



The Genius of Toni Morrison's Only Short Story

In the extraordinary "Recitatif," Morrison withholds crucial details of racial identity, making the reader the subject of her experiment.

By [Zadie Smith](#)
January 23, 2022

Illustration by Diana Ejaita

In 1980 Toni Morrison sat down to write her one and only short story, “Recitatif.” The fact that there is only one Morrison short story seems of a piece with her œuvre. There are no dashed-off Morrison pieces, no filler novels, no treading water, no exit off the main road. There are eleven novels and one short story, all of which she wrote with specific aims and intentions. It’s hard to overstate how unusual this is. Most writers work, at least partially, in the dark: subconsciously, stumblingly, progressing chaotically, sometimes taking shortcuts, often reaching dead ends. [Morrison](#) was never like that. Perhaps the weight of responsibility she felt herself to be under did not allow for it. To read the startlingly detailed auto-critiques of her own novels in that last book, “[The Source of Self-Regard](#),” was to observe a literary lab technician reverse engineering an experiment. And it is this mixture of poetic form and scientific method in Morrison that is, to my mind, unique. Certainly it makes any exercise in close reading of her work intensely rewarding, for you can feel fairly certain—page by page, line by line—that nothing has been left to chance, least of all the originating intention. With “Recitatif” she was explicit. This extraordinary story was specifically intended as “an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.”¹

The characters in question are Twyla and Roberta, two poor girls, eight years old and wards of the state, who spend four months together in St. Bonaventure shelter. The very first thing we learn about them, from Twyla, is this: “My mother danced all

night and Roberta's was sick." A little later, they were placed together, in Room 406, "stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race." What we never learn definitively—no matter how closely we read—is which of these girls is black and which white. We will assume, we can insist, but we can't be sure. And this despite the fact that we get to see them grow up, becoming adults who occasionally run into each other. We eavesdrop when they speak, examine their clothes, hear of their husbands, their jobs, their children, their lives. . . . The crucial detail is withheld. A puzzle of a story, then—a game. Only, Toni Morrison does not play. When she called "Recitatif" an "experiment," she meant it. The subject of the experiment is the reader.

But before we go any further into the ingenious design of this philosophical² brainteaser, the title itself is worth a good, long look:

Recitatif, recitative | ,rɛsɪtə'ti:v | noun [*mass noun*]

1. Musical declamation of the kind usual in the narrative and dialogue parts of opera and oratorio, sung in the rhythm of ordinary speech with many words on the same note: *singing in recitative*.

2. The tone or rhythm peculiar to any language. *Obs.*

The music of Morrison begins in "ordinary speech." Her ear was acute, and rescuing African American speech patterns from the debasements of the American mainstream is a defining feature of her early work. In this story, though, the challenge of capturing "ordinary speech" has been deliberately complicated. For many words are here to be "sung . . . on the same note." That is, we will hear the words of Twyla and the words of Roberta, and, although they are perfectly differentiated the one from the other, we will

not be able to differentiate them in the *one way we really want to*. An experiment easy to imagine but difficult to execute. In order to make it work, you'd need to write in such a way that every phrase precisely straddled the line between characteristically "black" and "white" American speech, and that's a high-wire act in an eagle-eyed country, ever alert to racial codes, adept at categorization, in which most people feel they can spot a black or white speaker with their eyes closed, precisely because of the tone and rhythm "peculiar to" their language. . . .

And, beyond language, in a racialized system, all manner of things will read as "peculiar to" one kind of person or another. The food a character eats, the music they like, where they live, how they work. Black things, white things. Things that are peculiar to our people and peculiar to theirs. But one of the questions of "Recitatif" is precisely what that phrase "peculiar to" really signifies. For we tend to use it variously, not realizing that we do. It can mean:

That which *characterizes*
That which *belongs exclusively to*
That which *is an essential quality of*

These three are not the same. The first suggests a tendency; the second implies some form of ownership; the third speaks of essences and therefore of immutable natural laws. In "Recitatif" these differences prove crucial, as we will see.

Much of the mesmerizing power of "Recitatif" lies in that first definition of "peculiar to": *that which characterizes*. As readers, we urgently want to characterize the various characteristics on display. But how? *My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick*. Well, now, what kind of mother tends to dance all night? A black one or a white one? And whose mother is more likely to be

sick? Is Roberta a blacker name than Twyla? Or vice versa? And what about voice? Twyla narrates the story in the first person, and so we may have the commonsense feeling that *she* must be the black girl, for her author is black. But it doesn't take much interrogating of this "must" to realize that it rests on rather shallow, autobiographical ideas of authorship that would seem wholly unworthy of the complex experiment that has been set before us. Besides, Morrison was never a poor child in a state institution—she grew up solidly working class in integrated Lorain, Ohio—and autobiography was never a very strong element of her work. Her imagination was capacious. No, autobiography will not get us very far here. So, we listen a little more closely to Twyla:

And Mary, that's my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean. So when the Big Bozo (nobody ever called her Mrs. Itkin, just like nobody ever said St. Bonaventure)—when she said, "Twyla, this is Roberta. Roberta, this is Twyla. Make each other welcome," I said, "My mother won't like you putting me in here."

The game is afoot. Morrison bypasses any detail that might imply *an essential quality of*, slyly evades whatever would *belong exclusively to* one girl or the other, and makes us sit instead in this uncomfortable, double-dealing world of *that which characterizes*, in which Twyla seems to move in a moment from black to white to black again, depending on the nature of your perception. Like that dress on the Internet no one could ever agree on the color of . . .

When reading "Recitatif" with students, there is a moment when the class grows uncomfortable at their own eagerness to

settle the question, maybe because most attempts to answer it tend to reveal more about the reader than the character.³

For example: Twyla loves the food at St. Bonaventure, and Roberta hates it. (The food is Spam, Salisbury steak, Jell-O with fruit cocktail in it.) Is Twyla black? Twyla's mother's idea of supper is "popcorn and a can of Yoo-hoo." Is Twyla white?

Twyla's mother looks like this:

She had on those green slacks I hated. . . . And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them. . . . [But] she looked so beautiful even in those ugly green slacks that made her behind stick out.

Roberta's mother looks like this:

She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen. I swear it was six inches long each way. And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made.

Does that help? We might think the puzzle is solved when both mothers come to visit their daughters one Sunday and Roberta's mother refuses to shake Twyla's mother's hand. But a moment later, upon reflection, it will strike us that a pious, upstanding, sickly black mother might be just as unlikely to shake the hand of an immoral, fast-living, trashy, dancing white mother as vice versa. . . . Complicating matters further, Twyla and Roberta—despite their crucial differences—seem to share the same low status within the confines of St. Bonaventure. Or at least that's how Twyla sees it:

We didn't like each other all that much at first, but nobody else wanted to play with us because we weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were dumped. Even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us.

At this point, many readers will start getting a little desperate to put back in precisely what Morrison has deliberately removed. You start combing the fine print:

We were eight years old and got F's all the time. Me because I couldn't remember what I read or what the teacher said. And Roberta because she couldn't read at all and didn't even listen to the teacher.

Which version of educational failure is more black? Which kind of poor people eat so poorly—or are so grateful to eat bad food? Poor black folk or poor white folk? Both?

As a reader you know there's something unseemly in these kinds of inquiries, but old habits die hard. You *need* to know. So you try another angle. You get granular.

1. Twyla's mother brings no food for her daughter on that Sunday outing
2. Cries out "Twyla, baby!" when she spots her in the chapel
3. Is pretty
4. Smells of Lady Esther dusting powder
5. Doesn't wear a hat in a house of God
6. Calls Roberta's mum "that bitch!" and "twitched and crossed and uncrossed her legs all through service."

Meanwhile, Roberta's mother brings plenty of food—which Roberta refuses—but says not a word to anyone, although she does read aloud to Roberta from the Bible. There's a lot of readable difference there, and Twyla certainly notices it all:

Things are not right. The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food.

She seems jealous. But can vectors of longing, resentment, or desire tell us who's who? Is Twyla a black girl jealous of a white

mother who brought more food? Or a white girl resentful of a black mother who thinks she's too godly to shake hands?

Children are curious about justice. Sometimes they are shocked by their encounters with its opposite. They say to themselves: *Things are not right*. But children also experiment with injustice, with cruelty. To stress-test the structure of the adult world. To find out exactly what its rules are. (The fact that questions of justice seem an inconvenient line of speculation for so many adults cannot go unnoticed by children.) And it is when reflecting upon a moment of childish cruelty that Twyla begins to describe a different binary altogether. Not the familiar one that divides black and white, but the one between those who live within the system—whatever their position may be within it—and those who are cast far outside of it. The unspeakable. The outcast. The forgotten. The nobody. Because there is a person in St. Bonaventure whose position is lower than either Twyla's or Roberta's—far lower. Her name is Maggie:

The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. . . . Maggie couldn't talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked.

Maggie has no characteristic language. She has no language at all. Once she fell over in the school orchard and the older girls laughed and Twyla and Roberta did nothing. She is not a person you can do things for: she is only an object of ridicule. "She wore this really stupid little hat—a kid's hat with earflaps—and she wasn't much taller than we were." In the social system of St. Bonaventure, Maggie stands outside all hierarchies. She's one to whom anything can be said. One to whom anything might be

done. Like a slave. Which is what it means to be nobody. Twyla and Roberta, noticing this, take a childish interest in what it means to be nobody:

“But what about if somebody tries to kill her?” I used to wonder about that. “Or what if she wants to cry. Can she cry?”

“Sure,” Roberta said. “But just tears. No sounds come out.”

“She can’t scream?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

“Can she hear?”

“I guess.”

“Let’s call her,” I said. And we did.

“Dummy! Dummy!” She never turned her head.

“Bow legs! Bow legs!” Nothing. She just rocked on, the chin straps of her baby-boy hat swaying from side to side. I think we were wrong. I think she could hear and didn’t let on. And it shames me even now to think there was somebody in there after all who heard us call her those names and couldn’t tell on us.

Time leaps forward. Roberta leaves St. Bonny’s first, and a few months after so does Twyla. The girls grow into women. Years later, Twyla is waitressing at an upstate Howard Johnson’s, when who should walk in but Roberta, just in time to give us some more racial cues to debate.⁴

These days Roberta's hair is "so big and wild" that Twyla can barely see her face. She's wearing a halter and hot pants and sitting between two hirsute guys with big hair and beards. She seems to be on drugs. Now, Roberta and friends are going to see Hendrix, and would any other artist have worked quite so well for Morrison's purpose? Hendrix's hair is big and wild. Is his music black or white? Your call. Either way, Twyla—her own hair "shapeless in a net"—has never heard of him, and, when she says she lives in Newburgh, Roberta laughs.

Geography, in America, is fundamental to racial codes, and Newburgh—sixty miles north of Manhattan—is an archetypal racialized American city. Founded in 1709, it is where Washington announced the cessation of hostilities with Britain and therefore the beginning of America as a nation, and in the nineteenth century was a grand and booming town, with a growing black middle class. The Second World War manufacturing boom brought waves of African American migrants to Newburgh, eager to escape the racial terrorism of the South, looking for low-wage work, but with the end of the war the work dried up; factory jobs were relocated south or abroad, and, by the time Morrison wrote "Recitatif," Newburgh was a depressed town, hit by "white flight," riven with poverty and the violence that attends poverty, and with large sections of its once beautiful waterfront bulldozed in the name of "urban renewal." Twyla is married to a Newburgh man from an old Newburgh family, whose race the reader is invited to decipher ("James and his father talk about fishing and baseball and I can see them all together on the Hudson in a raggedy skiff") but who is certainly one of the millions of twentieth-century Americans who watched once thriving towns mismanaged and abandoned by the federal government: "Half the population of Newburgh is on welfare now, but to my husband's family it was still some upstate paradise of a time long past." And then, when the town is on its knees, and the great houses empty and

abandoned, and downtown a wasteland of empty shop fronts and aimless kids on the corner—the new money moves in. The old houses get done up. A Food Emporium opens. And it's in this Emporium—twelve years after their last run-in—that the women meet again, but this time all is transformation. Roberta's cleaned up her act and married a rich man:

Shoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and rich. I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world.

For the reader determined to solve the puzzle—the reader who believes the puzzle can be solved, or must be solved—this is surely Exhibit No. 1. Everything hangs on that word “they.” To whom is it pointing? Uppity black people? Entitled white people? Rich people, whatever their color? Gentrifiers? You choose.

Not too long ago, I happened to be in Annandale myself, standing in the post-office line, staring absently at the list of national holidays fixed to the wall, and reflecting that the only uncontested date on the American calendar is New Year's Day. With Twyla and Roberta, it's the same—every element of their shared past is contested:

“Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white. You know how everything was.”

But I didn't know. I thought it was just the opposite. . . . You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days.

Their most contested site is Maggie. Maggie is their Columbus Day, their Thanksgiving. What the hell happened to Maggie? At the beginning of “Recitatif,” we are informed that sandy-colored Maggie “fell” down. Later, Roberta insists she was knocked down, by the older girls—an event Twyla does not remember. Later still, Roberta claims that Maggie was black and that Twyla pushed her down, which sparks an epistemological crisis in Twyla, who does not remember Maggie being black, never mind pushing her. (“I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?”) Then Roberta claims they *both* pushed and kicked “a black lady who couldn’t even scream.” It’s interesting to note that this escalation of claims happens at a moment of national “racial strife,” in the form of school busing. Both Roberta’s and Twyla’s children are being sent far across town. And as black—or white—mothers, the two find themselves in rigid positions, on either side of a literal boundary: a protest line. Their shared past starts to fray and then morph under the weight of a mutual anger; even the tiniest things are reinterpreted. They used to like doing each other’s hair, as kids. Now Twyla rejects this commonality (*I hated your hands in my hair*) and Roberta rejects any possibility of alliance with Twyla, in favor of the group identity of the other mothers who feel about busing as she does.⁵

The personal connection they once made can hardly be expected to withstand a situation in which once again race proves socially determinant, and in one of the most vulnerable sites any of us have: the education of our children. Mutual suspicion blooms. Why should I trust this person? What are they trying to take from me? My culture? My community? My schools? My neighborhood? My life? Positions get entrenched. Nothing can be shared. Twyla and Roberta start carrying increasingly extreme signs at competing protests. (Twyla: “My signs got crazier each day.”) A hundred and forty characters or fewer: that’s about as much as you can fit on a homemade sign. Both women find that ad hominem attacks work best. You could say the two are never as far

apart as at this moment of “racial strife.” You could also say they are in lockstep, for without the self-definition offered by the binary they appear meaningless, even to themselves. (“Actually my sign didn’t make sense without Roberta’s.”)

As Twyla and Roberta discover, it’s hard to admit a shared humanity with your neighbor if they will not come with you to reëxamine a shared history. Such reëxaminations I sometimes hear described as “resentment politics,” as if telling a history in full could *only be* the product of a personal resentment, rather than a necessary act performed in the service of curiosity, interest, understanding (of both self and community), and justice itself. But some people sure do take it personal. I couldn’t help but smile to read of an ex-newspaper editor from my country, who, when speaking of his discomfort at recent efforts to reveal the slave history behind many of our great country houses, complained, “I think comfort does matter. I know people say, ‘Oh, we must be uncomfortable.’ . . . Why should I pay a hundred quid a year, or whatever, to be told what a shit I am?” Imagine thinking of history this way! As a thing *personally directed at you*. As a series of events structured to make you *feel* one way or another, rather than the precondition of all our lives?

The long, bloody, tangled encounter between the European peoples and the African continent is our history. Our shared history. It’s what happened. It’s not the moral equivalent of a football game where your “side” wins or loses. To give an account of an old English country house that includes not only the provenance of the beautiful paintings but also the provenance of the money that bought them—who suffered and died making that money, how, and why—is history told in full and should surely be of interest to everybody, black or white or neither. And I admit I *do* begin to feel resentment—actually, something closer to fury—when I realize that merely speaking such facts aloud is so

discomfiting to some that they'd rather deny the facts themselves. For the sake of peaceful relations. To better forget about it. To better move on. Many people have this instinct. Twyla and Roberta also want to forget and move on. They want to blame it on the "gar girls" (a pun on gargoyles, "gar girls" is Twyla and Roberta's nickname for the older residents of St. Bonaventure), or on each other, or on faulty memory itself. *Maggie was black. Maggie was white. They hurt Maggie. You did.* But, by the end of "Recitatif," they are both ready to at least try to discuss "what the hell happened to Maggie." Not for the shallow motive of transhistorical blame, much less to induce personal comfort or discomfort, but rather in the service of truth. We know that their exploration of the question will be painful, messy, and very likely never perfectly settled. But we also know that a good-faith attempt is better than its opposite. Which would be to go on pretending, as Twyla puts it, that "everything was hunky-dory."

Difficult to "move on" from any site of suffering if that suffering goes unacknowledged and undescribed. Citizens from Belfast and Belgrade know this, and Berlin and Banjul. (And that's just the "B"s.) In the privacy of our domestic arguments we know this. We *must* be heard. It's human to want to be heard. We are nobody if not heard. *I suffered. They suffered. My people suffered! My people continue to suffer!* Some take the narrowest possible view of this category of "my people": they mean only their immediate family. For others, the cry widens out to encompass a city, a nation, a faith group, a perceived racial category, a diaspora. But, whatever your personal allegiances, when you deliberately turn from any human suffering you make what should be a porous border between "your people" and the rest of humanity into something rigid and deadly. You ask not to be bothered by the history of nobodies, the suffering of nobodies. (Or the suffering of somebodies, if hierarchical reversal is your jam.) But surely the very least we can do is listen to what was done to a

person—or is still being done. It is the very least we owe the dead, and the suffering. People suffered to build this house, to found that bank, or your country. Maggie suffered at St. Bonaventure. And all we have to do is *hear* about that? How *can* we resent it?⁶

It takes Twyla some time to see past her resentment at being offered a new version of a past she thought she knew. (“Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?”) But, in her forced reconsideration of a shared history, she comes to a deeper realization about her own motives:

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. Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. . . . And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn’t scream, couldn’t—just like me and I was glad about that.

A few pages later, Roberta spontaneously comes to a similar conclusion (although she is now unsure as to whether or not Maggie was, indeed, black). I find the above one of the most stunning paragraphs in all of Morrison’s work. The psychological subtlety of it. The mix of projection, vicarious action, self-justification, sadistic pleasure, and personal trauma that she identifies as a motivating force within Twyla, and that, by extrapolation, she prompts us to recognize in ourselves.

Like Twyla, Morrison wants us ashamed of how we treat the powerless, even if we, too, feel powerless. And one of the ethical complexities of “Recitatif” is the uncomfortable fact that even as Twyla and Roberta fight to assert their own identities—the fact that they are both “somebody”—they simultaneously cast others into the role of nobodies. The “fags who wanted company” in the

chapel are nobodies to them, and they are so repelled by and fixated upon Maggie's disability that they see nothing else about her. But there is somebody in all these people, after all. There is somebody in all of us. This fact is our shared experience, our shared category: the human. Which acknowledgment is often misused or only half used, employed as a form of sentimental or aesthetic contemplation, i.e., *Oh, though we seem so unlike, how alike we all are under our skins. . . .* But, historically, this acknowledgment of the human—our inescapable shared category—has also played a role in the work of freedom riders, abolitionists, anticolonialists, trade unionists, queer activists, suffragettes, and in the thoughts of the likes of [Frantz Fanon](#), Malcolm X, [Stuart Hall](#), Paul Gilroy, Morrison herself. If it is a humanism, it is a radical one, which struggles toward solidarity in alterity, the possibility and promise of unity across difference. When applied to racial matters, it recognizes that, although the category of race is both experientially and structurally “real,” it yet has no ultimate or essential reality in and of itself.⁷

But, of course, ultimate reality is not where any of us live. For hundreds of years, we have lived in deliberately racialized human structures—that is to say, socially pervasive and sometimes legally binding fictions—that prove incapable of stating difference and equality simultaneously. And it is extremely galling to hear that you have suffered for a fiction, or indeed profited from one. It has been fascinating to watch the recent panicked response to the interrogation of whiteness, the terror at the dismantling of a false racial category that for centuries united the rich man born and raised in Belarus, say, with the poor woman born and raised in Wales, under the shared banner of racial superiority. But panic is not entirely absent on the other side of the binary. If race is a construct, what will happen to blackness? Can the categories of black music and black literature survive? What would the phrase “black joy” signify? How can we throw out this dirty bathwater of

racism when for centuries we have pressed the baby of race so close to our hearts, and made—even accounting for all the horror—so many beautiful things with it?

Toni Morrison loved the culture and community of the African diaspora in America, even—especially—those elements that were forged as response and defense against the dehumanizing violence of slavery, the political humiliations of Reconstruction, the brutal segregation and state terrorism of Jim Crow, and the many civil-rights successes and neoliberal disappointments that have followed. Out of this history she made a literature, a shelf of books that—for as long as they are read—will serve to remind America that its story about itself was always partial and self-deceiving. And here, for many people, we reach an impasse: a dead end. If race is a construct, whither blackness? If whiteness is an illusion, on what else can a poor man without prospects pride himself? I think a lot of people's brains actually break at this point. But Morrison had a bigger brain. She could parse the difference between the deadness of a determining category and the richness of a lived experience. And there are some clues in this story, I think. Some hints at alternative ways of conceptualizing difference without either erasing or codifying it. Surprising civic values, fresh philosophical principles. Not only categorization and visibility but also privacy and kindness:

Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long. 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.

That people live and die within a specific history—within deeply embedded cultural, racial, and class codes—is a reality that cannot be denied, and often a beautiful one. It’s what creates difference. But there are ways to deal with that difference that are expansive and comprehending, rather than narrow and diagnostic. Instead of only ticking boxes on doctors’ forms—pathologizing difference—we might also take a compassionate and discreet interest in it. We don’t always have to judge difference or categorize it or criminalize it. We don’t have to take it personally. We can also just let it be. Or we can, like Morrison, be profoundly interested in it:

The struggle was for writing that was indisputably black. I don’t yet know quite what that is, but neither that nor the attempts to disqualify an effort to find out keeps me from trying to pursue it.

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture.⁸

Visibility and privacy, communication and silence, intimacy and encounter are all expressed here. Readers who see only their own exclusion in this paragraph may need to mentally perform, in their own minds, the experiment that “Recitatif” performs in fiction: *the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial*. To perform this experiment in a literary space, I will choose, for my other character, another Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney. I am looking at his poems. I am looking in. To fully comprehend Heaney’s *œuvre*, I would have to be wholly embedded in the codes of Northern Irish culture; I am not. No

more than I am wholly embedded in the African American culture out of which and toward which Morrison writes. I am not a perfect co-conspirator of either writer. I had to Google to find out what “Lady Esther dusting powder” is, in “Recitatif,” and, when Heaney mentions hoarding “fresh berries in the byre,” **no image comes to my mind.**⁹

As a reader of these two embedded writers, both profoundly interested in their own communities, I can only be a thrilled observer, always partially included, by that great shared category, the human, but also simultaneously on the outside looking in, enriched by that which is new or alien to me, especially when it has not been diluted or falsely presented to flatter my ignorance—that dreaded “explanatory fabric.” Instead, they both keep me rigorous company on the page, not begging for my comprehension but always open to the possibility of it, for no writer would break a silence if they did not want someone—some always unknowable someone—to overhear. I am describing a model reader-writer relationship. But, as “Recitatif” suggests, the same values expressed here might also prove useful to us in our roles as citizens, allies, friends.

Race, for many, is a determining brand, simply one side of a rigid binary. Blackness, as Morrison conceived of it, was a shared history, an experience, a culture, a language. A complexity, a wealth. To believe in blackness solely as a negative binary in a prejudicial racialized structure, and to further believe that this binary is and will forever be the essential, eternal, and *primary* organizing category of human life, is a pessimist’s right but an activist’s indulgence. Meanwhile, there is work to be done. And what is the purpose of all this work if our positions within prejudicial, racialized structures are permanent, essential, unchangeable—as rigid as the rules of gravity?

The forces of capital, meanwhile, are pragmatic: capital does not bother itself with essentialisms. It transforms nobodies into somebodies—and vice versa—depending on where labor is needed and profit can be made. The Irish became somebodies when indentured labor had to be formally differentiated from slavery, to justify the latter category. In Britain, we only decided that there was something inside women—or enough of a something to be able to vote with—in the early twentieth century. British women went from being essentially angels of the house—whose essential nature was considered to be domestic—to nodes in a system whose essential nature was to work, just like men, although we were welcome to pump milk in the office basement if we really had to. . . . Yes, capital is adaptive, pragmatic. It is always looking for new markets, new sites of economic vulnerability, of potential exploitation—new Maggies. New human beings whose essential nature is to be nobody. We claim to know this even as we simultaneously misremember or elide the many Maggies in our own lives. These days, Roberta—or Twyla—might march for women’s rights, all the while wearing a four-dollar T-shirt, a product of the enforced labor of Uyghur women on the other side of the world. Twyla—or Roberta—could go door to door, registering voters, while sporting long nails freshly painted by a trafficked young girl. Roberta—or Twyla—may practice “self-care” by going to the hairdresser to get extensions shorn from another, poorer woman’s head. Far beneath the “black-white” racial strife of America, there persists a global underclass of Maggies, unseen and unconsidered within the parochial American conversation, the wretched of the earth. . . .

Our racial codes are “peculiar to” us, but what do we really mean by that? In “Recitatif,” that which would *characterize* Twyla and Roberta as black or white is the consequence of history, of shared experience, and what shared histories inevitably produce: culture, community, identity. What belongs *exclusively* to them is

their subjective experience of these same categories in which they have lived. Some of these experiences will have been nourishing, joyful, and beautiful, many others prejudicial, exploitative, and punitive. No one can take a person's subjective experiences from them. No one should try. Whether Twyla or Roberta is the somebody who has lived within the category of "white" we cannot be sure, but Morrison constructs the story in such a way that we are forced to admit the fact that other categories, aside from the racial, also produce shared experiences. Categories like being poor, being female, like being at the mercy of the state or the police, like living in a certain Zip Code, having children, hating your mother, wanting the best for your family. We are like and not like a lot of people a lot of the time. White may be the most powerful category in the racial hierarchy, but, if you're an eight-year-old girl in a state institution with a delinquent mother and no money, it sure doesn't feel that way. Black may be the lower caste, but, if you marry an I.B.M. guy and have two servants and a driver, you are—at the very least—in a new position in relation to the least powerful people in your society. And vice versa. Life is complex, conceptually dominated by binaries but never wholly contained by them. Morrison is the great master of American complexity, and "Recitatif," in my view, sits alongside "[Bartleby, the Scrivener](#)" and "[The Lottery](#)" as a perfect—and perfectly American—tale, one every American child should read.

Finally, what is *essentially* black or white about Twyla and Roberta I believe we bring to "Recitatif" ourselves, within a system of signs over which too many humans have collectively labored for hundreds of years now. It began in the racialized system of capitalism we call slavery; it was preserved in law long after slavery ended, and continues to assert itself, to sometimes lethal effect, in social, economic, educational, and judicial systems all over the world. But as a category the fact remains that it has no objective reality: it is not, like gravity, a principle of the earth. By removing it from the story, Morrison reveals both the

speciousness of “black-white” as our primary human categorization and its dehumanizing effect on human life. But she also lovingly demonstrates how much meaning we were able to find—and continue to find—in our beloved categories. The peculiar way our people make this or that dish, the peculiar music we play at a cookout or a funeral, the peculiar way we use nouns or adjectives, the peculiar way we walk or dance or paint or write—these things are dear to us. Especially if they are denigrated by others, we will tend to hold them close. We feel they define us. And this form of self-regard, for Morrison, was the road back to the human—the insistence that you are somebody although the structures you have lived within have categorized you as “nobody.” A direct descendant of slaves, Morrison writes in a way that recognizes first—and primarily—the somebody within black people, the black human having been, historically, the ultimate example of the dehumanized subject: the one transformed, by capital, from subject to object. But in this lifelong project, as the critic Jesse McCarthy has pointed out, we are invited to see a foundation for all social-justice movements: “The battle over the meaning of black humanity has always been central to both [Toni Morrison’s] fiction and essays—and not just for the sake of black people but to further what we hope all of humanity can become.”¹⁰

We hope all of humanity will reject the project of dehumanization. We hope for a literature—and a society!—that recognizes the somebody in everybody. This despite the fact that, in America’s zero-sum game of racialized capitalism, this form of humanism has been abandoned as an apolitical quantity, toothless, an inanity to repeat, perhaps, on “Sesame Street” (“Everybody’s somebody!”) but considered too naïve and insufficient a basis for radical change.¹¹

I have written a lot in this essay about prejudicial structures. But I've spoken vaguely of them, metaphorically, as a lot of people do these days. In an address to Howard University, in 1995, Morrison got specific. She broke it down, in her scientific way. It is a very useful summary, to be cut out and kept for future reference, for if we hope to dismantle oppressive structures it will surely help to examine how they are built:

Let us be reminded that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third. The move toward a final solution is not a jump. It takes one step, then another, then another. Something, perhaps, like this:

1. Construct an internal enemy, as both focus and diversion.
2. Isolate and demonize that enemy by unleashing and protecting the utterance of overt and coded name-calling and verbal abuse. Employ ad hominem attacks as legitimate charges against that enemy.
3. Enlist and create sources and distributors of information who are willing to reinforce the demonizing process because it is profitable, because it grants power, and because it works.
4. Palisade all art forms; monitor, discredit, or expel those that challenge or destabilize processes of demonization and deification.
5. Subvert and malign all representatives of and sympathizers with this constructed enemy.
6. Solicit, from among the enemy, collaborators who agree with and can sanitize the dispossession process.
7. Pathologize the enemy in scholarly and popular mediums; recycle, for example, scientific racism and the myths of racial superiority in order to naturalize the pathology.

8. Criminalize the enemy. Then prepare, budget for, and rationalize the building of holding arenas for the enemy—especially its males and absolutely its children.
9. Reward mindlessness and apathy with monumentalized entertainments and with little pleasures, tiny seductions: a few minutes on television, a few lines in the press, a little pseudo-success, the illusion of power and influence; a little fun, a little style, a little consequence.
10. Maintain, at all costs, **silence**.¹²

Elements of this fascist playbook can be seen in the European encounter with Africa, between the West and the East, between the rich and the poor, between the Germans and the Jews, the Hutus and the Tutsis, the British and the Irish, the Serbs and the Croats. It is one of our continual human possibilities. Racism is a kind of fascism, perhaps the most pernicious and long-lasting. But it is still a man-made structure. The capacity for fascisms of one kind or another is something else we all share—you might call it our most depressing collective identity. (And, if we are currently engaged in trying to effect change, it could be worthwhile—as an act of ethical spring-cleaning—to check through Toni’s list and insure that we are not employing any of the playbook of fascism in our own work.) Fascism labors to create the category of the “nobody,” the scapegoat, the sufferer. Morrison repudiated that category as it has applied to black people over centuries, and in doing so strengthened the category of the “somebody” for all of us, whether black or white or neither. Othering whoever has othered us, in reverse, is no liberation—as cathartic as **it may feel**.¹³

Liberation is liberation: the recognition of **somebody in everybody**.¹⁴

Still, like most readers of “Recitatif,” I found it impossible not to hunger to know who the other was, Twyla or Roberta. Oh, I

urgently wanted to have it straightened out. Wanted to sympathize warmly in one sure place, turn cold in the other. To feel for the somebody and dismiss the nobody. But this is precisely what Morrison *deliberately and methodically will not allow me to do*. It's worth asking ourselves why. "Recitatif" reminds me that it is not essentially black or white to be poor, oppressed, lesser than, exploited, ignored. The answer to "What the hell happened to Maggie?" is not written in the stars, or in the blood, or in the genes, or forever predetermined by history. Whatever was done to Maggie was done by people. People like Twyla and Roberta. People like you and me.

This essay is drawn from the introduction to "[Recitatif: A Story](#)," by Toni Morrison, out this February from Knopf.