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TONI MORRISON'S TRANS- SUBJECTIVE AND TRANS- GENERATIONAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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The title of this essay is meant to gesture at the core preoccupation of a larger project that is designed to propose several things about the work of Toni Morrison. First, that the author's work (novels, essays, talks, etc.) is an elaboration of a fully evolved philosophical system that is foundational to the study of Africana thought broadly defined and Africana philosophy in particular. Second, that to experience the work of Toni Morrison is to be engaged, perhaps *immersed* or *embroiled* are more accurate terms, in a phenomenological experience that serves to establish the boundaries of Black life under the coercive threat of white supremacy while, at the same time, illuminating the manner in which that seemingly totalizing way of being is to be breached. What that means in substance, and what serves as the final proposition here, is that the *experience* of Morrison's work destabilizes the concept of "Blackness" as both a phenomenological and existential object. *Experience* is italicized for two reasons, both of which point to what I intend to situate as a **guiding premise** in what I am proposing: that Morrison the author is engaged in a process of self-making in the production of her work that results in art that

is capacious enough to envelop the reader as a spectator to her phenomenology of the self/subject and open the possibility of the same for the observer. In her essay “Race Matters,” from the collection *The Source of Self-Regard*, Morrison frames the depth and breadth of her writing:

The distrust that race studies receives from the authenticating off-campus community is legitimate only when the scholars themselves have not imagined their own homes; have not unapologetically realized and recognized that the valuable work they do can be done no other place; have not envisioned academic life as neither straddling opposing worlds nor as a flight from any ... W.E.B. Du Bois’s observation is a strategy, not a prophecy or a cure. Beyond the outside/inside double consciousness, this new space postulates the inwardness of the outside; imagines safety without walls where we can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world, “already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never needing to be closed.”¹

I am drawn to the final lines of the quote rendered here that asserts the existence of a space beyond the seemingly impenetrable walls of anti-Blackness that Afro-pessimism has so effectively mapped. The existence of this “third, if you will pardon the expression, world,” in excess of the Black/white world binary that serves as the dialectical imperative of the thinking of canonical scholars like Du Bois and Fanon, is the telos of the philosophical project of Morrison. What this means is that the phenomenological system I intend to expose here establishes the **point of departure as well as the goal** for the Black radical tradition that is in some sense reimagined: to in fact think beyond the limitations of anti-Black racism and its subject dis-forming logic to a world that provides for a space of stability for self-referentially formed Black subjectivity. In substance, the philosophical system I intend to explore takes up a comprehensive series of topics that broadly seem to fall into the following categories:

- Temporality/Genealogy
- Sex(uality)

¹ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Vintage International, 2019), 139.

- Gender
- Freedom
- Human/Animal Binary
- Spatiality/Place-iality
- Language

In the space allowed here, I will open an exploration of the first of these: what is, for Morrison, the inextricably related terms *temporality/genealogy*. The argument presented here is that Morrison’s relationship to **nonlinear time** is in fact the foundation of a form of cognition that allows/establishes access to the terms and conditions of a “third, if you will pardon the expression, world” that accommodates a way of *Being (as) Black*. Additionally, it is important to note that Morrison, in elaborating this third way, is engaged in a thoroughgoing critique of the foundations of Western phenomenology, not just in elaborating Blackness in excess of the structures of both Du Bois and Fanon, but also in destabilizing the assertion of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which posits the existence of the world of white supremacy as dialectically stabilized by what he understands as the “inverted” or “topsy-turvy” world that is described as “an inversion of the truth”² and described in more detail in section 158, in the chapter “Consciousness”:

However much this inversion, which is exhibited in the *punishment* of crime, is now made into *law*, it is still again also only the law of a world which has a supersensible world standing in *inverted opposition* to itself, in which what is despised in the former is honored, and what in the former is honored is despised. The punishment which, according the *law of the former*, dishonors a person and destroys him, is transformed in its *inverted world* into the pardon preserving his independent being and bringing honor to him.³

Morrison’s “third, if you will pardon the expression, world” destabilizes what Hegel requires: the normalization of the abjection of some subject vis-à-vis the other arguing that the

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *System of Science, First Part: The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. and ed. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 17.

³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 96.

terms of the inversion are the extension of dialectical abjection into his third (inverted) world. **All of this**—the relationship of Morrison’s philosophy of self-making and the way the world she imagines exists as what she calls a “ramification of ramifications” in the novel *Paradise*—is a **thoroughgoing mapping of white supremacy and its weaknesses**. This is substantially different, and I believe specific to the way Morrison understands the cultural crucible in which negatively framed Blackness exists, from the cause-and-effect relationship of the Cartesian *cogito*. The definition of the term *ramification* from the *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary* (online)—“one of a large number of complicated and unexpected results that follow an action or decision”—is **rendered more complex by the manner in which Morrison situates complications and the unexpected** as the causal conditions of more complications and more unexpected results, what we might understand as **Black subjectivity** in both the white world and the Black world that are encumbered with what the Afro-pessimists have proposed as anti-Blackness as the irreducible complication. Morrison resists this existence as abjection as the telos of positively framed Blackness and, in my reading, employs temporality and genealogy or, more specifically, the notion of “rememory” as the cognitive tool/reality for navigating this system of harm and perceiving a space of positive resolution. In the text of *Beloved*, Morrison’s character Sethe offers this explanation of the to-be-resolved confusion caused by these interlocking events of ramification that are awareness of Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational trauma.

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head ...”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you *hear* something or *see* something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A

thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else."⁴

I reference this confusion as a "to-be-resolved" state of affairs, in that the true nature of this Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational cognitive state, in spite of Sethe's ability to explain and note its existence, must necessarily elude the awareness of the mother who elects to kill her child. It is not clear to me, and this is perhaps the key to unravelling this problematic, that our prevailing system of cognition, which is rendered coherent by the telos of birth to death, is sufficient for the task of reckoning with Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational cognition. This is clear, though unstably so, by thinking through the important and devastating (mis)understanding that informs Sethe's decision to kill her children and then only successfully murder the child known, prior to her resurrection, as "crawling already?"⁵

What I mean here is that the tragic reality of the existence of the binary proposition of Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational cognition that is fueled by Morrison's notion of trauma induced "rememory" is that at the level of cognition of phenomenological reality, it doesn't matter if "crawling already?" is freed from the experience of slavery by death because she has and is already trans-subjectively and trans-generationally suffered(ing) its excesses. This, at some level, must be what causes the confusion for Beloved, who returns to find out why Sethe murdered "crawling already?" The fact of this lies in the inability of Beloved to resolve the sweep of "her" cognitive awareness that is also the dominant system of confusion for the other inhabitants of 124 as well.

This "confusion" is perhaps usefully explored through the following thought experiment, which has as its objective an "understanding" of the cognitive map that Morrison establishes as the phenomenological reality for marginalized Blackness that must be resolved to exceed the bonds of anti-Blackness.

Imagine that Subject A finds they are a passenger on a train that feels as if it is headed down a track. I say "feels as if" because there are no windows along the side of the train, and therefore movement is conveyed via two screens at the front of the car that are labelled "left" and "right," and each shows a landscape that is rapidly moving by. This gives our passenger, Subject

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

A, the notion that they are proceeding forward at a rapid pace. At the same time, Subjects B and C are aboard trains that are hundreds of miles away from one another as well as hundreds of miles from the location of Subject A. Both B and C are filming out of the left and right sides of their respective train cars and broadcasting to the left and right screens in the view of Subject A. What this means is that the sense-certainty of Subject A is based upon spatial, positional, and subjective disorientation because what they believe represents their cognitive experience is that of another. To further complicate this, Subject B has their camera aimed at a forty-five-degree angle in the direction of travel, and Subject C's camera is focused at a forty-five-degree angle away from the direction of travel. Additionally, Subject B's footage is from one hundred years ago and Subject C's is from fifty years ago. Nothing about Subject A's perception of the world, including that of the car being in motion, is synchronized with what is best understood as physical reality.

This is sufficiently complex and destabilizing to linear systems of cognition, and Morrison introduces an additional layer of complexity that enriches the cognitive tool she is developing. Subject B and C are also out of synch with what we may erroneously understand as normative cognition of reality in that the images they encounter may or may not be first-person cognitive events and, again, what enriches these encounters is that (1) they cannot tell whether they are a result of primary cognition, and (2) it in fact doesn't matter.

To say it doesn't matter is to substantively miss that, as far as Morrison is concerned, whether events are "real" or not is to misunderstand the expansive nature of "the real" in this system of thought. However, it deeply matters in grappling with the author's extension through improvisation on the thinking of both Du Bois and Fanon.

Recall that, in the essay mentioned earlier from *The Source of Self-Regard*, Morrison perhaps admonishes us to understand that "W.E.B. Du Bois's observation is a strategy, not a prophecy or cure," and further "[b]eyond the outside/inside double consciousness, this new space postulates the inwardness of the outside."⁶ Morrison's decision to focus her attention on the middle term of what I have labeled in other work as "Du Bois's Tripartite Subaltern

⁶ Morrison, *Source of Self-Regard*, 139.

Consciousness”⁷ is worthy of careful study—by centering her attention on the “sensation” of double consciousness that Du Bois exposes as

a peculiar sensation ... this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.⁸

The argument I am making here is that Morrison understands the rigidity of Du Bois’s system of consciousness that lands on twoness—“... an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”⁹—to be relatively pessimistic and the product of the cognitive trap of constructing awareness of the self through the vision of those dedicated to purposive destructive (mis)understanding and (mis)recognition of the other. Tracing Morrison’s intervention, proposing that this form of consciousness represents “a strategy, not a prophecy or cure,”¹⁰ it must then be the case that **even a cognitive system marred by its relationship to the logic of white supremacy is only one of several ways to disable this attempt at inescapable abjection, her project being structured around what she calls the “inwardness of the outside.”**¹¹ The phenomenology of Blackness proposed by Du Bois, which struggles to find its way out of the results of the absorption of negatively framed Blackness into the system of cognition of the self of the Black subject, is recalibrated and therefore extended by Morrison through the obliteration of a worldview that presupposes the good as existing only in counterpoint to the bad—the inside as oppositional, structured against the outside.

Recall that I proposed that Morrison here is employing the thinking of both Du Bois and Fanon to inform the necessary existence of the “third, if you will pardon the expression, world” described as “already made for me, both snug and wide open with a doorway never needing to be closed.”¹² The bridge from Morrison to Fanon, which has as its point of departure Du Bois, is

⁷ Michael E. Sawyer, *An Africana Philosophy of Temporality: Homo Liminalis* (Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 122.

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Morrison, *Source of Self-Regard*, 139.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

designed to address the two foundational thinkers' preoccupation with the white gaze and the implications thereof. I'm thinking specifically of the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*, whose encounter with the white gaze at the opening of chapter 5, titled "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," and reads "'Dirty, nigger!' or simply, 'Look! A Negro!'"¹³ asserts that the white gaze alters the subjectivity potentiality of the Black subject in that the regard of the Black Self by the Black Self is calibrated by a relationship to whiteness. The relevant quotation reads as follows:

Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.¹⁴

The concern with ontology, and its relationship to phenomenology and what that portends for the stability of the Black Self, maps alongside what we have established as the telos of the Du Boisian theory of the Black subject whose system of cognition leads to a barely sustainable existence in conflict with an internalized whiteness disguised as the "American." Morrison proposes a different view of this problematic, which resides in the relational interstices between ontology, phenomenology, and radical subject formation.

In *Beloved*, Sethe encounters the white gaze during the critical moments of her escape from Sweet Home, the forced labor camp, when Amy Denver, in a flight of a different sort, sees her and reacts by exclaiming, "'Look there. A nigger. If that don't beat all.'"¹⁵ Here, this encounter leads down a different path than that explicated by the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Mask* and, importantly, the Du Bois of *Souls*, in which he writes, "I remember well when the shadow swept across me."¹⁶ The story is a familiar one. The young Du Bois has his calling card refused by a girl in his class.

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 38.

had thereafter no desire to tear down the veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.¹⁶

Morrison takes a different approach, employing what might be productively called a utilitarian approach to the reality of white supremacy. Amy Denver, and her unavoidable (at least for white people) “look, a nigger” moment, is confounded by the ability of Sethe to do here what the subjects in the ruminations of Du Bois and Fanon cannot: enjoy sufficient subjective plasticity to be in the way to receive some form of “help” from white people while erecting a barrier of personal safety and subjective sovereignty by giving her a fake name.

“What they call you?” she asked.

However far she was from Sweet Home, there was no point in giving out her real name to the first person she saw.

“Lu,” said Sethe. “They call me Lu.”

Like the opening of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Sethe (here Lu), like Ishmael, announces themselves by prefacing their name with a “call me” as a disguise albeit with an important caveat. Although Ishmael has the agency to order himself to be addressed in a certain manner—“Call me Ishmael”—Sethe possesses neither the authority to name herself to white people nor, perhaps more importantly, the ability to do so safely, so she makes up a name as a claim of subjective sovereignty and a defense mechanism.

This thinking must be indexed against the point of entry to this essay, specifically the emphasis Morrison places on interrogating Du Bois’s understanding of subaltern self-consciousness. Sethe, upon encountering the white gaze, even in her state of physical and mental disability, accesses two states of being that are not accounted for or perhaps not part of the awareness of both Du Bois and Fanon. First, the possibility of the Animal:

¹⁶ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

Down in the grass, like the snake she believed she was, Sethe opened her mouth, and instead of fangs and a split tongue, out shot the truth.¹⁷

Recall that Du Bois's formulation has the telos of twoness within the Black body—two incompatible ways of being: Negro and American. For Morrison, neither one of these unresolvable subject positions is compatible with her reading of self-authorizing Black subjectivity that resists what she understands as an avoidable result of the system of cognition, double consciousness, which drives Du Bois's rigid system. What is essential to understand is that it is the relationship between Morrison's Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational system of cognition that allows the Negro/American binary to be displaced, within the same "dark body," by the Human and the Animal. The journey to that space of subjective possibility is solely dependent on an abandonment of double consciousness as the cognitive tool of the Black subject, to be replaced by Morrison's Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational way of knowing. What this means is that, in opposition to Du Bois's assertion of Black subjective awareness that comes to be(ing) through the eyes of another bent on the destruction of the subject in question, Morrison's subject knows about itself through the eyes of those who are similarly subject to the white gaze and its destructive effects.

Morrison demonstrates here, in these passages, the critical new way of Being Black: subjectivity that accommodates self-defining humanity and its positive relationship to the Animal. The relevant scene is set when Denver "easily slipped into the told story that lay before her eyes,"¹⁸ which is the account by Sethe of the moments before she encountered Amy Denver. Denver, yet to be born, is experienced physically by Sethe as a "little antelope ... [that] rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves."¹⁹

The fact of the matter here is that Sethe has no frame of coherent reference to be aware of the existence of the animal known as an antelope having lived in the southeastern United States her entire life. She resolves the cognitive confusion by accepting the fact that her memory is out of time.

¹⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance.²⁰

What we learn, as this passage unravels itself, is that the text accommodates the understanding that this “memory” is a “rememory” belonging to Sethe’s unnamed mother from her time (or a remememory of a rememory of some other subject in Africa) *before* the Middle Passage.

Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’am’s, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other.²¹

This means that the choice to represent herself to the white gaze at the cognitive threshold of this “third, if you will pardon the expression, world” allows for the two internally coherent possibilities of Black Being that comprise this subject: Human and Animal, as opposed to the impossible-to-resolve Negro and American. The Human and the Animal contain within them a complex series of identities. With respect to the Animal, Morrison reveals several, such as the snake, the hawk, the calf, to name a few. With respect to the Human, one of the most interesting notions exposed by Morrison here is that Sethe often refers to “ma’am” as a separate identity from herself. These passages reveal Sethe’s understanding: the first, “concerned as she was for the life of her children’s mother,”²² and the second, “I believe this baby’s ma’am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River,”²³ where the “she,” the “mother,” and the “ma’am” are all Sethe discussing herself as another. This ability to observe, from a separate space, the manifold internalized ways of being as if they are outside is the performance of the notion of the place of safety, elaborated by Morrison as the result of altered cognition.

In summation, Morrison’s comprehensive philosophical project is worthy of careful consideration in that it maps a course, through altered forms of cognition, that allows what is

²⁰ Ibid., 37.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 36.

²³ Ibid., 37.

presented as the outside to be inside and vice versa. This presents the logical corrective to notions of irreducible anti-Blackness and offers the possibility of self-definition for the Black Self.

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