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English 305

25 October 2019

Disrupting White Normativity in Langston Hughes's "I, Too" and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

In a society detrimentally attached to faulty color-blind ideologies, discussions of racial constructs in the Black literary imaginary highlight the fictionality of race and underscore the systemic consequences this social fiction incites. In considering Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" alongside Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too," I demonstrate that both texts illustrate how strategies of divisiveness and ignorance function as tools of white supremacy in the proliferation and maintenance of institutional racism. Placing these two texts in conversation with one another makes clear that the consequences of racial identification endure, and while Hughes clearly emphasizes its existence and consequences alongside his radical intentions, Morrison mediates the consequences of racial difference through racial absence to more subtly confront society's attachment to color-blind ideologies and the ways in which they diminish the significance and consequences of racial difference.

Although both texts irrefutably establish the existence of racial differences in spite of their being a construct, the stark racial identification in Hughes's "I, Too" deeply contrasts with the ambivalence of racial identity in Morrison's "Recitatif." From the poetic speaker's initial declaration of racial identity, "I am the darker brother," Hughes's poem invites a more explicit and condemning discussion surrounding the complexities of racial difference since its status as a social fiction does not mitigate its immediate and resounding consequences (line 2). In an era predating color-blind ideologies, Hughes's integration of the tensions between his dual

identity—being both Black and American—at the onset of the poem ignites the important conversation about Black American identity occurring throughout the early twentieth century. Jeff Westover's "Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work of Langston Hughes" considers how this history of national identity and "America's political self-definitions" provide Hughes "with the basis for challenging the status quo and demanding change from the government that supports it" (1207). In his poem, Hughes identifies the dissonance between his status as "the darker brother" and the fact that he "too, sing[s] America" to immediately highlight the status quo of racial difference that permeates American society and produces the strife and division Hughes later elucidates in his poem (2, 1). As Hughes follows "I, too, sing America" with the single-lined, declarative statement "I am the darker brother," the existence of racial difference resounds evocatively throughout the rest of the poem. Hughes intensifies the implications of this racial difference by connecting the existence of his racial difference to America's reduction of his identity to his race. As a response to Walt Whitman's ideals of American unity in "I Hear America Singing," Hughes immediately complicates American values of unity through the existence of racial difference, thus implicating the continuation of racial difference in a larger narrative of systemic racism, one in which "the darker brother" must fight for his recognition, safety, and existence.

Like Hughes's poem, Morrison's story "Recitatif" highlights and challenges a racially intensified status quo, yet as color-blind ideologies and white invisibility further imbed themselves into late-twentieth-century American culture and society, Morrison must employ more subtle, layered narrative strategies to combat the unacknowledged systemic consequences of racialization. Morrison identifies the characters Roberta and Twyla as "[looking] like salt and pepper," which is "what the other kids called [them] sometimes," creating an immediate

illustration of racial difference through ambiguous characterization while also highlighting society's recognition of that racial difference (1429). Morrison explicitly identifies the existence of racial difference while denying her readers the specificity of each character's race, essentially disrupting the status of white invisibility that positions whiteness as, what Margaret Andersen calls, "an unmarked category against which difference is constructed" (28). Amy Shuman and Robyn Warhol also include in their analysis of "Recitatif" Andersen's notions of white invisibility. They note that "race does not inhere in any person, but is discursively constructed" out of the same "perceived difference and affiliation" that stem from the institutional maintenance of white invisibility (1010). Morrison's simple depiction of the "salt and pepper"—Black and white—racial identities of each character emphasizes the ways in which racism and its institutionalization function because of white racial identity, highlighting the inarguable existence of racial difference in society. By removing racial specificity and installing ambiguous racial markers in "Recitatif," Morrison develops a narrative in which "racial difference" is not "the main complication producing the plot," and she instead centralizes the consequences of systemic racism as influencing the plot and character development in the short story (Shuman and Warhol 1012). Morrison reveals how even if racial identity is unknown, its consequences continue within a tradition centered on "the creation, development, and maintenance of white privilege, economic wealth, and sociopolitical power over nearly four centuries" (Andersen 29). Twyla's and Roberta's lack of racial specificity illuminates the frailty of color-blind ideologies, since even the removal of explicit racial differences in the text ultimately does not mitigate the consequences of a racialized society that continues to perpetuate ideals of white supremacy.

Through the metaphor of family units in "I, Too," Hughes presents the estrangement of "the darker brother," or Black people, from the American household as a means of challenging

the same status quo of white hegemony Morrison addresses in “Recitatif.” Hughes immediately insists on the existence of Blackness in America as significant, yet subdued and subjugated, because the speaker addresses how white America “send[s] [him] to eat in the kitchen / When company comes” (3-4). Hughes illuminates the tendency for white America to diminish and marginalize the voices and presence of Black citizens. White America’s decision to “send” away the “darker brother” “[w]hen company comes” also implies feelings of intense shame for white America concerning the treatment of Black folks throughout American history, and the racial baggage of their presence evokes unwanted shame and guilt amid white company. Hughes’s commentary on the erasure of Black presence in these communal spaces further implicates white society’s active marginalization because it forces Black folks to “assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they [can] be better, less threatening servants” (hooks 30). In alluding to this erasure through images of the American family, house, and home, Hughes underscores the moral and psychological damages to Black Americans in American institutions of racism. He ultimately attests that the marginalization that racial differences produce erases the humanity and experiences of Black Americans. In contrast to Morrison’s racial ambivalence, Hughes’s bold directness in addressing racial tensions and divisions in his poem not only fits into the artistic conventions of his time but also speaks to the necessity of explicitness in regard to racial dialogues: it creates the community space necessary to begin understanding the consequences of enduring racialization.

Whereas “I, Too” contrasts white America’s investment in racial difference to American ideals of family and household, “Recitatif” depicts shifting notions of kinship between Twyla and Roberta to necessitate a transformation of family values—values more greatly influenced by

intersectional solidarity and acknowledgment of difference—as a means of coping in a white-supremacist society. Since both women live in the intersections of their race, class, and upbringing, Morrison develops the intersectionality in "Recitatif" to reveal how the systemic nature of racism produces compounding consequences when other marginalized identities intersect with racial identity. In spite of Twyla and Roberta being a "black girl and a white girl" and coming from different class backgrounds, their shared experience of family instability inspires greater unity between them in their youth (Morrison 1436). Morrison emphasizes the inherent negligibility of this racial difference by depicting them at their midlife reunion "behaving like sisters separated for much too long" (Morrison 1436). In this moment, Morrison illustrates how the once sisterly pair becomes distanced by other marginalizing aspects of the girls' identities, class being the most salient. Class tensions tear their sense of unity asunder and act as a persistent barrier between them, reinforcing the roles of classism and class divisions in maintaining the status of white supremacy. As a function of white-supremacist ideals, classism magnifies the consequences and tensions of racial difference in "Recitatif," illuminating the role of racial difference in creating divisions between marginalized groups and preventing the formation of racial and class unity—both of which threaten the maintenance of white supremacy. Through an emphasis on sibling connection and solidarity along lines of intersectionality, Morrison insists that people create deeper emotional connections and coalitions to begin dismantling the division-inducing system of white supremacy and the tools that support it. In a later reunion, Morrison reveals white-supremacist constructs inspiring even greater unnatural fissures in the two girls' sisterhood:

> Automatically I reached for Roberta, like the old days in the orchard when they saw us watching them and we had to get out of there, and if one of us fell the other pulled her up

and if one of us was caught the other stayed to kick and scratch, and neither would leave the other behind. My arm shot out of the car window but no receiving hand was there.

Roberta was looking at me sway from side to side in the car and her face was still. (1439)

As their societally manufactured differences deepen the chasm between them, Morrison illustrates the extensive nature of whiteness in diminishing the solidarity between Twyla and Roberta. Although they may be on opposing sides, Morrison describes Twyla as "automatically [reaching] for Roberta"; however, Twyla is met with Roberta's "still" face. "[N]o receiving hand" saves her from the racial difference, and white-supremacist constructs develop between them. Twyla's instinct to find solidarity with Roberta in spite of their difference underscores the fictitious nature of racial difference, yet their inability to create unity in spite of Morrison's insistence on their inherent sisterhood spotlights Morrison's insistence on the debilitating consequences of racial difference. The destabilization of Twyla and Roberta's kinship problematizes class division because it serves as a tool of white supremacy, which necessitates class difference and racial difference in order to emotionally sever the values of sisterhood and unity among marginalized peoples. While these racial differences may be fiction, Morrison further indicts them as systemic and consequential because they traffic in strategies that depend on division and tension working to break down important opportunities for coalition.

In the culminating moments of each text, both authors punctuate their responses to the consequences of racial difference with active solutions that stress immediate consciousness and recognition of the enduring state of systemic racism. The passage of time works as a significant and intentional aspect in both texts in their discussions of overcoming and dismantling white supremacy. Hughes contends that "[t]omorrow," after he "laugh[s] / And eat[s] well /And grow[s] strong," he will "be at the table / When company comes" (8, 5-7, 9-10). Because the

speaker's experience stands as a voice for the Black collective, his insistence on joy, resilience, and defiance is both a message to his fellow Black Americans and a warning to white America. Hughes suggests that change is swiftly approaching, and that Black folks will not wait idly for white Americans to correct the system supporting their privilege and continuing the disenfranchisement of Black Americans. In a similar vein, Morrison's narrative structure, which impinges on the chronological and nonlinear progression of Twyla and Roberta's relationship, speaks to the similar nonlinear reality of racial progress that necessitates the dismantling of white supremacist systems. In their final conversation, Roberta's admission that she wanted to kick Maggie—a racially ambiguous, disabled woman—and that she "really did think [Maggie] was black," even if "now [Roberta] can't be sure," reifies Morrison's portrayal of the intersectional consequences of racial differences (1441). Roberta's shifting memory and retelling of the story of Maggie's abuse ultimately "captures the contemporary legacy of America's racialized past," highlighting the failure of color-blind ideologies to rectify a history fraught with systemic racialized violence (Benjamin 89). Instead, Morrison celebrates self-reflection and honesty, while rejecting silence and complicity, because they disrupt mechanisms of white supremacy that create division and stifle the development of solidarity.

Morrison and Hughes ultimately assert that the actions of seeing and doing remain entangled in the struggles for racial awareness and destruction of white supremacy. Both texts inevitably arrive at a mutual understanding that "all black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" because of the multifaceted and complex ways in which white supremacy functions (hooks 32). For both authors, overthrowing the violent state of white supremacy requires acknowledging and interrogating systems of racial oppression. Morrison and Hughes each reject

the way in which "whiteness is felt to be the human condition," instead insisting on a shared humanity that society must rectify and uplift through immediate action and solidarity (Dyer 12). Hughes's poignant, final declaration—"They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I, too, am America"—invites white America to confront and reconcile its shameful attachment to racial difference and the maintenance of white supremacy in a country supposedly founded on ideals of unity and solidarity (16-18). Alongside this, in "Recitatif" it is Roberta's understanding that "wanting to is doing it" and her final question of "what the hell happened to Maggie?" that each underscore Morrison's denial of complicity and silence (Morrison 1442). Like Hughes, Morrison demands that, as a means of working toward America's reconciliation with its racially fraught past, society continuously question the white-supremacist systems that further the marginalization and erasure of oppressed folks.

"I, Too" and "Recitatif" both work within stereotypical constructs of Blackness to better exemplify the United States' reliance on Black stereotypes of menace, illiteracy, and inferiority to uplift whiteness and maintain sociological, political, and economic power. "Recitatif" especially undermines any attachments to color-blind ideals by highlighting every reader's desire to place Twyla or Roberta into one of our two options for racial identity: Black or white, a desire that often conflates the struggles of poverty with those of race. Alternatively, Hughes addresses racial difference and its consequences with a greater sense of immediacy, creating a sense of urgency for the systemic racial issues facing Black Americans. Ultimately, both texts advocate that we acknowledge racial tensions while taking radical action and forming racial kinships to reduce those tensions and rehabilitate systemic imbalances of power.

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