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The Ancestor as Subtext

Sabine Broeck

- 1 This text has grown out of my love of and respect for Toni Morrison's work. It is supposed to be—however much it might take the shape of a critical reading—very much my homage to the work of a writer who has made some of the most articulate and publicly visible moves to satisfy a communal desire for the African-American memory, and to create, if sites of stone and marble have been lacking, fictional spaces as "monuments" to the black diaspora in the New World. It is also a piece of work that vastly benefited from Professor Michel Fabre's insightful remarks and writings on the subject.
- 2 The whole essay represents a moment in my ongoing argument with Morrison's meditation on the racialization of American literature, or, in other words, on the national canon's divisive memory, in her essay *Playing in the Dark* (New York, Vintage Books, 1993). The essay consists of three lectures Morrison gave in 1990 for the prestigious William E. Massey Lectures at Harvard University. This annual lecture series regularly draws large audiences, staging eminent intellectuals to evaluate the History of American Civilization, as the lecture title indicates. By appearing in this context, Morrison speaks not only to, for and within a community of specialized African-Americanists, but to a larger non-homogeneous community interested in her aesthetic and moral judgement on the American literary tradition. The same holds true, of course, of the circulation of the print version of *Playing in the Dark* which has become one of the most influential essays in cultural and literary American Studies in the last decade. A reading of *Playing in the Dark*, accordingly, has to take into account its specific terms of address.
- 3 I will first recapitulate the essay's main arguments, and then explore the curious tension it contains with respect to its *ownmemory*, to its own major subtext, namely Ralph Ellison's essays collected in the volumes entitled *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. Morrison is on record as having called Ellison, on the occasion of his funeral service in April 1994, a "true humanitarian who loved and worked and lived in the craft of the art of fiction, and the world of literature". Her presence at the service, as well as her words, bespeak intergenerational respect and admiration, even though they do not mark any acknowledgement of a possible particular indebtedness on her part. Reading *Playing in the*

Dark however, one may be struck not only by deep resonances of Ellison's work on the "lower frequencies" as it were, but as well by a strategy of what I would like to call *enphrasement*: a re-membering of his articulations in and by Morrison's own utterance.

- 4 Toni Morrison has been one of the most articulate proponents of the recent surge of an African American culture of memory. She has argued forcefully and enacted in her fiction the cathartic, ethical and political necessity to grasp the "inside"—as she would call it—of the Middle Passage and slavery. *Beloved*, her Nobel prize winning novel, figures as what is called elsewhere an act of "as-if-testimony", with its author taking the position of an imaginary but intimate witness. This testimony records slavery's destruction of individuals and of the entire cultural, political and social fabric of American society, but also a history of enduring African American creativity, community lore, traditions and resistance. To say it in Morrison's own terms, she has insisted on a private and public "response-ability" to the American past and present.
- 5 Her project in *Playing in the Dark* is concerned with the reconstruction of the canon, that is of *collective literary memory*. In this case, she takes on white memory, or better, white amnesia. "Going inside" the experience of slavery, Morrison delivered a catharsis, a compensation to the African-American community. Instead of thus turning inward, as she described her *Beloved* project, in her essay, she now turns outward and dissects the mechanics and procedures of white forgetting. This double task—to go inward and to turn outward as a guardian of memory—has become the hallmark of Morrison's aesthetics of African American memory.
- 6 Fundamental to this aesthetics of memory has been her insistence on the crucial role of material, and spiritual ancestry. She has claimed to be the heir to a precarious but indomitable African American community of ancestors whose voices she reconstructs and invests with *her own* urgency. Simultaneously, she answers to and continues the specifically female and maternal inheritance in her own "real" family. Imbued with those ancestors' memories, Morrison has already made herself a generative ancestor for the following generations. She has assumed the persona of a *mega-consciousness*, of someone who publicly remembers, conjectures, judges, praises and condemns. Her work has acquired a political trajectory, as well as high media visibility.
- 7 Unlike such contemporaries as Caryl Phillips, Gloria Naylor, Derek Walcott, Michelle Cliff, or Charles Johnson, who have also dedicated their work to the de- and reconstruction of the American, or Western memory of modernity, Morrison has ventured outside the boundaries of the literary into the political realm. This results not only from the enormous success of her Nobel prize winning novel but also from the rather carefully staged creation of an *authoritative persona*, the projection of a voice styled to be highly individualized and personal at the same time as it underwrites her intervention as a *public intellectual*.
- 8 Her rhetoric in *Playing in the Dark* almost aggressively undergirds this intervention as a first person inquiry, a commandeering and pioneering project:
- 9 I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest (*Playing in the Dark*, 3).
- 10 By way of engaging almost casually—without giving any particular reason for her selection—a number of prominent white writers and critics ranging from Marie Cardinal, through Antonia Byatt, Robert Penn Warren, William Carlos Williams to Dominick La

Capra, Toni Morrison suggests the kind of nonchalant familiarity with various and rather diverse white discourses which may only be had from a position of unquestionable authority. This position established, she proceeds to re-read the work of a select canon of white American authors: Poe, Twain, James, Hemingway, and Cather, for gendered measure, to deconstruct their white amnesia, the ways in which they have responded or failed to respond to the challenge of an Africanist presence in American history and culture.

- 11 I would like to outline very roughly her approach at this point. Morrison introduces her project with the following question:

These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (*Ibid.*, 5)

- 12 Accordingly, Africanism—Morrison's term for the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (*Ibid.*, 6)—functions in the Eurocentric tradition (as) both "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations of ethics and accountability" (*Ibid.*, 7). This rhetorical construction, she argues, provides a way of "contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (*Id.*). It follows from this argument that literary and cultural critics should examine the intricate construction of whiteness, as a reverse gesture, based as it has been on the however much suppressed, that is to say *absent*, presence or on what Morrison calls the "ornamental vacuum" of conscious and knowledgeable considerations of Africanism. "What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as 'American'" (*Ibid.*, 9)? With her by now notorious stipulation that the critical perspective on racialization should shift from the "serving" to the "served" she proposes "to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored or altered those notions" (*Ibid.*, 11). Thus, criticism should make visible the manifold ways "that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (*Ibid.*, 17). The cultural obsession with the construction of the American as a new white man has required *difference*, a difference that became established not only vis-à-vis the old European feudal traditions, but on the American stage itself.
- 13 A close reading of this brilliant and overdue project, however, has produced one nagging question. Is Toni Morrison's intervention as original as it obviously claims to be? Although it might not be noticeable to the larger audience that she has courted and won, those familiar with the African American literary tradition cannot help but hear the echoes of a powerful precursor, Ralph Ellison. Let's now take a look at Ellison's essays, and trace how Morrison hides and embodies Ellison's influence in one and the same gesture.
- 14 Ralph Ellison becomes the very *absent presence*, or *present absence* that *Playing in the Dark* so poignantly establishes as its organizing trope. In a particularly self-styled way, Morrison thus conjures up a tradition of signifying that relies utterly on the subtle distinctions

between who is in the know, and who is not, playing an uncanny game with her readers' awareness, their memory of African-American textuality or the lack of it. A question this trickster-like move raises—but does not answer—is one of the *ethics of debts* and who is to pay them? Should the response-ability to the textual gift of ancestral tradition lie with the author, or—what Morrison seems aggressively to assume—does this responsibility lie with the reader, whose decisive act of respect would then be to hear Ellison without Morrison's announcements, to read Ellison inside of Morrison's formulations? Does Morrison explicitly mark only her *white* textual environment in order to establish, or at least to underline her own authority? Does the act of hiding foundational memory create an authority that would be threatened by Ellison's presence made visible to all of her readership?

- 15 These passages from two of Ellison's essays are highly programmatic:

How is it then that our [...] prose—[...]—becomes suddenly dull when confronting the Negro? Obviously there is more in this than the mere verbal counterpart of lynching or segregation. Indeed, it represents a projection of processes lying at the very root of American culture and certainly at the central core of its twentieth century literary forms, a matter having less to do with the mere "reflection" of white racial theories than with processes molding the attitudes, the habits of mind, the cultural atmosphere and the artistic and intellectual traditions that condition men dedicated to democracy to practice, accept, and, most crucial of all, often blind themselves to the essentially undemocratic treatment of their fellow citizens. [...] Negroes of fiction [...] are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which [...] the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role. [...] The Negro stereotype [...] is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between [...] the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. [W]e view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds. [...] When white men drew up a plan for a democratic way of life [the Negro] was recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human "natural" resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization. [The Negro's role] is to be seen operating even when the Negro seems most patently the little man who isn't there. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (*Shadow and Act*, New York, Random House, 1952, 27-37)

[...] It was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience and consciousness. [...] Because these things are bound up with their notion of chaos it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the "criminality" implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness. ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" in *Shadow and Act*, 48)

- 16 The proximity of these two arguments is stunning.
- 17 Toni Morrison obviously takes Ralph Ellison's canon (not, incidentally, the "American Renaissance" plus "Twentieth Century Great White Male Writers") and reads it from a black feminist perspective with a late 20th century deconstructive sophistication not available to Ellison's generation. She adds Willa Cather and the problematics of white American and African-American women's relations—something Ellison, one is not surprised, ignored completely. Morrison pays particular attention to Ernest Hemingway, reading him with a keen eye to the usefulness of Africanism for both his racism and for

his misogynist troping of the white female—a point, for example, that altogether "eluded" Ellison.

- 18 This raises the issue of *gendered authority over memory*. The question of memory, then, is more intricate and *charged* than Morrison's repeated "politically correct" interview answers will let on: who will have a say in what the community remembers, and who will be acknowledged as an ancestor and by whom? Seen from this vantage point, the question of political and aesthetic debt gains new poignancy: Morrison relies on Ellison, sounds him to the inside community and thus keeps his brilliantly useful insights in memory. At the same time, she suppresses the paternal name of this memory that would make his influence visible and thus meaningful to everybody outside the community. It would also, however, grant Ellison exactly the foundational status her project of (black female) authority may not concede, since her text needs to stage itself as *originary*, precisely in order to be heard, and not be submerged under lines of male ancestry.
- 19 Morrison has already written back to, or *against* Ellison, in no uncertain terms in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel is centered on a reconfiguration of the Trueblood incest episode in *Invisible Man* which avantgarde African-American theorists like Houston Baker read emphatically as a generative metaphor of Black—masculine creativity. Morrison by contrast rewrites the incident as an African-American "*Ur-Scene*" of paternal rape. Thus, having made her debut in the literary world with a debunking of African-American literature's major father figure, she proceeds to displace Ellison as an ancestor in *Playing in the Dark*.
- 20 Morrison plays out competing investments in/over memory: On one level, *Playing* becomes a site of memory as the "struggle to recall", as Walter Benjamin phrased it, bringing a painful, but necessary and wondrous gift to her readership. On a second level, in the Foucauldian sense, it is a *site of memory as production*, implying powerful strategies of selection and suppression, of both, recalling—naming, as Morrison has it in *Beloved*, and forgetting, calling somebody *out of* his name. The text thus delivers memory in terms of a very ambivalent intertextuality—something we tend to overlook if we read an essay like *Playing in the Dark* as meta-commentary without attention to its own memory, as a self-contained statement without genealogy, primary, and final. The essay then, makes us complicit in Morrison's entanglement *of* and *in* the intricacies of gift and debt.

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