Toni Morrison’s social criticism

“But we do language.”

“Being a writer, she [the griot] thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences.”

(Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” 13)

“... lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both the excluder and the excluded.”

(Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture” 19)

Though much less widely recognized or acclaimed than her fiction, or even her work in the field of literary theory, Toni Morrison’s social criticism specifically elaborates on discussions raised elsewhere in her oeuvre. As in her other work, it contains a strong cognitive element, in the sense that she is primarily preoccupied with the way in which language is used by human beings and how it shapes what she calls the “construction of social reality.” Much of this is dealt with in her fiction, which is often fairly straightforward about the social conditions of African Americans, as, for example, in the episode in Song of Solomon, when in a “lecture” dominated by the word not, Railroad Tommy lists many of the things that a black person cannot have. Nevertheless, Morrison’s criticism goes beyond the mere representation of facts. Using the label “cognitive” can take much of the mystery out of the so-called “magic realism” of her work and place it in a context of pragmatics, of a discourse that connects language and the human beings who use it in a framework which puts at the center of intellectual activity embodied minds rather than some kind of textualist grammatology. Language is something that people “do”; it is a part of human behavior and therefore intrinsically of social relevance.

This “realistic” involvement in her fiction may be one reason why the corpus of Morrison’s social criticism in essay form is relatively slim. She has edited two volumes on very topical issues: first, Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality (1992) on the Clarence Thomas hearings
before his Supreme Court appointment, and secondly, *Birth of a Nation*hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case (1997). For both books she has written introductions that engage in the language politics of these very public issues. There is no mistaking these texts for anything else than straightforward social criticism, and they provide a good opportunity to pinpoint some of Morrison's cognitive concerns. Once we better understand the nature of some of these representational issues, we can easily connect them to three of Morrison's other essays that are more focused on the intricacies of writing as an interactive process negotiating inside and outside, the private and the public, namely her brilliant lecture upon the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), then her equally impressive speech upon the acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, "The Dancing Mind" (1996), and finally, "Home" (1997), the introductory piece to a volume of contributions at a conference in Princeton inspired by her colleague Cornel West's seminal book *Race Matters*.6

"Friday on the Potomac"

In her introduction to *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, entitled "Friday on the Potomac,"7 Morrison shares some of her ideas on the construction of an "official story" of the Clarence Thomas hearings and the desire of the public to receive the "ultimate historical account" or "last word" (x). Significantly, she turns this end into a beginning and meaning into a matter of process: "For the kind of insight that invites reflection, language must be critiqued" (xi). She demonstrates in an almost haunting way how the language used to characterize the black nominee was motivated by racist stereotypes, reducing him to his laughter, his body, and his sexuality (xii–xiv). Similarly, the descriptions of Anita Hill deprived her of a rational self:

Since neither the press nor the Senate Judiciary Committee would entertain seriously or exhaustively the truth of her accusations, she could be called any number or pair of discrediting terms and the contradictions would never be called into question, because, as a black woman, she was contradiction itself, irrationality in the flesh. She was portrayed as a lesbian who hated men and a vamp who could be ensnared and painfully rejected by them. She was a mixture heretofore not recognized in the glossary of racial tropes: an *intellectual* daughter of black *farmers*; a *black* female taking *offence*; a black *lady* repeating *dirty words*. Anita Hill's description of Thomas's behavior toward her did not ignite a careful search for the truth: her testimony simply produced an exchange of racial tropes.8 (xvi, original emphases)
The hearings were reduced to “an exchange of racial tropes,” Morrison concludes; the “official story” found no consistent motivation in her accusations that made sense. In both cases, Thomas and Hill, the black human beings are eclipsed by a language that completely controls them: “The participants were black and therefore ‘known,’ serviceable, expendable in the interest of limning out one or the other of two mutually antagonistic fabulations” (xvii). Morrison puts her finger on these projections of “voyeuristic desire, fueled by mythologies that render blacks publicly serviceable instruments of private dread and longing” (xvii–xviii). This is, of course, a classical case of “othering,” but the crucial point is that Morrison takes the binary out of the realm of mere language structure and contextualizes it in a historical realm of human interaction. The crux of the matter is the denial of motivation, of rational intentionality, to the people concerned – which is simply a denial of their humanity, of their right to think for themselves and make sense of their cognitive agency.

“Friday on the Potomac” is mainly about the dehumanizing nature of racial stereotypes – which is why Morrison’s main intertextual reference is to the colonizing narrative of Robinson Crusoe: the foot on Friday’s head, learning the master’s language, the subaltern script. It is interesting, however, to look at the details of Morrison’s criticism. Though the “internalization” of the master’s language “is complete” in the case of Friday ([xxvii] and implicitly Clarence Thomas), she insists on the cognitive implausibility of his case:

During the time in which he knows no other English, one has to assume he thinks in his own language, cogitates in it, explains stimuli and phenomena in the language he was born to. But Crusoe’s account suggests otherwise, suggests that before his rescue Friday had no language, and even if he did, there was nothing to say in it.

(Morrison wonders: “Did Friday forget completely the language he dreamed in?” (xxv). Though she is strongly aware of the influence of the colonizing discourse and of the inevitability of the master’s language, she signals its incompleteness. Rather than lamenting the “official story” and narratives of self-destructive black irrationality, her introduction ends on notions of “conversation,” “serious exchange,” “intense debates” and “new conversations” (xxx). The way out of victimization involves a dynamics of multiple agency – the recognition of “people [talking] to one another” (viii), of a plurality of voices behind language, i.e., of cognitive empowering, of language motivated by individual lives.

Such a cognitive model of language is very different from a textualist one because it focuses on people speaking rather than on interacting texts only
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(how can texts "interact" all by themselves anyway?). Language is two-tiered: it is only meaningful as a symptom of human behavior; it is not the mere product of some generative grammar or structuralist synchronicity. Thus the circularity involved is one of the feedback loop of a learning mind (which involves a causality of people creating concepts) rather than a hermeneutic circle of conceptualist referral (which would limit itself to a grammatological interaction of signs). When Morrison talks of a "new arena" (xxx) of debate, the realm of symbols is opened up to the world of human interaction.

"Dead Man Golfing"

Morrison’s contribution to her edited volume on the O. J. Simpson trial is again concerned with the denial of black cognition by the “official story.” The press and the public are shocked about their own delusion: “We thought he loved us” (vii). The black subject is defined by mutually exclusive frames of “puppy” and “monster,” which can only be reconciled at the price of “incoherence”; “incoherence and emotional disorder ‘fit’ when the subject is black . . . Difficult explanations are folded into the general miasma of black incoherence” (ix). Morrison observes that the prosecution “needed a coherent case, not a coherent defendant. ‘Senseless’ is the term most often applied to crime (and criminals) anyway” (ix). The price for a coherent narrative that explains reality is the irrationality of “the other,” of blacks, and, as Morrison suggests, even of devious “criminals” in general.

Morrison draws a historical analogy to Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” a story that she had previously made reference to in her piece on Clarence Thomas:

Like Captain Delano in Benito Cereno, the racist thinker can jump from the view of the slave, Babo, as “naturally docile, made for servitude” to “savage cannibal” without any gesture towards what may lie in between the two conclusions, or any explanation of the jump from puppy to monster, so the truth of Babo's situation - that he is leading a surreptitious rebellion aboard the slave ship, that he is a clever man who wants to be free - never enters the equation.

("Friday," xv)

The denial of intelligence (“that he is a clever man”) is demonstrated to be part of an old story that refuses to acknowledge the black mind. Melville is important for Morrison because he exposes the nature of that self-deception and emphasizes the instantaneous change of perception in the Captain’s mind from “dog” to “snake,” the “abrupt switch of the Senegalese from one kind of animal to another” (“Dead Man,” x). She calls this an “epiphany” of American reframing: “[T]he reversal is played out with and on a black man”
(x). And she makes clear that this projective imposition is also a denial of humanity:

Even when permitted conceptually to enter the kingdom of Homo sapiens, blacks have historically been viewed as either submissive children, violent ones, or both at once . . . What might be illogical for a white is easily possible for a black who has never been required to make, assumed to make, or described as making “sense.” (xi)

Equally frightening is the analogy that Morrison finds of this framework with the description of criminals as “psychotics” and scapegoats within public reasoning, as “the perfect marriage of Jekyll and Hyde” (xii). There is an “absence of a rational analysis of behavior.” She uses this expression twice because it provides a common denominator for all three contexts: Simpson, the slave, the criminal. When she herself tries to build a case and “construct a plot any reader would accept,” she fails (xii). She cannot write a coherent narrative of O. J. Simpson’s behavior that would satisfy the “standards of believability”: “All my efforts collapsed into non-sense. Without the support of black irrationality . . . the fictional case not only could not be made, it was silly” (xiii). This is why the “official story” of the media again resorts to old underlying narratives of lynching, a “symbolic language . . . already scripted, fully spectacularized and riveting in its gazeability” (xvi). Morrison observes a precession (as Baudrillard would have it) of given representations over reality – but at the same time, crucially, she puts her finger on what is precisely excluded by such a postmodernist semiotics: “[T]he dialogue is confined to the terms the spectacle has set” (xvii). The racism is contextualized by a framework of imposition and non-interaction that excludes causality in the sense of human agency by the object concerned.

Morrison’s point is that the “real lives” remain “largely unimagined” and feed no input into the “official story,” which “is already in gear to protect itself” (xviii). In cognitive terms this means that in order to keep the schemata intact, the media limit themselves to active gestures of assimilation, of appropriating lived experience to the already given public representation, thereby avoiding accommodation, i.e., a readjustment (or adaptation) of the given schemata to reality – which is nothing less than a refusal of learning on their part. What stays intact therefore are the racist stereotypes and the given intractability of policing power: “It would take the whole department to effect such a conspiracy, wouldn’t it?” (xxii). This way difficult issues can be avoided and their complexity can be ignored – Morrison also regrets that, for example, there is no “domestic abuse dialogue” and that the complexity of race and gender issues combined remains unpacked (xxii–xxiv). She demonstrates how “the grammar of the meta-narrative” (xxiv) imposes its
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simplistic binary ("guilty or innocent") on the case, "dismissing or trivializing all counternarratives" (xxv).

Because of the commercial "gigantism" of the case (xvii) the given "grammar" is applied to Simpson and at the same time (naturally) reflected back unto its origin as a projection, i.e., "the black individual is forced to stand in for the entire race" (xxviii). For Morrison this "official story" marks the "longing for a living black man repeating forever a narrative of black inferiority" (xxvi), a tendency which she associates with the "post-Civil Rights discourse on black deviancy" (xxvii). In the end the real Mr. Simpson is reduced to a "disembodied voice, a phantom. A social cadaver and a minor irritant in the official gaze, which cracks occasionally to expose him golfing. A 'dead' man arrogantly alive" (xxv). Morrison shows how through the imposition of "the will of the dominant culture" (xxviii) Simpson becomes a ghost, a disembodied conceptual haunt exemplifying the alienation of the black minority. It is probably no coincidence that she is hinting at traditional black imagery of duppies and zombies, in which the body is severed from the mind and concepts deny the lived experience.

Nobel Lecture

In the other three texts discussed here, Morrison moves from specific political arenas into her own domain of writing and shows how this struggle for a cognitive dimension of acknowledged humanity translates into a pragmatic approach to language when it comes to the life of books. In her Nobel Lecture she makes clear that the example of her old and blind griot applies to the "lore of several cultures" (9) – it applies to all human societies. Being "both the law and its transgression" (10), this woman is the keeper of a tradition to which she at the same time contributes what T. S. Eliot would call her "individual talent."12 She preserves and she makes new in order for the heritage to survive. Her blindness is only at first sight a "profound disability" – it also stands for the "clairvoyance" of the traditional seer (10). Cognizant of history and the past, she is not distracted by the perceptualist logic13 of what Morrison terms "spectacle" or "gazeability" in the Simpson piece. Her vision is one of knowledge, i.e., it is precisely a cognitive one. The old woman's treatment of language is not phenomenological; it does not follow the logic of phenomena but engages in human behavior.

"It is in your hands," is what she says about the children's bird (17). Language depends on responsible agency: "Being a writer, she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences" (12). This is why she argues against the irresponsibility of a "dead language," what
she calls a “statist language” (13) because it “suppresses human potential” (14). The fact that such language can do “violence” implies an intimate connection with the extra-linguistic world – language is always part of a process of human interaction at its origin: “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas” (16–17). Hence, language that is severed from its living use is deadly.

Like many critics today, Morrison acknowledges the grammatological powers of structure, but her main aim is to expose this aspect as a problem rather than as an epistemological origin. She regrets the “lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both the excluder and the excluded” (19). Her language is a door to the mind, and the reason why a monolithic language fails (Morrison uses the example of the Tower of Babel) is the simple fact that “heaven,” the superstructure, must be imagined at one’s “feet”: “Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives” (19). When she suggests “a view of heaven as life,” she implies biology as a crucial ingredient of language. “The vitality of language” means that it can “limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” (20). Though “displacing experience,” it cannot be “a substitute for it” (20). Though acknowledging what deconstructionists would consider “deferral,” Morrison rather points beyond language as a hermeneutic chain of signifiers and suggests that linguistic incompleteness be complemented by the user – in a model that corresponds to a feedback loop.

Morrison’s example of such language use is Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” in which he states that the world will not “remember what we say here” but “what they did here.” “Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war,” says Morrison. “Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to do so. Its force, its felicity, is in its reach towards the ineffable” (20–21). And this “ineffable” is inevitably cognitive. Morrison suggests deference rather than deferral, respect for the other subjectivity in language, for the intentionality, the motivation, the knowledge described. The “generative” element in word-work is not found in its grammar but in its securing of our “difference, our human difference” (22). Language is something that “we do,” Morrison insists – this is why it “may be the measure of our lives” (22). It is about concepts measuring life, not concepts measuring concepts only.

In the second part of her Nobel Lecture, Morrison changes to the perspective of the children, testing the relevance of such a live heritage. They have a right to question their elders: “You trivialize us and trivialize the bird that is not in our hands” (27). There is a receiving end in Morrison’s narrative, i.e.,
her model of understanding is personified: “Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world” (27). They do not want the closure of a blueprint, but rather want to be shown “belief’s wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear’s caul” (28), which is why they insist that her blindness is a blessing: she can “speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation” (28). Language can free us from the powerful onslaught of visual totalizing because it can register things not seen, such as the knowledge of the past, and it makes possible “mediation,” i.e., a negotiation of multiple influences, reflection, control over one’s experience.

Morrison ends this dense text with the epiphanic scene of “a wagonload of slaves” arriving at an inn in a winter environment reminiscent of Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi.” It exorcises Faulkner’s image in an encounter of the slaves with a girl and a boy who offer them food and drink, “and something more: a glance into the eyes of the one she serves” (30). Morrison emphasizes that “look” and the “look back,” which “warm” their stop. The final episode in this essay about language insists on its social nature. It is about interaction, recognition, respect, striving for a redeeming communion of equals. Similarly, the moment of encounter between the griot and the children means that they have “truly caught” the bird – this encounter is what the ineffable of language refers to.

The Dancing Mind

In The Dancing Mind Morrison again uses this fundamentally egalitarian and empowering image of dialogic interaction, a behavioral model of human encounter, and applies it to both the acts of writing and of reading. “There is a certain kind of peace,” she writes, “that is not merely the absence of war” (7). Thus we see her break out of a given binary (war vs. peace) and looking for an alternative: “The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one” (7). She liberates the notion of peace from its supplementary position as absence of activity and redefines it as an alternative activity of dancing, a pleasurable agency of interaction and cooperation.

Morrison’s conceptual alternative is not based on “active negation” but on “passive negation.” An active negation would be defined by its opposition to what it stands against — “peace” as the other of “war,” the dominant concept to which it is functionally attached and on which it is dependent. Passive negation conversely does not let itself be defined by what it opposes — the oppositional aspect is not part of the alternative; it is merely perceived
as such when the two notions are compared. Rather than opposition, we have difference – thus passive negation is actually a positive “affirmation” in its own right. Whereas active negation is the product of a closed gestalt of conceptualist logic, passivity negation is a matter of pragmatics and language use. It simply stands for the open possibilities of variety, of multiple positivity.

This does, of course, involve agency on all sides and therefore moves beyond representational structures into cognitive processes. The stress is not on language determining behavior but on behavior within language. Thus even writing and reading, the interior moments when a human being is together with a text, are defined as dialogic. Morrison regrets that “to be alone with a book” is a lost “skill” (10). She attributes this to an educational system of top-down discursive control that she calls “the terror of growing up vacuum-pressured in this country” and sees as a danger “even to the entitled” (13). She rather wants textual encounters to be encounters of minds, “that intimate, sustained surrender to the company of my own mind while it touches another’s – which is reading” (15). Note that this is “surrender” to company (personification) and interaction (dialogue).

It is significantly different from, say, the experience described in George Poulet’s classical description of the “Phenomenology of Reading”:

As soon as I replace my direct perception of reality by the words of a book, I deliver myself, bound hand and foot, to the omnipotence of fiction . . . I become the prey of language. There is no escaping this take-over. Language surrounds me with its unreality . . . I am the subject of thoughts other than my own. My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another.

This is mere reflection. In a sense I must recognize that no idea really belongs to me. Ideas belong to no one. They pass from one mind to another as coins pass from hand to hand.19

This is no experience of dialogue but an experience of possession by another. Morrison is unwilling to submit to such a format. She knows that ideas are not a matter of mere neutral exchange value (“coins”) but always belong to the person whose ideology they reflect. Moreover, as an African American she is wary20 of the controlling power of ideas. In the black animist tradition, ideas behave like the “invisibles,” the selfish loas, when the Voodoo gods, or “laws,” try to control people in acts of literal physical “possession.” These ideas must be negotiated with by the houngan or mamba, the priest or priestess, whose medicine is precisely powerful because they can stand up to these possessive voices with their connaissance, i.e., with their knowledge of ideologies and their ability to negotiate (this is also implied by the griot of her Nobel Lecture). Hence the art of Morrison’s “surrender” in the act of reading is to let it happen while not letting it become overwhelming.
In this speech to the National Book Foundation Morrison emphasizes “the seriousness of the industry” (15). She makes clear that there is a political responsibility in the encounter of reader and writer in the text, i.e., in “the life of the book world”: “Its real life is about creating and producing and distributing knowledge; about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one’s own mind dancing with another’s; about making sure that the environment in which this work is done is welcoming, supportive” (16). This pledge can be read as a reminder to the publishing world to make the encounter of minds possible, to secure cognitive agency: “Securing that kind of peace – the peace of the dancing mind – is our work” (17). As Lakoff and Johnson argue in their cognitive linguistics manifesto, we “live by” metaphorical concepts, and there is a crucial difference whether we define our arguments in terms of war (and peace) or as a matter of “dance.”

“Home”

The essay “Home” both confirms many of the observations already made above and adds to them by clarifying some of the political dimensions in the context of “race.” Morrison tries to imagine “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter” (3), and the metaphor she comes up with is a “home” rather than a “house.” She likes the term “home” because it helps her “domesticate” the racial issue and turns the utopian project into “a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (4). Morrison has no delusions about “agency,” “sovereignty,” or “authority”:

As an already- and always-raced writer, I knew from the very beginning that I could not, would not, reproduce the master’s voice and its assumption of the all-knowing law of the white father. Nor would I substitute his voice with that of his fawning mistress or his worthy opponent, for both of these positions (mistress or opponent) seemed to confine me to his terrain, in his arena, accepting the house rules in the dominance game.

Note Morrison’s preoccupation with the problem of gestalt logic in a spatial environment, one that would force her into active negation: “In short, wasn’t I (wouldn’t I always be) tethered to a death-dealing ideology even (and especially) when I honed all my intelligence toward subverting it?” (4–5). She is afraid of being merely reactive in her intellectual enterprise, and of becoming the victim of an active negation that eclipses her own self. Or, to express this in the terminology of postcolonial theory: Morrison does not want to “write back” to the colonizing discourse and then find herself victimized by a theory that locates, once again, the colonizer at the center of an inverted map! It is crucial that this gesture of active negation be avoided.
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“Home” means that she wants to have her written encounters on her own territory, to be her own mind rather than the supplement of somebody else’s. In that sense, Morrison is a Bakhtinian, as Justine Tally has suggested. Bakhtin’s arguments for the cognitive humanism of the dialogic and against the logical abstractions of the dialectic are also hers, and that precisely because Morrison wants to avoid the pitfalls of active negation, which is dehumanizing and depriving the “other” of his or her own cognitive agency. An example of this kind of problem in the imagination of what she calls “Western hegemony” (11) can be found at the Negerball of a European carnival. We will not learn much about blacks there: we will merely learn about “the other” as a carnivalesque projection of disguises. Though we may encounter some African stereotypes, the Neger part of the event will include men dressed up as ladies, cowboys, Chinese, beggars, animals, and generally symbols of otherness. This kind of negativity is already conceptualized; these figures are not concept-making – they have no mind of their own. My point is that in their negativity such projections merely reflect the cognitive agency of one side – hence the “incoherence” of the other side. The “black irrationality” Morrison found in the “official” stories of the Clarence Thomas hearings and the O. J. Simpson trial is informed by Negerball semiotics. Rather than represent the other, one should talk to “them” in order to learn about their inside, the reasonings of their mind – which involves a framework of personifying dialogue.

Morrison’s example of cross-influence in “Home” is how she changed one word in the last sentence of Beloved at the suggestion of her editor. This triggers a process of reflection in which she states: “My efforts were to carve away the accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable” (7). Writing in a non-racial language is impossible: this “register of permanently unrealizable dream” would allow “racism an intellectual weight to which it has absolutely no claim” (8). Hence the ultimate political gesture is to voice the other as a self.

This is why “home” is more important than “theory”: “We need to think about how invested some of the best theoretical work may be in clinging to the house’s redesign as simulacrum” (8). Theory means following the logic of your premises when they no longer refer to reality. The need for a “nonmessianic language” (11) opposes the dialectical mode of a totalizing gestalt. Submitting theory to the dialogue of a conference may even, as she insists, “save our lives” (11). Because we “live by” these terms, as Lakoff and Johnson would have it, we have to discuss them, negotiate them, remake them within a pragmatic context.
I find Morrison here in the tradition of the pragmatist philosopher and cognitive psychologist William James, who insists that theory cannot match experience. A cognitive model is human, conversational, but not limited to logic: “Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it.” Tracing experience, language is used and at the same time overcome: “I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus, a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent” (9). This is her vision of a “social space that is psychically and physically safe” (10). And, most important, this “new space” is “formed by the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the ‘othered,’ the personal that is always embedded in the public” (12). The “safety without walls” Morrison envisages is one of interaction between the personal and the public, where the personal may not be primary, but it is priority, a place “both snug and wide open” – “home” as a comfortable space of encounter, beyond alienation.

At the core of Morrison’s concerns in her social criticism are logical snares of representation. They have to be pointed out because they dominate the media, the political debates and agendas, and they are abused for reasons of power, racism, and, sometimes, sheer ignorance. Moreover, many of these images also determine our internalized discourses, our own thinking, writing, reading. It is at this cognitive core of mental human agency where Morrison is most political, when she unpacks the modalities, incompatibilities, the contradictions, and the injustices, and effectively demonstrates how exactly they “measure” our lives (Nobel Lecture, 22).

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 22 (original italics). All other references to this essay will be included within the text.
2. See the subtitle of Morrison’s book on the Clarence Thomas hearing (note 7 below).
4. I am borrowing this notion from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1999).


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11. The origin of this terminology can be found in Jean Piaget’s cognitive psychology, which has revolutionized the modern psychology of learning; see Dorothy G. Singer and Tracy A. Revenson, *A Piaget Primer: How a Child Thinks* (New York: Plume, 1996), p. 15. Piaget’s operational cognitive model is based on the interaction of a living organism within the environment.


18. Like the “ground” in a gestalt, active negation is determined by the foregrounded shape of a predominant “figure.” It merely traces an argument given by the preceding part.


20. She uses the word “vigilance” (7).


23. My example for this fallacy is the seminal text in postcolonial theory by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*. 
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