

## Sympathy and Indeterminacy in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

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### I

Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" requires its readers to engage with the text by embracing its indeterminacies. The principle indeterminacy of the story involves the racial identities of the two protagonists. Twyla, the narrator, begins the story when she was eight years old and met Roberta, a girl "from a whole other race," in St. Bonaventure, a shelter for orphans and wards of the state (2253). The plot follows a series of meetings between Twyla and Roberta during their adulthood. Early in the narration, the details show that one of the two girls is black and the other is white, but the exact racial identity of each is never revealed. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison states that "Recitatif" is

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“an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (xi). In this sense, this experiment is a challenge intended for the reader because the difference in race as well in class works as the main cause for the two characters’ estrangement from each other and conflict in their later lives. Twyla and Roberta, after living in the shelter as roommates for four months, have brief encounters during the course of their adult lives. Their conflict and differences are integrated into the context of racial strife. Readers can sense the tension between the two, and follow the changes in their relationship against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement. The story shows how race affects, permeates, and marks the interracial friendship. However, readers cannot assign a definite racial identity to Twyla or Roberta. Instead, they come to question any assumptions that they may have about the racial identity of either character.

Another source of mystery is the character named Maggie, who is a kitchen worker at the shelter. As Trudier Harris points out, Twyla and Roberta are placed in a similar position to the reader of this story regarding Maggie (104). Just as readers might be troubled by the indeterminacy of the racial identity of Twyla and Roberta, Twyla and Roberta themselves become uncertain of Maggie’s race. They are more troubled, however, by their different memories of an incident involving Maggie during which both of them were present, and the conflict between Twyla and Roberta culminates with the revelation of these differences. Twyla remembers that Maggie fell down in the orchard. Roberta, however, states that she did not fall accidentally, but was pushed

down by the "gar girls," the older girls in the shelter. Moreover, Roberta later presents another version of the incident saying that Twyla also kicked Maggie, "a poor old black lady, when she was down on the ground" (2264). The continually revised account of the incident in which Maggie was attacked generates doubts about the reliability of Twyla's narration and the memories of Twyla and Roberta, turning their past into another realm of mystery. The conflict between Twyla and Roberta is channeled through their memories of Maggie, and the emotional and psychological struggle around this issue emerges as the main theme of the story.

The story begins with the challenge of the indeterminate racial identities of the central characters, and ends with the question, as phrased by Roberta, of "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (2266). The intentional removal of the positive proof for the racial identities of the characters from the text is a technique by which Morrison induces reader participation, particularly in becoming self-reflective about the social construction of racial identity. As David Goldstein-Shirley points out, in the process of selecting certain details from the descriptions of and information about Twyla's and Roberta's family background, cultural practices, socio-economic status, and positions on political issues as conclusive evidence for their racial identities, readers are pulled into self-reflection about their own preconceptions and assumptions of racial identities and into a critical examination of the socially constructed racial markers and stereotypes in the text (77). The reader's self-reflective mode of reading and its effect on her assumptions and preconceptions of racial identities parallel the

ongoing questioning and argument between Twyla and Roberta over their behavior toward Maggie. While readers are pulled into examining their sensitivity to the social construction of racial stereotypes and identities, Twyla and Roberta come to question what happened to Maggie. As Twyla and Roberta, in their encounters, come to read their experience in the shelter retrospectively and continuously revise their memories of the event, the reader is led to create different versions of the story, not only changing the racial identities of the two, but also delving further into the psychological and emotional struggles that emerge from the differences and revisions of the memories of the two. The anguished question posed by Roberta at the end of the story shows her sense of moral responsibility and her concern for the welfare of Maggie. I posit that the sense of responsibility and moral reflection implied in the final question is what Morrison tries to induce in her readers in their understanding of race matters and relationships.

The concern in the question posed by Roberta that Maggie may have undergone further suffering later on is based on her sympathetic identification with Maggie. Realizing that their aggression toward Maggie is, in fact, an expression of their fear and anger at the abandonment by their mothers, Twyla and Roberta come to a mutual understanding of their vulnerability at the shelter, and place themselves in Maggie's situation, recognizing her common vulnerability and the force of the cruelty directed toward her. As Twyla and Roberta express their concern for Maggie, the reader is also asked to raise the same concern for Twyla and Roberta, who were scared and lonely eight-year-old

girls during their stay at the shelter. The self-reflection toward moral awareness on the part of the reader also comes with the emotional movement of sympathy. The process of identification that happens in the story also happens between the reader and the characters. The vulnerability of Twyla, Roberta, and Maggie is surely due to the powerlessness or the incompetence that is socially defined along the line of race, gender, and physical or cognitive ability. The feelings of sympathy that Morrison evokes in this story become a driving force for recognizing the point of individual responsibility in the victimization of the powerless. The resolution of the story is not based on the ambiguity of the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta, but on the root of their struggle over their memories of Maggie. The question raised in the story relates to the ongoing projection of Maggie as an object of aggression and victimization. This shows that the issue of race should also be examined in the context of psychological violence along the racial divide, and this work shows how moral reflection can be induced in a manner that is free from such projection and objectification. In this sense, one cannot treat as separate matters the experiment by Morrison of obscuring the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta and the narrative drive, the psychological struggle experienced by Twyla and Roberta regarding Maggie, their mothers, and each other. In this regard, the question of how the identification process turns into one of moral questioning and how the emotional process can lead one toward moral judgment can be a matter of examination.

## II

In her 1997 essay, "Home," Morrison states that questions of "How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?" have persisted throughout her work (5). Addressing these questions, Morrison includes reader participation as a crucial element in her literary imagination. She stresses that her fiction "requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary" (9). However, as Morrison herself points out, although such an argument can be made successfully, it is difficult to imagine the ways in which the actual writing induces such movements. In her postscript to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes,

One problem was centering: the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved. (211)

As we can observe in her differentiation between the state of being emotionally "touched" and that of being "moved," Morrison

expects the movement of self-reflection and a moral question on the part of her readers: "an interrogation of themselves for the smashing." In Morrison's understanding, the self-reflective engagement is driven by emotions, and the emotional engagement brings the imperative to move or act, not being able to be in "the comfort of pitying"<sup>1)</sup> the victim. Morrison's project is to lead the reader to identify with Pecola by overcoming the emotional distance, but as she observes, it is not successful in the work. As Claudia, the narrator of the work, admits, such identification on her part comes too late. The adult Claudia in retrospect realizes that she could have been Pecola, the victim, and that her emotional survival is through her own participation in victimization of Pecola from the sense of powerlessness and self-hatred. Claudia observes that those in her neighborhood as well as she herself project the part of themselves that society defines as ugly and unworthy and "dump" their psychological and emotional waste on Pecola (205).

The experiment in "Recitatif" is another attempt by Morrison to remove the emotional distance or barrier on the part of readers and to lead them to move away from the socially constructed affective reaction regarding race. The projective

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1) Just as Morrison in the passage differentiates "pity" from the affective movement that leads to moral judgment and sense of responsibility, in discussions of emotions, the term "sympathy" rather than "pity" is used to denote that particular moral feeling and one's awareness of another person's undeserved suffering. In common usage, the terms "sympathy" and "pity" are often used without any clear distinctions drawn between them. However, scholars of emotions have provided differentiation between the two terms. See, for instance, Martha C. Nussbaum's differentiation between "pity" and "sympathy" in *Upheavals of Thought* 301-2.

identification, as we see in the example of the relationship between the black community and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, can lead to the victimization of the weaker one, which also explains the psychological power and work of racism in interracial relationships. In "Recitatif," the twinship, which comes in retrospective in the case of Claudia and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, is built from the beginning between the two girls from different races. The emotional barrier due to the difference in race, class, or culture affects their friendship obviously, but what is known to the reader is the struggle due to the differences, not the racial identity of the two, which makes the reader deprived of the socially constructed psychological channel of her own projective identification: her preconceptions or assumptions based on the socially constructed racial markers.

Considering that the projective identification can work with and for racism, the question is how the mechanism of identification leads to moral judgment and self-reflection. Morrison's strategy in "Recitatif," I argue, is to enact reciprocity and the move away from the egoistic stance in identification. There is no morality without an acting subject, as Theodor Adorno argues: "all ideas of morality or ethical behavior must relate to an 'I' that acts" (28). Morality is not reducible to rules of abstract universality or norms of prescriptive social value. If self-reflection is an operation of moral critique that brings changes in the ways of thinking who I am and how I must act in relation to others, Morrison shows that this self-reflection is driven by emotions, and makes the participation in the emotional and psychological struggle of the two women of different races in



"Recitatif" the work of readers without depending on their habitual projection in terms of race.

In the discussions of sympathy, transcendence of partiality and egoism is an important factor for defining this emotion as a moral sentiment and drive. Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) defines sympathy<sup>2)</sup> as people's "fellow-feeling with the passion of others," and says that sympathy is a natural human feeling (1). Sympathy is based on the capacity to identify oneself with another person, and according to Smith, the capacity is our imagination: people sympathize with another by placing themselves in the person's situation through imagination. In Smith's observation, the change that takes place in the imagination in the state of sympathy is not the mere change in the perspective of the sympathizer. In sympathy, one imagines what it is like to be not just in the situation of the other person but to actually be that person. Smith stresses, "I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters" (281-82). Through imaginative identification, people remove themselves from their egoistic position; this point provides a rationale for viewing sympathy as being not merely for oneself, but for others. However, this imaginative identification does not fully explain how moral judgment acts in feelings of sympathy. Smith also

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2) Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* defines "pity" and "compassion" as people's "fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others" and "sympathy" as people's "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (2). However, Smith does not insist on differentiating those terms. Rather, he uses "sympathy" as a comprehensive term, and emphasizes how this emotion is related to moral judgment and the sense of justice.

points out that in sympathizing with another person, individuals go through a process of evaluating the propriety or impropriety of the emotional response of the other person as well as the cause of the response (10-14). People form judgments by trying to view and to evaluate the situation at a certain distance (93). According to Smith, experiencing sympathy with another person, one can maintain a distance within which one can make impartial judgments and evaluations, but simultaneously, can fully identify with the other person as if one were that person. It seems difficult to maintain both stances at the same time.

Smith shows that our sympathy with others is not based on the desire to approve others or to be simply approved by others, but goes through a complicated process of self-reflection. He says that human beings, by nature, have not only "a desire of being approved of" but "a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what [they themselves approve] of in other men" (99). This desire creates an internal judge, which he calls, "a man within the breast," "some secret reference," or a "well-informed" and "impartial spectator," in making moral judgments (93-98). As John W. McHugh argues, we can understand the spectator within as not just the effect of an internalization of an external voice or the viewpoint of society but a mechanism for moral self-reflection through self-bifurcation (196-98). Smith writes, "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of" (95). The impartial spectator can be the other self, who knows and sees the self from the vantage point of the self and who judges the conduct of the

self based on the knowledge and understanding. In this sense, sympathy can be a highly selective and complicated process of identification.

Smith's explanation of sympathy helps us understand how affective movements can lead to moral self-reflection. If sympathy is an important affective and psychological drive for moral judgment, it is not because we accept external social norms of value for moral judgments nor because the ego is the sole judge of our conduct or relationship with others. From the need for sympathy from even an imaginary someone who is trustworthy in knowledge and understanding of us, we become engaged in a dialogical mode in our moral reflection. This way, we can support our conscious virtue against social disapprobation and our egoistic desire. Judith Butler also points out that our self-reflection in ethical deliberation is facilitated in "the interlocutory scene in which one is asked what one has done, or a situation in which one tries to make plain, to one who is waiting to know, what one has done, and for what reason" (13-14). Arguing against Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, who holds that we become reflective at all about our actions in the context of justice and punishment and that morality emerges as the terrorized response to punishment and our conscience is constructed by turning our natural aggression toward ourselves, Butler holds that we can be reflective in a more friendly situation of being addressed by another or by the desire to be recognized by another. She says, "[C]alling into question the regime of truth by which my own truth is established is motivated by the desire to recognize another or be recognized by one" (24). Both Smith and Butler point out

the importance of our desire to be approved by others in moral self-reflection, and according to Smith, the other is not just anyone, but the one who is trusted by the self for knowledge and understanding of the self.

Morrison's point in "Recitatif" is that the trust or understanding begins on the emotional level. For Morrison, the desire or willingness to be engaged in a dialogue with another becomes the structural conditions for calling into question the truth of myself and my ability to tell the truth about myself. If I am engaged in a dialogue with another telling the truth about myself, I am implicated in relation to the other before whom and to whom I speak. The subject forms itself in relation to a set of imposed norms, but these do not act unilaterally or deterministically upon the subject nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norms. The subject inaugurates its reflexivity and ethical agency in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraints. By obscuring the racial identities of the two main characters in "Recitatif," Morrison stages the struggle between two individuals each of whom becomes the other self for each other with her understanding and knowledge of the other. Both Twyla and Roberta in their adulthood find that the racial barrier or difference has become a hindrance in rejuvenating the twinship they had in the shelter. However, Morrison shows that the bond of the two is the basis for their effort to trace back and rethink their emotional wound. With this, the attack and accusations each directs toward the other, which can be easily swept up in the social and political conflicts culminating in the racial strife of the present time, can be examined in the context of the reciprocal

interaction between the two individuals.

It is important to notice that the effort to revise their memory and process the hurt feelings toward their mothers leads to the sympathy with a distant other, Maggie. It is clear that either Twyla or Roberta is black and the other is white, but Maggie's racial identity cannot be determined in either way as the two remember differently though they saw her frequently in the shelter. In the case of Maggie, the racial ambiguity can be from her physical appearance, while the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta are textually obliterated. The textual indeterminacy in Twyla's and Roberta's racial identities is also an indication of the psychological weight of their emotional bond in the shelter. The two girls are in a way more engaged in the power struggle of the orphanage than that of the outside society. Twyla and Roberta need to protect themselves from the other girls who tend to victimize them because they are not "real orphans" like the other children of the shelter. Morrison shows that the identification through the common experience and the common emotional wound of "being dumped" by their own mothers in the shelter leads to the emotional bond beyond their racial differences. The indeterminacy in Twyla's and Roberta's racial identities leads the reader to understand the psychological weight of the emotional bond in their situation and moral movement, and the mutuality and self-reflection prompted by the memory of their twinship in the shelter also brings them into a sympathetic identification with the distant other, Maggie, regardless of her differences from them.

## III

In the shelter, Twyla and Roberta become friends out of necessity: “nobody else wanted to play with [them] because [they] weren’t real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky” (2254). The fact that they are wards of the state but not orphans makes them outcasts among the other children in the shelter. Their common experience of being the weakest in the shelter hierarchy leads them to form a bond despite their racial differences. What brings them together in the first place, however, is their shared experience of, and emotions stemming from abandonment. They were “dumped” because Twyla’s mother “danced all night and Roberta’s was sick” (2253). Being children of eight years old, they must have gone through socialization and enculturation in terms of racial differences to some extent. Introduced to Roberta, Twyla is reminded of her mother’s words about people of Roberta’s race: “they never washed their hair and [they] smelled funny” (2253). When the shelter director, whom the residents call the Big Bozo, tells Twyla that she is to share the room with Roberta, Twyla expresses her animosity, in earshot of Roberta, by saying to Bozo, “My mother won’t like you putting me here.” Bozo answers, “Maybe then she’ll come and take you home” (2253). Roberta does not laugh, but instead she asks Twyla, “Is your mother sick too?” (2254). From this moment, the two girls begin to build a relationship based on their common experience and understanding; they form a protective bond against Bozo, the cruelty of the gar girls, and the shared shame and hurt that stems from their experience of abandonment.

As the story proceeds, it becomes clear that the shame and pain of Twyla and Roberta is rooted deep in their complicated emotions about their mothers; their bond also runs deep and long within the depths of their emotional wounds. The emotional reactions they show during their direct conflict in their later encounters attest to their complicated feelings about their mothers. For example, the first time they encounter each other as adults at the Howard Johnson's restaurant where Twyla works as a waitress and Roberta stops on her way to see Jimi Hendrix perform, Twyla uses Roberta's shame about her mother to attack Roberta. Twyla recognizes Roberta first; Twyla wonders, before she approaches Roberta to talk with her, if Roberta will remember her or want to be reminded of her time at the shelter. Roberta acts clearly as though she does not want to talk to Twyla; in front of her friends, Roberta humiliates Twyla, for not knowing who Jimi Hendrix is. After she is "dismissed without anyone saying goodbye," Twyla retaliates by asking Roberta about her mother. She knows that the simple question, "How's your mother?" will stir Roberta emotionally; as Twyla expects, "[Roberta's] grin cracked her whole face" (2258). Similarly, the issue of mothering, which Roberta brings up in her picket sign at a protest that reads, "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" becomes the trigger for the argument between the two and for their emotional reactions. Twyla initially did not hold any opinion about school busing; however, when she sees Roberta among the women protesting against it, she becomes emotional and displays anger. As Twyla comments to Roberta, the protesting women remind her of Bozo, who, Twyla believes, makes decisions about other people's

children (2263). Twyla's view of the protesting women as infringing on the rights of children likely springs from her indignation at her forced institutionalization in the past and at her own mother, who was incompetent at protecting her. Her hurt feelings intersect with political, class, and racial issues in her argument with Roberta, and Twyla takes part in the counter protest after her confrontation with Roberta. However, the sign brought by Twyla reading, "AND SO DO CHILDREN," is obviously Twyla's personal response to the message on Roberta's sign.

Through their experience in the shelter, Twyla and Roberta form a bond, coming to act and feel as one. Although their arguments can be ascribed to racial, class, or other types of differences, their conflict clearly always comes down to the issue of Maggie and their mothers; what really troubles them is their memories of living in the shelter. Despite the fact that she and Roberta are on opposite sides of the school-busing conflict, Twyla "automatically" reaches out to Roberta for help when a group of angry protesters begin to rock her car (2263). From this, we can infer that the feeling of betrayal of their bond also plays a part in the ongoing conflict between Twyla and Roberta. In the shelter, they were always on the same side in dealing with the mean and hostile treatment they experienced from others and in acting on the anger and shame they felt inside:

Those four short months were nothing in time. Maybe it was the thing itself. Just being there, together. Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew –



how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed. There was politeness in that reluctance and generosity as well. Is your mother sick too? No, she dances all night. Oh—and an understanding nod. (2260)

Twyla does not give detailed accounts of the hardship or the emotional turmoil she experienced during her time in the shelter. Her memories are mainly presented from her perspective as a child; therefore, the narration lacks insight regarding the meaning of the bond between Twyla and Roberta at the shelter. However, in the intensity of the astonishment and anger of Twyla at Roberta for her dismissive rudeness at Howard Johnson's and at her participation in the picketing protest, we can sense that Twyla expects her past "togetherness" with Roberta to continue to be present in their relationship. Twyla reads the present situations within the conceptual and emotional framework of those days. When, at Howard Johnson's, Twyla sees Roberta's flamboyant make-up, she alludes to the gar girls: "Talk about lipstick and eyebrow pencil. She made the big girls look like nuns" (2257). Twyla likens the picketing women to the controlling Bozo at the shelter, and tries to persuade Roberta into sharing her interpretation of the scene: "Swarming all over the place like they own it. And now they think they can decide where my child goes to school. Look at them, Roberta. They're Bozos" (2263). For Twyla, her experience in the shelter forms the basis for her judgment of and emotional responses to her present interactions with Roberta. For Roberta, the racial difference becomes an issue when Twyla and Roberta are with other people, such as her two

male friends during the meeting at Howard Johnson's and the other women at the picket line. However, when they are alone, they become friendly, and behave like "sisters."

Moreover, determining which of the protagonists is talking to which can sometimes be confusing; even when it is clear which one is speaking, the words spoken can also be understood as the speaker talking to herself. Just as Twyla's sharp question to Roberta, "How's your mother?" might serve as a reminder of her own shame, Roberta's accusation that Twyla has never moved on from her childhood experiences can also be directed to herself. During her confrontation with Twyla, Roberta says, "We both [kicked Maggie]," and accuses Twyla for having never changed: "Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground" (2264). This shows that Roberta has been struggling with the feelings of guilt, and she levels accusations against Twyla in an effort to assure herself of her own changed state. Imagining that she has committed violence toward Maggie, Roberta also includes Twyla in the act. Similar to the way that Twyla reaches out her hand to Roberta automatically during a time of danger, Roberta believes that she and Twyla were united in wanting to attack Maggie.

The racial divide provides an easy way for the protagonists to channel their own shame and guilt onto each other. However, Twyla and Roberta cannot continue to just define their relationship along this divide, nor can they find a way out of their struggle through objectification of the other. The conversations between Twyla and Roberta during their later

encounters show they again depend on each other for help in delving into their struggles and activating their self-reflection regarding their reactions.

#### IV

The title "Recitatif"<sup>3)</sup> implies that the text can be understood as a type of oral literature that is modified or changed into different versions when it is read or sung for different audiences. Readers can find the changeability implied in the title in the continuous revision of the memories of Twyla and Roberta in the story or in the variations in interpretation of the work among readers. We can also understand this malleability as the way that the two protagonists affect one another. Their encounters bring forth an interaction between the self and the other self and between the past and the present. In the shelter, Twyla and Roberta function practically as one in protecting themselves against the gar girls; during their adulthood, they see their differences more acutely and accurately. Their relationship oscillates between emotional, psychological closeness and the distance wrought by temporal and social gaps. With their memories of their lives in the shelter and their abrupt, accidental encounters as adults, the two protagonists are led into the process of questioning their ways of understanding the past and dealing

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3) The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines a recitative as "a style of musical declamation intermediate between singing and ordinary speech used especially in the dialogue and narrative parts of an opera or oratorio."

with the emotional wounds. Twyla thinks that Roberta “messed up” her account of the past; however, this leads her to question herself, “I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?” (2262). Each one’s memories challenge those of the other. The challenge leads to the continuous revisions of their memories.

We can also understand the concurrent closeness and distance in their “behaving like sisters” and “[passing] like strangers” (2260) as the movement of interaction within which each of the two protagonists, seeing herself in the other, reflects on her own emotional wounds from the perspective of her other self. As they see themselves in each other, Twyla and Roberta also work to convince each other of certain points as a way of convincing themselves. In this sense, each becomes a “reference” or “spectator” for the other’s judgment, knowing that the other will not be persuaded by any explanation with which she cannot persuade herself.

Meeting Roberta at Howard Johnson’s for the first time after their experience as roommates in the shelter, Twyla says that she knows how Roberta feels about being reminded of the shelter because she herself has never talked about the shelter to anyone (2258). It is a secret they share, and with this secret, they examine their memories in the space created between just the two of them. With the understanding that the other was also there, feels the same way, and knows what others do not know, the two argue with one another, and each comes to admit her shame, guilt, and fear to the other. This is different from rationalizing guilt to others who do not share one’s experience, emotions, or knowledge. Their knowledge and understanding of the roots of

their common shame and fear makes the two characters formidable counterparts to each other in their conflicts. However, at the same time, the fact that they share the knowledge and understanding makes them a reliable reference for judgment for each other. When Twyla dwells upon Roberta's accusation that she hurt Maggie, the question of Maggie's racial identity preoccupies her, at first. However, as Kathryn Nicol points out, the truth that Twyla eventually reaches is not the truth of Maggie's race but the truth of violence done against her (218). What matters to Twyla is the fact that she did not kick Maggie and that Roberta also knew it:

I tried to reassure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her, I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. We watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. (2265)

As we see from Roberta's confession, when Twyla and Roberta meet again in a coffee shop after the confrontation at the picket line, what has troubled Roberta is clearly also the violence towards Maggie:

Listen to me. I really did think she was black. I didn't make that up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure . . . . She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only

them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day—wanting to is doing it. (2266)

Roberta is shaken in her belief that Maggie is black; however, she focuses on the violence toward Maggie in which she thinks she participated and for which she therefore feels guilty. Both Twyla and Roberta come to face and admit their guilt and shame with the understanding that they know what nobody else knows and that they share the same feeling and perspective.

Smith observes that a human being “desires not only praise but praiseworthiness” and that people cannot be satisfied with being merely admired for what other people are admired, and at least believe themselves to be admirable for what other people are admirable (96). Smith adds, “[I]gnorant and groundless praise can give no solid joy” (98). This point shows that moral judgment of conduct by oneself and others is possible with full knowledge and understanding because people do not want approval from others only, but also to be evaluated based on understanding and a solid ground for approval or disapproval. The evaluative nature of sympathy demands a solid ground for moral judgments, and as we can observe from the interaction between Twyla and Roberta, the trust in the other's perspective and feelings constitutes a solid ground for judgments. In this sense, in Smith's description of “well-informed” and “impartial” spectator as a condition for good moral judgment, we can understand being “well-informed” as not

just in terms of factual knowledge. Twyla and Roberta can achieve this kind of understanding by sharing the knowledge and feelings as one. The confidence in the intention and understanding of the imaginary spectator makes the judgment process work and brings satisfaction with the judgment.

In producing their shared narrative of the past, Twyla and Roberta create an intimate space that mediates between themselves and their memories of abandonment. With confidence in the other's understanding of her feelings and perspective, Twyla and Roberta evaluate the fear, anger, and shame that have sprung from their experience at the shelter and the way those emotions shed light on their present response. In the presence of the one individual who knows "what nobody else in the world knew" about her (2260), each can change the way she feels about herself, and can come to see her past self as an object of sympathy:

"We were kids, Roberta."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know, just kids."

"Eight."

"Eight"

"And lonely."

"Scared, too." (2266)

With this admission, the two reach the point of ethical movement in this story; namely, the question regarding Maggie's welfare. The acknowledgment of their common vulnerability and their self-sympathy is extended to include sympathy with the vulnerability of others. In this sense, they will possibly re-examine

their feelings of anger and guilt in their relationship to their mothers, as they change the way they perceive Maggie and begin a moral evaluation of their aggression toward her. Imagining the possibility of reparation for themselves goes hand in hand with their desire for reparation in their attitude toward Maggie.

## V

The question about what happened to Maggie leads to an examination of the sense of justice involved in the emotion of sympathy. The reader can scarcely deny that Maggie was a target of actual or imagined violence for the children at the shelter. The conflict between Twyla and Roberta over the memory of Maggie may be resolved at the end of the story; however, the question of moral responsibility is not closed along with this resolution. The question posed by Roberta at the end of the story can be an invitation for the reader to move beyond the given representation of Maggie, which remains at the symbolic level throughout the story. If Morrison uses the character of Maggie as a catalyst for the quest of Twyla and Roberta to rethink their complicated emotions about their mothers, the reader now faces the following moral question: what makes it easy to imagine an act of violence toward Maggie and to read her as a victim? The child-like appearance of Maggie, her awkward gait, and her lack of response to the taunts of the girls at the shelter may seem to be related to a physical and/or mental disability. However, just as racial stereotypes and markers in the text cannot be clearly



assigned to the characters, the connection between the silence of Maggie and any disability she may have is not clearly indicated. Twyla and Roberta's violence toward Maggie, whether imagined or actual, constitutes the point where their anger and shame, which sprang from their experience of abandonment by their own mothers, are materialized. Twyla sees her indifferent and careless mother mirrored in Maggie, calling her deaf and dumb. She sees her dancing mother in the sway of Maggie's body as she walks. She even sees herself in Maggie; she mentions that neither Maggie nor herself could scream in protest (2265). Roberta also equates the sickness of her own mother with the disability of Maggie. We can notice that the feelings of anger, frustration, and shame of Twyla and Roberta play an important part in the process of making the connection between the silence of Maggie and disabilities. Just as the difference of Twyla and Roberta from the other children in the shelter makes them a target of violence by the older girls, the disability that Maggie may have provides an easy channel to transfer their anger onto her.

Howard Sklar points out that the "strategy of employing stereotype in representing the story's characters extends, as well, to the apparently disabled character Maggie" (138). He goes on to argue that the detailed stereotypical images of disability that Morrison uses to describe Maggie in the first scene along with the relative absence of specific and reliable information throughout the story make it difficult for readers to revise their first impressions of her (147). Reading this story as an experiment in activating self-reflection among readers in the reading process, I believe that the difficulty in revising one's first impression of the characters or

in reading into them beyond the symbolic level is also a challenge for the reader. As Twyla and Roberta repeatedly revisit the scene of Maggie being attacked in the orchard, readers are invited to read the story repeatedly not just to attempt to solve the mystery of the racial identities of the two protagonists but also to examine the emerging indeterminacy around their memories of Maggie. The reader may at first be in the comfort of simple pity, adopting the perspective of Twyla, the narrator of the story, who describes the incident regarding Maggie in a brief way and using a dry tone. However, as Roberta's memories challenge those of Twyla, the reader cannot finish reading without raising questions about Maggie's role in the memories of the protagonists and in the story. The assumption that Maggie is black or has disabilities provides a channel for projection of the emotional struggle of Twyla and Roberta. Despite this, the reader can be self-reflective enough to ask the question of whether political awareness or critical understanding of the process of victimization is sufficient to induce moral movement. If Maggie is victimized because she is black or has disabilities, we can read the story as a critique of racism and ableism. However, the point that Morrison raises in her experiment with "Recitatif," which presents indeterminacy in racial identities of the protagonists and the projection in the representation of Maggie, is that race and disability matter not just because of the injustice done on the basis of each, but also because those markers lead the reader into already-established, guided channels of political, psychological, and emotional responses. Just as the interpretation by Roberta of their conflict as racial or political in nature does not persuade or satisfy Twyla,

readers likely still remain uncomfortable with the question of what happened to Maggie in the story. More importantly, readers can come to call into question the violence of their own imagination. Sklar points out that "sympathy for [Maggie] on the basis of what we *do not* fully know is not the same as to suggest that we have assumed that we can understand her" and "we sympathize, not because we 'know' her, but because we care enough to *want* to know about her" (152; emphasis in original). In this sense, Maggie is the character for whom it is required that one read beyond symbolic representation; such an engagement leads readers to inquire about the side of the story from Maggie's vantage point and to question the connection between disability and victimization.

Moreover, we can ask how one becomes engaged in sympathetic identification with distant others and how mystery or indeterminacy can be related to movement toward moral examination. Smith argues that once they know the natural and proper point of blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, people can become self-reflective and make moral judgments (96). We can presuppose an already-established or "proper" standard or set of rules on which to base judgments. However, if one has a pre-established point for moral judgment, one merely applies rules in place of judgment, rather than truly making a judgment. In this sense, Jacques Derrida argues that justice is irreducible to any rule and entails an experience of facing indeterminacy: "the *decision* between just and unjust is never insured by a rule" (244; emphasis in original). If one does not assume the natural and proper point of praiseworthiness that comes from an

already-determined standard or rule, one cannot help but resort to one's own satisfaction to serve as the solid ground for moral evaluations and judgments. People want to have a solid point or ground for their evaluations in moral judgment; however, satisfaction in one's sense of justice cannot be defined generally or prescriptively. In "Recitatif," the indeterminacy in the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta and in the representation of Maggie as a catalyst for the emotional struggle of the central characters serves as an invitation for readers to rethink the violence of their imagination, which follows the enforced affective movements along the racial divide and along the divide between ability and disability. As a result, the true challenge for the reader is to examine how far to venture to satisfy a sense of justice.

Sympathy is an affective tie that holds society together, but also can constitute an affective drive to dissolve established boundaries. As Derrida explains, the indeterminacy inherent in the concept of justice makes the movement toward it open to infinity, and this movement is materialized in the act of decision. Smith states that sympathy is not a long-lasting feeling because the imaginary change of situation is momentary and the thought of one's own safety or the realization that one is not truly the suffering party continually intrudes itself on one's consciousness (13). Susan Sontag also points out, "Compassion is an unstable emotion." She brings up this point with consideration of the sense of responsibility that follows the feeling: the question of "what to do with the feelings," arises, and the emotion "needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (101). When one observes the suffering of others in the distance on a television screen, one can

be tested on one's emotional distance from them. Viewing a close-up and edited image of suffering individuals, one can become apathetic or troubled by the link between the suffering and one's own safety. In this sense, we can also understand Smith's point about "safety" in the context of the choice between action and inaction that the emotion of sympathy brings with it. If sympathy is a moral feeling and the sense of justice is an important element in moral judgments, then with the feeling of sympathy, one faces the choice between venturing into an act of moral judgment for the suffering individuals and maintaining one's distance from them. Derrida not only defines justice as consideration for the indeterminable and infinite other, but he also observes that justice cannot be separated from the act of decision-making. One can understand that the idea of justice that Derrida offers as an abstract concept the defining moment of which is infinitely delayed; however, we can scarcely deny the requirement of a specific act of decision in cultivating a sense of justice. Therefore, movement in sympathy can be the starting point for action and change.

## VI

Morrison states that the goal of her writing and her struggle with language is to create a social space that is psychically and physically safe and free ("Home" 10). The social space that Morrison suggests is between the text and the reader; at that point the writer and readers can be imaginatively engaged and

can cultivate their emotional responses to motivate ethical changes. Morrison's experiment in "Recitatif" is to induce moral self-reflection and movement into ethical action in readers. The movement of Twyla and Roberta into moral self-reflection and sympathy with Maggie signals that those two characters will undertake further work of this nature. Similarly, the reader of this story is required to place herself in the situations of Twyla, Roberta, and Maggie. Then, the necessary actions and psychological work become clear and specific for each individual. Morrison writes that as a black female writer, she has decided to work toward "eliminating the potency of racist constructs in language" because this is the work she can do and by which she can help to bring about changes ("Home" 4). With its indeterminacy and ambiguity, Morrison places this work in the social space or interlocutory situation created between her text and the reader. She also touches on emotions, a specific point of collective experiences. The feelings of sympathy that Morrison evokes in "Recitatif" serve as a call for moral self-reflection and inspire action not merely in matters of race. In sympathy, people are engaged in a dialogue with another, and the process can be a moral movement because sympathy entails a sense of responsibility and an action for the other. Sympathy, with its potential rooted in reciprocity and imagination, provides room for reflecting on and calling into question the truth of oneself, and the creative impulse in imagination activated in the communicative situation can propel a movement toward unknown others and indeterminate future.

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## Sympathy and Indeterminacy in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

**Abstract**

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Toni Morrison's sole short story, "Recitatif," is, in her own words, "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial." The challenge intended for the reader provides an opportunity to examine the moral self-reflective movement in sympathy, which is the main theme of the work as well as a drive for the reader's engagement with the work. The argument of this paper starts from the view that morality is not reducible to rules of abstract universality or norms of prescriptive social value and that the subject inaugurates its reflexivity and ethical agency in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraints in relation to a set of imposed norms and in relation to other subjects. Morality involves an acting subject, and the movement, act, or change takes place in self-reflection. As Adam Smith and Judith Butler argue, our self-reflection in ethical deliberation is facilitated in the interlocutory scene in which we are engaged in a dialogue with another whether internalized or existing. Morrison in this work shows that the desire or willingness to be engaged in a dialogue with another becomes the structural conditions for calling into question the truth of myself and my ability to tell the truth about myself and that such self-reflection is driven in the emotional closeness and mutual understanding between the two parties. While the two main characters build such a relationship, it

also leads to their sympathy with a distant other. With its indeterminacy and ambiguity, Morrison also places this work in the social space or interlocutory situation created between her text and the reader. The feelings of sympathy that Morrison evokes in "Recitatif" serve as a call for moral self-reflection and inspire action not merely in matters of race. Sympathy, with its potential rooted in reciprocity and imagination, provides room for reflecting on and calling into question the truth of oneself, and the creative impulse in imagination activated in the communicative situation can propel a movement toward unknown others and indeterminate future.

**Key Words:** Sympathy, Indeterminacy, Identification, Race, Disability, Toni Morrison, "Recitatif"

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