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Stepping in the Full-Colored Body of the Other: An Alternative Way of Writing in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

HAYASHI Hikari

Introduction

As an African-American woman writer, Toni Morrison has been struggling against African-American's being seen as "the other" by the white majority. She declares, in her lecture in 1988, that:

> Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been "discovered" actually to exist . . . it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. . . . We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, "other." ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 135)

Morrison expresses the powerful will among African-Americans to create their own narratives, without being institutionalized as "black other" compared to the white majority.

Along with this statement, Morrison comments more specifically about her novels in the latter half of the lecture. She remarks that her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is an example of an ice-breaking moment of achieving the "voice" of a young African-American female subject. The opening phrase of Claudia's narration, "Quiet as it's kept" (*The Bluest Eye* 4), illustrates "a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last" ("Unspeakable Things" 149). To give a voice to someone who has been suppressed is one of Morrison's basic reasons for writing.

Morrison's texts surely have the purpose of "vocalizing" what has

been silenced. However, it is more than necessary to reemphasize their status as something written as a book. As Anita Durkin points out, it is not only the orality of the text but also its written-ness that is important in Morrison's novels, because she metafictionally pursues the matter of writing. Instances of Morrison's playing with textuality can be found in her entire career, from the first page of *The Bluest Eye*, in which three paragraphs of an elementary reader narrative repeating itself show how utterly the writer, Pecola, becomes psychologically disintegrated (Powell 752), to the last page of *Jazz*, in which the narrator asks the reader to "[l]ook where your hands are" (229).

Accompanying such an experimental narrative technique, which Morrison inherits from earlier generations of postmodernists, she sometimes employs the written-ness of her writing as a crucial way of treating race: she intentionally utilizes the simple strategy of writing words that can be a device to *obliterate* the skin color of the narrator and the narrated characters. For instance, her short story, "Recitatif," never specifies the race of the two protagonists. Twyla, the narrator, only mentions that Roberta, her friend, is "a girl from a whole other race" (243), and that together they "looked like salt and pepper" (244), without saying which is which. Another example is the first sentence of *Paradise*, "They shoot the white girl first" (3), which gives the reader information that there is one white girl in the Convent, but carefully omits specifying her.

In Morrison's writings, this deliberate colorless-ness of the written texts paradoxically implies the issue of race. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how the act of writing functions in relation to depicting colors, whose differences produce a definite division between "Us" and "the other," and how it contributes to "vocalizing" a suppressed African-American voice. *Paradise* is the most appropriate text to consider in this regard because, through its carefully constructed saga of one all-black town, it explores problematic aspects of the relationship between community and individual mediated by written texts, the

mechanism of re-producing the hierarchy based on described differences, and the interplay of both colorless-ness and colorful-ness in writing. Through considerations of three main acts of writing by different types of the characters inside and outside of the black community—the townsmen's, Patricia's, and the Convent women's—this paper will illuminate Morrison's belief in the possibility of an alternative way of writing that can release the silenced voices of the people who has been called "the other."

Beware/Be the Power of the Written Words

The word "colored" has been used, mostly from the segregation era, as a marker of being an African-American ("Coloured / Colored," def. A. 3.c.), that is, as "the other" apart from "the whites." This notoriously eugenic distinction reduced all indefinable hues of skin to two colors, that is, black and white. In *Paradise*, Morrison illustrates this narrowing as a psychological change reflected in a character's way of seeing. As soon as Elder Morgan sees two men hit a woman on the street, he realizes the different skin colors of each side, as if his sense of color has radically changed: "Just as suddenly the scene slid from everyday color to black and white. . . . The two whitemen turned away from the unconscious Negro woman sprawled on the pavement" (94). Such divided colors limited to black-and-white monotone inevitably become a marker of racial inequality, differentiating itself from the harmonious varieties of colors in the everyday world.

This sense of color as irreconcilable binary opposition has seeped into the whole community of Ruby, where Elder is from. The town was founded after a group of black people kept being denied participation in any other black communities. They find "a new separation: light-skinned against black" (194), and such experiences have hardened their minds against any strangers. Their blue-black skin, violently marked as a sign of exclusion, has become the only color that they can bear, putting all other hues paler than them into the category of despi-

cable "other." Here is their peculiar turn of the idea of exceptionality: the ones who have been repulsed as "the other" become the ones who repulse the paler-skinned oppressors as "the other," who must be eliminated from the community.

Their pride and hatred toward strangers are shown in a sentence engraved in the iron plate at the mouth of the Oven, the symbol of the town: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (86). It has two meanings, as the black vernacular trope of "signifyin(g)" does,[1] one of which is meant for the townsmen behaving with reverence to God, the other of which is "a threat to those who had disallowed them," that is, the light-skinned black people (195). Those words function to keep their solidarity and exclude "the other" outside the community.

However, the written sentence cannot be effective forever; it inevitably has the possibility of being re-written. It is expressed as a conflict between the older generation and the younger one within Ruby. After about ninety years since their ancestors have inscribed the words, the young, who are encouraged by the Black Power movement, propose to convert these words into a "motto," that is, "Be the Furrow of His Brow." The aggressive young express doubts about the correctness of the original words, insisting that, "No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time" (84). This rough remark infuriates the elders. Steward Morgan, one of the men in power in the town, says, "That's my grandfather you're talking about. Quit calling him an ex-slave like that's all he was" (84). Then, Deacon Morgan, his twin brother, concludes, "Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built," separating the young from their ancestors: "They dug the clay—not you. They carried the hod—not you" (85). One can see that the dichotomy of "Us" and "Not-Us" is repeated even inside the town, as a split between the ones who count themselves in their tradition and the others who try to destroy it. It is an echo of their hostility toward "the other." Even in the community founded in opposition to the large "other," another division, now between fathers and sons, unavoidably

emerges. The sentence written on the Oven becomes the borderline that marks the division between generations.

Paradise, with its extraordinary effort to describe an entire history of a black town, shows the ripples of discordance with "the other," which always pop up in every group of human beings. This reproduction of dichotomous hierarchy is engraved in the words, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." It provokes the reader to question how the written words open themselves up to the possibility of being re-written, how they create and re-create the distinction of "the other." The written sentence is such a touchstone that divides people into categories; for the townsmen, the words are already and always colored in black and white, separating who is on the "Us" side and who is not, without allowing any colors in the middle. In this way, the writing of the men in Ruby shows that the act includes a risk of delineating, ostracizing, and thus silencing "the other."

Who Were the Women Who Had Only One Name?

While the townsmen's act of writing binds them with the reproduction of the "other" figure within a community, the women in the town have room to play with variations on the words. Dovey Morgan, the wife of Steward, thinks that "Furrow of His Brow" alone would be enough, because "[s]pecifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile" (93), understanding the original intention as a double meaning. Anna Flood thinks of "Be the Furrow of *Her* Brow" (159), after she feels cheered up by the women from the Convent. But the women are always excluded from the men's meetings, and their opinions are dismissed. In this sense, the female characters are another "other" figure suppressed in the community.

It is Patricia Best who cares and writes for those unofficial stories of the women in Ruby. She is a daughter of Roger Best, who married a light skin-colored Delia from another city, against the warnings of the townspeople. Patricia names those black elites "eight-rock," as in a

deep level in a coal mine, describing them as people "whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (193). Patricia observes their hidden desire to exclude "the others," which here means the light-skinned women from outside the town. She is writing Ruby's "history," with a collection of family trees, but it tends to stray from an official observation of the town to her own subjective interpretation about those non-8-rock women. She asks herself, "Who were these women who, like her mother, had only one name? . . . Who were these women with generalized last names? . . . Women whose identity rested on the men they married—if marriage applied" (187). Patricia, who has such an outcast mother, is curious about the women whose names indicate their positions on the margins of the community. Her writing shows a certain sympathy for those silent women. At one point, she writes specifically to her mother, illustrating the lives those non-8-rock outsiders had to live "among those skinny blue-black giants, neither they nor their wives staring at your long brown hair, your honey-speckled eyes" (200). Patricia's silent accusation of the townspeople is spoken on her pages through small episodes that have been neglected by the town's main history. Her efforts could be a countering action toward what the men in Ruby have created and believed in as their history, with the narrative of perfect memories of Deacon and Steward. Critics such as John N. Duvall and Lucille P. Fultz evaluate Patricia highly as the true narrator of the history of Ruby: that "the unspeakable of the community's sexual politics becomes spoken" (Duvall 147); and that she is special because of her "dual position within the community: she is an insider, a member of the elite 8-rocks on her father's side; and an outsider, the offspring of 'tainted' blood on her mother's side" (Fultz 80). Patricia is surely a silence-breaker at the margin of the community.

However, Patricia burns her writings in the end. Neither Duvall nor Fultz gives us a sufficient explanation for why she has to do it, if she is a special narrator of the town. Instead, as Patricia McKee reads it, Pat-

ricia's denying of her own texts shows that her writing is as imperfect as that of the townsmen. McKee suggests that she is "[t]errified of what is within herself and her own family—feelings of shame and rejection that indicate her likeness to the men who ostracized her mother and her daughter" (203). Patricia gives up her writing because she learns that she has internalized the harmful system of excluding "the other." For instance, she regrets that she has treated Richard Misner as an outsider-enemy (216). Another example is her daughter Billie Delia: Patricia hits her because of her unruly behavior, and Billie Delia leaves Patricia's house for the Convent and then for another city. Patricia learns how much her perspective owes to the townsmen's either/or dichotomy, delineating her daughter and Misner as "the other." Her writing has to be stopped and destroyed since it becomes another way of reproducing the dynamics of binary opposition. And yet, the act of burning the paper itself becomes another repulsion of the otherness, which she tried to capture in her writings. Here she comes to a dead end like that of the men in Ruby: writing inevitably functions to delineate and exclude "the other." Her project of vocalizing the suppressed in turn exhibits her own silencing power, as a writer, over those whom she tried to speak up for.

However, Patricia, who notices the silenced existence of women, can at least expect a further possibility, one that the men in Ruby would not acknowledge: that it is always women who can disturb the existing patriarchal dynamics: "everything that worries them must come from women" (217). She finally finds the role of the women whose originality is unclear: to disrupt the men's belief in their pure lineality by the feminine power of reproduction. The women who have only one name could have been a force varying the patriarchal lineage, which also could have been a creative interference with the frozen solitary species, although Patricia has no place for exercising that power any more. Her confession to God that she burned her writing sounds like desperate regret (217), but at the same time, it awaits another way of

female writing, which the next section explores.

"Stepping in" the Full-Colored Body of the Other

It is the women in the Convent who demonstrate an alternative possibility. The Convent functions as a haven to which wandering women can temporarily escape. Consolata, the last nun there, accepts those hurt women who came from everywhere for various reasons: Mavis had her two babies suffocate accidentally in her car and was afraid that the rest of her family might kill her; Gigi suffered from viewing a traumatic scene of a black boy being shot in a riot; Seneca was abandoned by her "sister" at the age of five and repeatedly cut herself with a razor; and Pallas found that her mother seduced her boyfriend, and Pallas was also raped in the water by unknown boys. Those troubled women have come together to live in the Convent by themselves, seventeen miles away from Ruby.

The relationship of the Convent women is an ideal female friendship. They care for each other, neither offending nor inquiring too much about the others. Morrison always explores this kind of female friendship in other novels, too: the relationships between Claudia and Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*), Nel and Sula (*Sula*), Margaret and Ondine (*Tar Baby*), Sethe and Amy (*Beloved*), Alice and Violet (*Jazz*), Twyla and Roberta ("Recitatif"), Christine and Heed (*Love*), and Florens and Daughter Jane (*A Mercy*). Being female is the most essential basis of their friendship. They were "girls together," so much that it was intensified into "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (*Sula* 174), or they tried to become "wonderful old ladies" (*Tar Baby* 241). These female friendships sometimes transcend even their racial differences (the cases of Margaret and Ondine, Sethe and Amy, Twyla and Roberta, and Florens and Daughter Jane). The Convent women are a culmination of Morrison's career-long pursuit of female relationships. Including one white girl, the emphasis is not on the color of their skin, but on their being women who have the same vulnerable bodies.

Roberta Rubenstein states, in her study of the female body and the idea of boundary, that "[t]he idea of boundary . . . expresses the relationship between the body and language as inter-reflexive dimensions of experience in the world" (231). This is the case in the Convent women's drawing their bodies' templates on the cellar floor. Those silhouettes become the boundary that confirms their bodies' safety and that at the same time frees them to speak about their past. As ordered by Consolata, the women lie down on the floor naked, and Consolata assumes the service of template drawing (263). They are told to stay still in the outlines, as she confesses about her past relationship with Mary Magna and Deacon, two opposite lessons about her body and its boundary (263). As a Catholic nun, Mary Magna taught Consolata to forget her corporeal desires, that her spirit was everything. Then she met Deacon and learned the forbidden corporeal pleasure, until she carelessly violated the boundary between them by biting his lip so hard that it bled ("My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him" [263]). After his leaving, she cared for Mary Magna, learning that corporeality and spirituality are not incompatible.

Consolata's speech prompts the other women's talking, which is called "loud dreaming" (264): "Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles . . . . And it is never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning" (264). Each woman's past is shared and re-experienced here: Mavis's outing in the car to the deli; Pallas's rape in the water; Gigi's participation in a mob; Seneca's lonely nights waiting for her "sister" coming back. The body silhouette copied on the floor affirms the space for each woman to express what happened to her. In other words, "they step easily into" each other (264), because of and beyond the written boundary of their bodies.

Then, they start to color their silhouettes with painting materials, speaking to each other about what has been drawn:

> Are you sure she was your sister? Maybe she was your mother. Why? Because a mother might, but no sister would do such a thing. Seneca capped her tube. Gigi drew a heart locket around her body's throat, and when Mavis asked her about it, she said it was a gift from her father which she had thrown into the Gulf of Mexico. Were there pictures inside? asked Pallas. Yeah. Two. Whose? Gigi didn't answer; she simply reinforced the dots marking the locket's chain. (265)

Here, their "loud dreaming" turns into dialogues that are expressed freely, without being divided by quotation marks. They interact with the other girls' traumas, try to reinterpret them, and when they cannot answer they can just continue their drawing, which now becomes their language. This ritual of drawing and painting is the most important scene in the novel. Many critics read this sequence as a decisive moment of the women's transformation: it is an act of "self-actualization" (Fuqua 49), a place for "reconstructing or recovering their unique souls" (Fraile-Marcos 28), or an attempt to create "social space" where the women "are able to incorporate those things that are either lost or cannot be explained . . . into their narrative discourse" (Schell 90). Although they are right, these critics miss the crucial point of this scene: this is the way the Convent women *write*. Compared to the townsmen's writing of the dictum on the Oven and Patricia's writing of her paper, the drawing and painting of the Convent women can be interpreted as an alternative way of writing that can do what the other ways of writing cannot.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of the verb "write" includes "to form (letters, symbols, words, etc.) by carving, engraving, or incision; to trace in or on a hard or plastic surface, esp. with a sharp instrument" ("Write" 1.b.), "to form or delineate (a letter, symbol, ideogram, etc.) on paper or the like with a pen, pencil, etc.; to trace (significant characters) in this manner" (2.a.), and even "to form

by painting or the like; to paint" (3.b.). In other words, "writing" means not only writing words but also writing symbols, painting and drawing. The Convent women's writing is thus leaving traces, not limited to lexical writing. The women's drawing, compared to the alphabetical writings of the townsmen and Patricia as proofs of their intellect and education, might seem to be an act of retrogression. However, after seeing how both the men's and Patricia's writings end up reproducing the exclusion of "the other," it is in the Convent women's pre-lexical drawing that we see a possible alternative to language writing. Timothy B. Powell sees the possibility of a "black logos" to "de-center the white logos" (748) in Pilate Dead's illiterate father's writing of her name (*Song of Solomon* 18): "pre-lexical and thus beyond the margins of the logos's field of power" (757). In the same way, the Convent women's "writing" is an attempt to evict the power that writing has unavoidably, making itself an act of problematizing the idea of Western alphabetical writing. Their silhouettes delineate each character to conjure up what she has concealed. In addition, what they depict in their own silhouettes, such as scars and a heart locket, becomes ideographs that signify something beyond alphabetical vocabularies. For them, writing is a force that frees their unspoken words from the dominant discourse of the Western logos. In other words, their non-alphabetical figures metamorphose into signifiers, which trigger their speaking as signified. Remembering Gates's "signifyin(g)," the convent women's silhouette drawing is a new way of signification that avoids the fixed meanings of any existing languages. The Convent women create a totally new language on the floor, using their female bodies.

Moreover, they can go beyond the boundaries between self and other because there is a borderline: those lines, as soon as they are written, open themselves to be "stepped in." The phrase "step in" is not only used in the scene of the loud dreaming (264), but also appears when Lone describes the "spell" that Consolata should inherit from herself ("Step in. Just step on in. Help him, girl!"[245]). It means to enter

into someone and revive them. Encouraged by Lone, Consolata "stepped in" Scout Morgan, who has been severely injured by a car crash (245): she sees inside the boy "a pinpoint of light receding," and stares at it "until it widened," as if "the lungs in need were her own" (245). "Stepping in" can be paraphrased as standing in the other's body as if it is one's own and making a positive change to it. This is different from her intrusion into Deacon's body. "Stepping in" does not mean to violate the other's territory, but to gently interact with it by a somewhat magical talent to see the other's pain. Now, with the haunted and hurt women gathered to her, she teaches them how to "step in" the others. The result becomes those playing sentences as cited above, entangled with each other. They become a collective subject to re-experience the past trauma, stepping into each other's memories conjured up from the body silhouettes.

The colors with which the women write are another important difference from other ways of writing. Their empty body silhouettes induce them to fill in the space with colorful drawings of non-lexical signs. Guided by the terms about colors (for example, "robin's egg blue" and "one drop of red" of Seneca's scars, "yellow barrettes" of the crazy woman whom Pallas saw, "red peonies" of blood stains on the boy's shirt that Gigi could not forget [265]), the reader can visualize how colorful their memories are. Done with painting materials, their "writing" becomes colorful in a way that neither the men in Ruby nor Patricia could think about. And transcribing their colorful writing onto the pages of the book, Morrison does her best work: obliterating their race. It becomes possible for the first time to write in full color when she describes the Convent women's freedom from racial description of their skin colors. Of course, what the reader literally sees is a black alphabet printed on white pages. But by their racial ambiguity, the imagination of the reader can freely color the characters' past as the text indicates. Morrison's printed text shows a compromise between inscribing the Convent women's alternative colorful writing and the

Occidental writing system of the Roman alphabet. In this sense, the writing of the Convent women could be considered to be a metafictional gesture of pointing to Morrison's writing itself, her pursuit of alternative ways of writing without reproducing the exclusion of the "other" figure. What she achieves in *Paradise* is to write the characters as the silhouettes with the colorful insides, which evoke their voices and urge the readers to "step in" to them, so that readers can color what is written in their imaginations not by the binary black and white but by every hue existing in nature.

The effectiveness of this alternative way of writing is still controversial, because the Convent women's writing is not fully understandable to the men in Ruby. To their eyes after the disastrous attack, the colorful writing that the women left is read only as "[l]ovingly drawn filth" that "[n]one dares step on" (287). However, the women in Ruby can read a positive possibility in the traces that the Convent women have left. Anna Flood and Billie Delia can see what the men could not. Anna, coming back to the town after the raid, reads the women's writing more precisely ("the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them" [303]). Billie Delia also foresees the recurring existence of those women who disappeared elsewhere (308).

The Convent women's pre-lexical and colorful writing is "no longer haunted" by the failures of the writings of the men in Ruby or of Patricia, as the women themselves are (266). Differentiating itself from writing's force of excluding "the other," their alternative way of employing lines and colors in order to "step in" illustrates Morrison's own hope for the possibility of writing. The ambiguous race of the Convent women maximizes the effectiveness of "stepping in" the others' colorful bodies, and it saves them from the failures of other dichotomy-possessed townspeople. Interacting with these women, some people in town could deduce the possibility of changing, though others could not. *Paradise* illustrates this complicated power politics about writing and

the possibility of subverting it within the various acts of writing in and out of one community.

Conclusion

Morrison's oeuvre has begun by speaking about how a black girl could not speak because of the racial prejudice that causes her to see that white skin and blue eyes are beautiful. All through her career, Morrison's act of writing is a pursuit to extricate African-Americans from the silenced position of "the other." In *Paradise*, Morrison explores how "the other" is reproduced and excluded in a community, with a certain possibility of an alternative way of writing in the figures drawn by the Convent women. Comparison between three different types of writing shows the distinction. The townsmen's ambiguous writing opens itself up to the endless discussion of whose power is stronger. The writing by Patricia could have been a disturbing force for this patriarchal dichotomy, but fails, because she has already internalized the black and white dichotomy so much that she becomes the oppressor, even though she well knows the feelings of the excluded. Her writing ends up being burned as a failure to subvert the existing hierarchy. Instead, the Convent women's pre-lexical and colorful writings induce them to speak up from their boundaries, and successfully divert themselves from reproducing the exclusion of "the other." They draw lines in order to "step in," and color themselves in order to be free from race. The complex of these activities—drawing silhouettes, sharing loud dreaming, and coloring their bodies—becomes itself an alternative way of writing, which is free from the power relationship that lexical writing inevitably contains.

For Morrison, writing seems to have the same function as that of the Convent women: to delineate the characters' silhouettes and color their insides in order to go beyond the line between one's self and "the other." From this point of view, her message that "we are not other" can be read as another "signifyin(g)" act of hers: this motto for nega-

tion of the powerful dichotomy between "Us" and "the other" turns itself into encouragement for the reader, the ultimate other, to "step in" the colorful body of the characters, which suggests an alternative possibility for realizing the "paradise" that is the book.

Note

1. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Signifying Monkey*, Chapter 2.

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