Her own work, Morrison argues legitimizes her theories. As she puts it in an interview with Claudia Tate published in 1984 in a collection entitled “Black Women Writers at Work [5],” “I wrote *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were books I had wanted to read. No one had written them yet, so I wrote them [5].” This bold statement signifies the intellectual work that Morrison set out to do. In a sense she refers to her position as a reader, implying that she wanted to have read a book that hadn’t been written before. By extrapolation, this readerly outlook exemplifies the theoretical drive that made her suggest critics should take into account the Africanist presence hidden (erased, silenced, and omitted) in the canonical works of American literature. On the other hand, she embarked in a different, yet complementary project of literally writing that same presence she brilliantly proved had been overlooked.

This brings me to the second part of my argument. In setting out to write literature about and for her village people, for her tribe, Morrison is changing and, at the same time, giving a new perspective to American letters. By pointing out that every writer has to confront the conflict between the private and public life and by underlining the distinction that writers in the past avoided that conflict in an effort to permit harmony to flourish, Morrison is in fact addressing with conviction the haphazardness that the exclusion or annihilation of one of those two modes of live would cause. Moreover, she clearly suggests that because Poe, Twain, Melville, or Hemingway coded the conflict they almost unconsciously erased the Africanist experience which in her understanding is a prime prerequisite of their work.

In other words, by not avoiding that conflict between the private and the public life arguably Morrison succeeds in her village literature to confront society and to write about a community in which both reader and narrator construct the book together based on a shared

experience. For her, then, writing is not a private or closed exercise of the imagination. She doesn't close herself in an ivory tower to indulge in personal dreams; rather, she is performing for the African American community what old people, musicians, and preachers used to do in order to give their members a sense of their life and history, of a whole precious experience they have long been denied from having. In fact, she was genuinely looking, as any public intellectual would do, for ways of empowering her people and she found this in fiction writing. For her, then, writing and especially writing village literature, novels for and about the community, becomes a way of giving authority, sovereignty, and responsibility to African Americans.

This move, more than anything, is a political move which is nowhere better expressed than in "Home [6]," an essay in which the author is operating with a distinction that I believe emphasizes her entire vocation. The distinction she makes between the racial house and home directly cuts through both her fiction writing and theoretical strategies. Whereas, she seems to imply, the canonical literature did its best in creating a racial house, a house that she compares with the house of the master, her own fiction and theory position themselves in what she calls home, "I prefer to think of a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father's house of many rooms. I am thinking of it as home. "Home" seems a suitable term because, first, it lets me make a radical distinction between the metaphor of house and the metaphor of home and helps me clarify my thought on racial construction. Second, the term domesticates the racial project. [...] Third, because eliminating the potency of racist constructs is the work I can do [6]."

This radical shift from house to home, from constructing the racist language to deconstructing it represents Morrison's fundamental literary and intellectual project. Playing along with her theoretical delineations, I argue that the home Morrison writes and writes about is a home in which the Africanist presence is already present, but not in the sense in which it was there from the beginning, erased, silenced, and mutilated, but, rather, in a political sense in which, instead of avoiding the conflict between private and public life, a true student of literature should be trying to assess and make sense of the conflict in all its consequences.

In the same essay, however, Morrison pushes her line of thought even further. She calls for the development of a "nonmessianic language to refigure the raced community to decipher the deracing of the world. It is more urgent than ever to develop an epistemology that is neither intellectual slumming nor self-serving reification [6]." This idea of reconfiguration, then, comes in the tradition of the public intellectual whose task is to bring about change, to reconfigure the world, and eventually to save, literally and figuratively, the lives facing extinction. Furthermore, by changing house into home, by writing the Africanist presence as opposed to do literary archeology in order to decode it, and, ultimately, by refiguring the raced community into a deracing world, Morrison cautions against a racialist belief that considered from the beginning black people nothing more than wasted and wasting property. What she is advocating here goes beyond her theoretical work about the Africanist presence and well beyond her village literature. The world-as-home she imagines is in fact the life-work that renowned philosophers have been advocating for a long time, in which the clearing of intellectual and moral space, not different from the work that Morrison is doing, could eventually create a home "where racial constructs are being forced to reveal their struts and bolts, their technology and their carapace, so that political action, legal and social thought, and cultural production can be generated *sans* racist cant, explicit or in disguised [6]."

CONCLUSION

The political action alluded to in Morrison's essay qualifies her without a doubt for the position this paper tried to assign to her. But as I hope I was able to show at least in well seop part, Morrison is a public intellectual of the finest and most urgent calling. The work she arduously dedicated her life to seems to be the culmination of a long struggle that African Americans had to fight for a long time. Using Ralph Ellison's metaphor of the invisible man [7], I think that Morrison's work is a direct result of trying and succeeding to make the invisible visible. On the one hand, in her theoretical work she advocated for the visibility of the Africanist presence and on the other hand, in her fiction, she moved to center stage what she suggestively called village literature and, more often, than not made the invisible woman visible. This effort, I argue, legitimizes her position of a public intellectual in more than one respect.

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