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THE SUBVERSION OF BLACK AESTHETIC: TONI MORRISON'S *RECITATIF*

Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to present Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif" (1983), as a literary text that resists or subverts the established practices of understanding, analyzing and canonizing texts written by African Americans. The starting point of this paper is the thesis proposed in *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (2006), edited by Gene Andrew Jarrett, that there is an ideological consistency in the exclusion of what Jarrett terms "anomalous" texts from African American literary anthologies. In other words, the overall preoccupation with racial representations has influenced the way of reading and organizing African American literature and defining the "Black" or African American Aesthetic. Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" represents such an "anomalous," alternative, or unconventional text that challenges these practices. Furthermore, for its analysis, the paper relies on the methods proposed by New Formalism. This critical approach aims to interrogate the relationship between form and social, historical, and cultural contexts. Thus, one of the central aims of this paper is to show how Morrison uses and manipulates form and structure in her story to subvert notions of race and difference and to ultimately challenge the way in which texts written by African American authors are read and understood.

Key words: African American literature, New Formalism, short story studies, Black Aesthetic, subversive texts, Toni Morrison

1. Introduction

The idea behind this paper is to examine the mechanism by which literary texts emerge to question, problematize or destabilize the dominant procedures of reading, interpreting and classifying literary works. More specifically, the paper addresses the problematic nature of African American literature and reading practices associated with it, and the consequent emergence of subversive or anomalous texts written by African Americans. This paper analyzes a particular African American text, the short story "Recitatif" (1983) by Toni Morrison, in order to show how this specific tension between definitions of African American literature and African American writers results in texts that call into question those definitions. By extension, the paper aims to inspect the usefulness of applying the critical methods proposed by New Formalist critics in practice. As one of the main goals of New Formalism is to explore the relationship between literary form and context, especially the way they collide, the

methodology developed as a result of such critical inquires is relevant and valuable to this analysis. Thus, this paper examines the way in which Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif," challenges or disrupts the dominant way African American texts are read, understood, classified and organized.

2. African American Literature and Anomalous Texts

The very nature of African American literature has always been a complex and sensitive area of inquiry. As African Americans fought for equality and emancipation in all areas of society, the same process was transposed to the literary world. Works written by African Americans were rediscovered, and new and inspiring works were written that found their place and status in the literary canon. However, the joint forces of anthologies, literary scholars and publishers have contributed to the idea that the very essence of African American literature lies in its representation of a specific racial experience. As a result, many African American writers aimed to challenge and destabilize those firm and well-established notions. In other words, texts written by those authors posed an alternative to the dominant ways of writing, reading, classifying and thinking about African American literature.

Thus, the starting theoretical point of this paper is the claim put forward by Jene Andrew Jarrett in *African American Literature Beyond Race* (2006) that different practices or protocols have worked together to shape our understanding and reading of African American texts. Jarrett claims that literary anthologies allow race to overdetermine the idea of African American literature by giving the impression that African American texts must feature African American protagonists alongside certain historical themes, political issues, or "subjectivities defined by race" (2006, p. 2). Another notable critic, Claudia Tate (1998, p. 3), states that racial protocols, covertly or overtly prescribed by publishers, critics and anthologies, demanded that texts written by African Americans should represent their author's lived experiences with racial oppression. In other words, anthologies usually classify literary works as "African American" when they depict the presumed social, cultural, and political realities of African Americans.

Another factor that exerted its influence on African American literature was, and still partially is, the Black Aesthetic as proposed by the Black Arts Movement[1] in the 1970s. As defined by Larry Neal (1968), the Black Aesthetic refers to the idea that African American authors should employ a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. Here, the word "separate" basically points to an overall aesthetic that is detached from the western, or white, cultural aesthetic. Put differently, the Black Arts Movement urged African American writers to create a separate kind of literature that would express all the particularities of the black experience in a

[1] According to *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* (2005), the Black Arts Movement is a cultural movement that emphasized racial pride and a commitment to produce works that reflected the culture and experiences of black people. In addition, the dominant spirit of the Black Arts Movement was politically militant and often racially separatist.

radically different manner from those seen in literature written by white authors. Ideologically or politically charged[2], the need for developing a "black aesthetic" was explained in terms of the necessity of African American authors to define the world in their own terms, to speak to and about spiritual and cultural needs of African Americans, and to destroy "white ways of looking at the world" (Neal, 1968, p. 1). Several collections of essays that followed built upon Neal's propositions. For example, Ron Karenga (1971, p. 33) and Addison Gayle (1971, p. xxii) stated that all art must express and support the struggle of African Americans. Additionally, others emphasized the importance of a separate criticism that would evaluate African American texts according to the values of the Black Aesthetic. Hoyt W. Fuller called for "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience" (1971, p. 9). Consequently, such established criteria should eliminate from consideration those works of art which do not adequately reflect the black experience (1971, p.10). From these examples, it is evident that these scholars emphasized the importance of racial identity, collectivity, and nationalism as the central concerns of the Black Aesthetic. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of a separate criticism that would work together with the proposed principles for writing African American texts.

As a result, African American authors were expected to represent life experiences realistically. Jarrett uses the term "racial realism" to refer to that prescribed protocol of realistic representation of the African American experience. As he explains, "racial realism pertains to a long history in which authors have sought to re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference" (2007, p. 8). In the case of racial realism, certain images and tropes were promoted to control representations of race to shield African American texts from stereotypes and racism (Jarrett, 2006, p. 3). What is significant here is that literary texts do not just reflect the social or political realities of the external world, but they also actively shape or modify those realities according to the dominant ideology. In other words, realism, in this case, means that "representations of the world in written discourse participate in the construction of the world" (Jarrett, 2007, p. 7), affecting readers' understanding of that external world in the process. This preoccupation with racial representation, both cultural and literary, "perpetuated the belief that the best and most useful African American literature depicts the race" (Jarrett, 2006, p. 6).

Consequently, these influences on African American literature have produced deviant, marginalized or anomalous texts. Tate defines these texts as anomalous because "they resist, to varying degrees, the race and gender paradigms that we spontaneously impose on black textuality" (Tate, 1988, p. 8). According to Jarrett, these texts defy "the literary protocols of ethnic authenticity and realism" (2006, p. 5) by not employing race as the primary human marker. Often, these texts tell stories about African Americans that do not fit the "Western hierarchical paradigm of race as exclusion, vulnerability, and deficiency" (Tate, 1988, p. 7). In other words,

[2] Neal (1968, p. 1) explicitly states that the need for a "black aesthetic" is inseparable from the political aims of African Americans. He sees the Black Aesthetic as a concrete expression of African American political values, and as an instrument of African American political struggle against the racist West.

literary works can represent, subvert or transform the way different behavioral traits are essentialized as constituents of racial identification. Moreover, such anomalous or subversive texts express various modes of resistance to "the dominant forms of aesthetic philosophy and cultural-political power during their historical moment" (Jarrett, 2007, p. 14). This emphasis on historical awareness is also important for this paper, as it considers the particular historical moment when Morrison's short story was published.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, the paper attempts to present "Recitatif" as an anomalous short story that emerged in a particular historical moment to question or challenge the predominance of the Black Aesthetic and racial realism.

2.1 Methodological Framework

To explore this tension between anomalous African American texts and the dominant academic, literary and socio-political formations, this paper employs methods proposed by New Formalist critics. Generally, New Formalism, as a body of critical approaches, seeks to examine the relationship between form and historical, social, or cultural context. It relies on New Historicism and Cultural studies but also adopts strategies employed by various formalist and structuralist schools of thought.

First and foremost, New Formalist critics emphasize the importance of form in literary studies, and their objective is to offer a new way or new ways of looking at form. Moreover, New Formalism aims to understand different tensions between politics and aesthetics, and history and form (Theile, 2013, p. 6). As Fredric Bogel (2013, p. 22) explains, the goal of New Formalism is to discover how formal elements of a text might complicate and contradict what the content tells us. Thus, understanding those tensions and contradictions is central to the methodology and theoretical approach of New Formalism (Theile, 2013, p. 6). Explained briefly, New Formalism values close reading as a way of carefully inspecting various formal elements. However, the end goal of this approach is to think about how form may stand in contradiction to content, or how it may work against the contextual environment of a given work.

What this paper specifically relies on is Caroline Levine's redefinition of form and the methodology that follows. The foundation of Levine's theoretical approach is her broadened understanding of form. She claims that form "refers to shaping patterns, to identifiable interlacings of repetitions and differences, to dense networks of structuring principles and categories" (2006, p. 632). Consequently, she relies on formalist insights to think about social hierarchies, institutions and major cultural-political categories as forms. Hierarchies can be understood as forms because they arrange bodies, things, and ideas according to levels of power and importance. Moreover, they rank, or organize experience into asymmetrical, discriminatory, often deeply unjust arrangements (Levine, 2015, p. 82). The same can be said about binary categories such as class, race and gender. They can be conceived as forms precisely because they "divide a field of objects, bodies, or ideas into two domains" (2015, p. 84), but they do not always function as hierarchies. Where Levine diverges from post-structuralism and cultural studies is her understanding of binary categories,

hierarchies and complex relations between them. While many different hierarchies seek to impose order on us, they do not always align, and when they collide, they may generate more disorder than order (2015, p. 84). Likewise, various binaries, "though formally alike, do not map perfectly onto one another" (2015, p. 90).

Furthermore, Levine calls for a close inspection of the different ways in which social or political forms interact with literary forms, especially when they do not agree with each other. In other words, literary forms often do not reflect social or political hierarchies, but they collide with them and aim to destabilize them (2006, p. 626). Levine imagines this interaction between literary forms and social and political formations as occurring on a common "cultural-political field", where they act as patterns operating on a common plane and are less likely to reinforce or reflect each other than to clash or interrupt one another (p. 626). This specifically pertains to hierarchical structures and cultural-political categories. Viewed this way, neither of these categories is in possession of the cultural-political field. Instead, "categories such as race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and disability are not parallel structures of inequality, but they are different forms that compete and interlace and overlap" (p. 629). Thus, crude, binary ideologies seek to impose order on the cultural-political field, but when different ideologies operate together, their power to impose order begins to break down (p. 629).

This directly pertains to literary criticism as well. Levine sees the potential problem in political critics' tendency to generalize the political forms beyond the text's own example (2015, p. 110). Ideas of literary critics about how these forms operate in the world often guide or govern their assessment of the politics of literary texts (p. 110). In other words, political readings routinely rely on implicit models of how these forms operate. As a result, political readings of texts both generalize forms and rank them. Thus, hierarchies structure even the most politically progressive writing in literary studies, including postcolonial, Marxist, and feminist criticism (p. 87). This is the problem that Levine's formalism tries to engage with. As she explains, strategic formalism is a way of interrogating "the forms at work not only in the cultures we investigate but in the thought of the scholars ourselves" (2006, p. 635).

Following New Formalist concerns and Levine's propositions, this paper argues that the ways of reading, understanding and classifying African American texts can also be understood as forms, or ordering principles, that operate under hierarchies of their own. For example, the predominance of racial realism in African American literature and the interpretive practices influenced by it, act as an ordering principle on both texts and readers. This practice has already been criticized by other academics. Tate states that critics require African American texts to emphasize the injustice of African American protagonists' "persistent and contested encounters with the material and psychological effects of a racially exploitative distribution of social goods, services, and power" (1988, p. 3). Readers and scholars, both black and non-black, usually expect literary works and critical studies by African Americans to contest racist perspectives and the resulting oppression (Tate, 1998, p. 3). As a result, "race remains a salient source of the fantasies and allegiances that shape our

ways of reading" (Abel, 1993, p. 497) all types of social experiences. Furthermore, Jarrett (2007, p. 24) uses the term "hermeneutical circle of blackness"[3] to refer to various assumptions that can predetermine readings of African American texts and to explain why understanding parts of texts presuppose understanding their entirety. Put differently, what critics see and what they reveal is implicit in their assumptions (Jarrett, 2007, p. 176). Specifically, African American texts have frequently been interpreted in terms of racial hierarchies that in turn affects the interpretation of all other aspects of those texts, especially during the time that Morrison published her story.[4] Thus, if the aforementioned practices of reading and understanding African American texts can be thought of as forms, or ordering principles, it might be said that they operate as a hierarchy. In this case, the category of race is placed at the top of this hierarchy, and it affects and structures all other categories beneath. As a result, categories such as class, gender, diverse cultural markers, sexuality, and even forms of knowledge and narrative are unavoidably understood in terms of race.[5]

Therefore, this paper attempts to apply the methodology described above to show how and why Morrison's short story disrupts and defies common reading practices and the dominant definition of African American literature. It pays special attention to the way that Morrison uses and structures various socio-political categories in her story to destabilize each other, and how this complex interaction collides with readers' expectations and understanding. Moreover, the paper also examines Morrison's utilization of the narrative perspective and its effect on content.

3. Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

Throughout her literary career, Toni Morrison frequently challenged the dominant ideas about the identity, culture and literature of African Americans. Writing about her aims as an author, Morrison states that her goal is to "free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (1993, p. xi). Likewise,

[3] The term itself points to the long tradition of hermeneutics, where the hermeneutical circle refers to the circular way in which understanding one part of a text presupposes understanding the whole text, and vice versa (Jarrett, 2007, p. 168).

[4] African American studies have radically changed since the last decade of the twentieth century. For example, the field of "blackness studies" explores the historical assignation of racial essentialism, and builds new frameworks for theorizing black culture (Jarrett, 2007, p. 7). Likewise, various critical theories at the end of the twentieth century showed an increasingly sophisticated understanding of how power relations built on antiquated, discredited assumptions of racial difference sustain and perpetuate themselves (Fishkin, 1995, pp. 455-456). Thus, Morrison had written her story before these changes in African American studies occurred.

[5] An example might be a division of African American texts alongside gender lines. The assumption that female and male texts are mutually exclusive based on, for example, racial freedom in terms of black manhood, can be essentialist and simplistic because it emphasizes a sort of segregation of the experiences, writing, structures, and practices of African American men from those of African American women (Jarrett, 2007, pp. 174-175).

many critics have already identified Morrison's short story as an example of a text that goes against the traditional definitions of African American literature and the interpretive practices associated with them. For example, Jarrett points out that "Recitatif" represents a "postmodern defiance of racial-realist ideologies central to the Black Aesthetic" (2007, p. 167). Similarly, Kelly Lynch Reames (2007, p. 131) claims that Morrison's story challenges readers' conception of racial identity. Thus, this paper attempts to contribute to this ongoing debate.

The story itself revolves around the long-lasting relationship between two main characters, Twyla and Roberta, over the span of thirty years. The two characters meet for the first time at St. Bonny's shelter as children and throughout the story, their relationship is marked by continuous conflicts as well as moments of friendship and unity. At the very beginning, the story clearly states that one of the characters is white and the other is black. However, as readers try to determine the racial identity of the characters, the text adamantly refuses to disclose it. Instead, Morrison structures the narrative in five fragments, or five encounters between Twyla and Roberta during different stages of their lives, where, in each of them, she sets several categories or ordering principles in motion such as race, sexuality, class, and cultural authority. As each of the fragments employs different socio-political categories and places the characters on various ends of these categories, the story actively complicates interpretations that rely on the well-established practice in which all aspects of a text are explained in terms of the racial hierarchy that structures all other categories, and, in turn, the distribution of power.

The first fragment deals with the episode when Twyla and Roberta meet for the first time at St. Bonny's shelter. As already stated, the first category that is initiated is race. Influenced by her mother, Twyla reveals her racialized thinking about Roberta. Thus, Twyla could be put at a higher position in the racial hierarchy and Roberta at a lower. However, another hierarchical arrangement is introduced in the story which complicates the racial hierarchical binary. Twyla describes her experience in the shelter as one based on discrimination and abuse. She explains that no one wanted to play with her and Roberta because they "weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky" (Morrison, 1983, p. 244). Due to their status as abandoned children, Twyla and Roberta experience verbal and physical abuse from other orphaned children. It becomes clear that the hierarchy in the shelter is not predicated on racial identity but other criteria of difference. As Twyla clearly states, "all kinds of kids were in there, black ones, white ones, even two Koreans" (p. 244). However, the story complicates this arrangement further by introducing the character of Maggie, who is a disabled person. Both Twyla and Roberta express their animosity towards her, verbally and perhaps physically abusing her. Thus, this hierarchy at the shelter puts Twyla and Roberta in the position of both victims and victimizers. They are united in their position as abandoned children and in their opportunity to discriminate against a disabled person but disunited according to racial lines. The form of the shelter quickly disorganizes the hierarchy of race with its implicit enforcement of inequality established at the beginning.

Furthermore, during the second encounter, the difference in sexuality and cultural knowledge between the two characters is emphasized. Twyla, working at

Howard Johnson's diner accidentally meets Roberta as she enters with two men. Twyla describes Roberta as wearing a halter top, shorts, hoop earrings, big hair, heavy makeup and smoking a cigarette. She remarks that Roberta "made the big girls look like nuns" (p. 249). Contrastingly, Twyla describes herself as wearing a simple waitress uniform and shapeless hair. In this scene, a stark difference is established in sexuality, as Roberta appears highly sexualized while Twyla does not. The difference between the two of them is emphasized further when it becomes evident that Twyla has never heard of Jimi Hendrix. Thus, as Reames (2007, p. 135) explains, Twyla's waitress outfit and her cultural ignorance contrast starkly with both Roberta's sexuality and cultural authority.

The third encounter, although much friendlier than the previous one, adds to the ongoing interplay of differences and similarities of social class. The conversation between the two reveals that Twyla is married to a firefighter named James, while Roberta is married to an IBM executive. Twyla is part of the working class, whereas Roberta is elevated to a member of the upper class by means of her wealth. Moreover, the text invokes the category of race once again, as Twyla and Roberta discuss the state of interracial relations during their previous encounter. Roberta claims that she was unpleasant towards Twyla due to the tension between white and black people, while Twyla explains that, in her view, relations between these different groups were more than fine. Roberta expresses her skepticism about the presumed equality between white people and African Americans, while Twyla seems oblivious to the existing subtle racism.

The next fragment deals with the race-integration busing used to integrate public schools in the United States during the 1970s. At the beginning of this part, the story subtly reintroduces the racial hierarchy, as Twyla remarks that the papers referred to this event as a "racial strife" (Morrison, 1983, p. 255). Eventually, the women meet again when Twyla spots Roberta on a picket line protesting busing. When Twyla decides to get involved and protest in favor of busing, the story again puts these characters on different ends. Additionally, the notion of motherhood is another category invoked by both Roberta and Twyla. Roberta brings a sign that says, "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" (1983, p. 256) to declare her right as a mother to send her children to whatever school she thinks is right for them. However, Twyla attempts to undermine Roberta by bringing a sign that says, "HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?" (1983, p. 258), negating her status as a mother because she only has stepchildren.

By putting each of the characters on different ends of various hierarchically structured categories throughout the narrative, the story shows how dominant terms of these hierarchies fail to align with and enforce each other. At the beginning of the story, Twyla appears higher in the racial hierarchy and Roberta towards the lower position. Their positions seem to be reinforced later when Twyla expresses her obliviousness to the still-present racial discrimination. Considering their sexuality presented in the second fragment, Roberta's sexualized body aligns her again with the lower position within the traditional category of femininity, while Twyla again remains at a higher position. However, this alignment is quickly disorganized as Twyla

occupies a lower position in the hierarchy based on her social class. Furthermore, the power of the racial hierarchy to organize the social experience in the story is undermined during the fourth encounter. It becomes evident that Roberta is against busing due to her power as a member of the upper class to send her children to a desired school, while Twyla is in favor of busing due to her inability to send her child to a better school. The relationship among these ordering principles is complicated further when Twyla uses her status as a biological mother to erode Roberta's claim to her right as a mother to choose schools for her stepchildren. In addition, Twyla and Roberta's initial experience at the shelter unites them at the lower position within the hierarchy that segregates children according to their status as either orphaned or abandoned. Simultaneously, Twyla and Roberta occupy a higher position in the hierarchical binary based on disability, which enables them to take part in abusing Maggie. Thus, these various hierarchical structures, though formally alike, do not map perfectly onto one another and fail to reinforce each other. In Levine's words, "hierarchies break down not because they are internally contradictory but because their encounters with other hierarchies unsettle them" (2015, p. 91). If a text's narrative structure is examined in terms of Levine's ordering principles, it becomes evident that "Recitatif" points to the breakdown of a single hierarchy's power to structure and organize all others, and thus its ability to organize the whole social and political world of the text.

Moreover, the way the short story destabilizes the power of racial hierarchy to organize all other aspects of social experience also interferes with such highly formalized practices of reading that rely on the category of race to explain the remaining parts of a text in question. The problems that arise when such a reading or interpretation is employed have already been extensively discussed by Abel (1993), Reames (2007), and Jarrett (2006; 2007). For example, Abel explains that her initial interpretation was a "white woman's fantasy" about black women's sexual potency that "persists in the face of contrary evidence" (1993, p. 474). In other words, Roberta's sexuality does not automatically point to her identity as an African American woman. Abel also points to a reading by her African American friend and scholar who believes that Twyla is black and Roberta white based on the characters' economic status and politics (1993, p. 473). However, the text forces us to rethink the idea that substituting class for race is "a reliable method of human classification" (Jarrett, 2007, p. 181), despite the historical fact that racial differentiation has consistently accompanied class differentiation. There are many other examples in the text where enforcing racial identities on the characters based on their behavior and alignment within different socio-political categories only creates further problems and contradictions. Thus, Reames claims that Twyla and Roberta's meetings are dominated by their differences, "which are economic and only secondarily connected to race" (2007, p. 133). In addition, the effect of the story is not only that racial identity cannot be determined, but that this indeterminacy tends to "free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (Morrison, 1993, p. xi). For example, when Roberta's mother brings chicken legs and oranges

to the shelter, the power of this stereotype falters in the face of the text's racial ambiguity. Instead, it forces readers to think more deeply about the significance of particular types of food that both mothers bring to the shelter. It becomes clear that the text is actually emphasizing the fact that Twyla is underfed because her mother does not care about her nutrition. Furthermore, Twyla's remark that "everything is so easy for them" (Morrison, 1983, p. 252), when she finds out that Roberta is married to an IBM executive, could refer to the privilege that the upper classes enjoy rather than to a specific racial or ethnic group. Likewise, during the busing protests, Twyla tells Roberta that the United States is "a free country," to which Roberta replies, "not yet, but it will be" (Morrison, 1983, p. 258). Although the underlying motive for busing in the United States was racial de-segregation, in this case, it is more likely that the characters are talking about inequality between social classes, and not necessarily about the overt or covert racism that was certainly present. Therefore, all the social, cultural and political markers in the story, and the language used to represent them, are liberated from racial inflection or determination. This does not mean that Morrison's story simply denies the importance of racial identity as it is clearly one of the most important aspects of social reality in the lives of its two main characters. As Jarrett explains, Morrison's text does not deny race matters, but it addresses "the tendency of race to overdetermine and thus reduce the complexity of human identity, relations, and culture, especially as portrayed in African American literature" (2006, p. 6). Instead, the text invites its readers to forego a simplistic understanding of the whole story based on a single category and to closely focus on the complexities of characters and the way the world of the text operates around them.

Finally, this paper attempts to briefly analyze Morrison's employment of the first-person point of view in the story. In the manner of New Formalism, this paper looks for times when the point of view, as a formal device, might collide with or undermine what attention to content alone reveals. The entire story is told from Twyla's perspective, and thus, it is important to identify moments in the text where Twyla's narration becomes unreliable. The first time Twyla's narrative authority is undermined is when she discusses the incident of Maggie's fall in the shelter's orchard with Roberta. Here, Roberta claims that the other girls in the shelter knocked Maggie down and tore her clothes, while Twyla does not remember this at all. The second time when Roberta calls into question Twyla's authority is when she claims that both also took part in the violence and that Maggie was black. However, the story skillfully undermines Roberta's own reading of race at the very last sentence. She reveals her fundamental uncertainty about Maggie's racial identity. Although Twyla is the one who dominates the narrative, as her perspective is the only one in the story, Roberta undermines both Twyla and her own reading of race. Significantly, both perspectives are only called into question when it comes to racial differences. While it is evident that race occupies an integral part in the lives of both characters at the level of content, Morrison's specific and strategic employment of unreliable narration points to the inadequacy of racial identity to organize both the characters' and readers' understanding of the socio-political experience in the world of the text.

"Recitatif" deeply unsettles our understanding of how different hierarchies operate inside and outside literary works. The hierarchies and their specific ordering within the narrative structure operate in such a way to interfere with the capacity of characters and readers to organize the social world of the text according to a single category. The racial ambiguity and interplay or collision of other hierarchies dismantles or disrupts the organizing power of the racial hierarchy that ultimately resides outside of the text itself, within readers and the presumed socio-political reality. In other words, the category of race loses its power to structure and affect the way we think about other categories or binaries that are traditionally placed beneath. Moreover, this short story unsettles the idea that the fixity of racial identity should constitute the sole protocol for reading, writing, and defining African American literature (Jarrett, 2007, p. 382). Instead, the text draws our attention to the particularities in the lives of the two main characters and the deeply complex nature of their friendship as well as their conflict.

4. Conclusion

Morrison's short story "Recitatif" is anomalous or disruptive because it poses an alternative to the dominant ways of thinking about African American literature. It deeply unsettles our own reading habits when we spontaneously try to enforce racial identity on characters or try to explain their specific life experiences in terms of race. "Recitatif" repeatedly and strategically employs different hierarchies and shows how these various ordering principles fail to align and reinforce each other according to the traditional understanding of how these forms operate. Ultimately, it disrupts the power of the racial hierarchy to order and organize all other forms and categories, and thus challenges the highly formalized readings of African American literature. The story's employment of narrative perspective also complements this disruption by rendering its narrator unreliable only when it comes to the construction of racial identity. Moreover, the story is an example of a literary text that arose at a specific historical moment to pose an alternative and question the dominant practices of reading, classifying and canonizing works written by African Americans. Although assumptions about simplistic racial differences and critical readings stemming from these assumptions were increasingly challenged by new critical theories in the last decade of the twentieth century, Morrison's story stands as an example of a literary work that actively and self-consciously works against simplistic representations of race and usual definitions of African American literature at the time it was written.

Theories and methodologies developed by New Formalist critics might be valuable for investigating the numerous tensions between literary texts and the various contexts described above. As one of the primary interests of New Formalism is to explore the possible contradictions between form and content, this approach can reveal new meanings that remain unacknowledged in more traditional approaches. Likewise, Levine's approach based on her reevaluation of hierarchies and binary categories, and the way they operate in literary texts, might lead beyond the

paradigms of post-structuralism and cultural studies to reveal how literary forms could destabilize well-formed cultural and political formations.

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SUBVERZIJA AFROAMERIČKE ESTETIKE: „RECITATIV“ TONI MORISON

Rezime

Osnovni cilj ovog rada je da predstavi kratku priču Toni Morison, „Recitativ“ (1983), kao književno delo koje predstavlja alternativu dominantnim načinima razumevanja, čitanja i definisanja afroameričke književnosti. Tako, rad polazi od tvrdnje u knjizi *Afroamerička književnost izvan rase* (2006) da su određene prakse uticale na koncepciju afroameričke književnosti kao zasebnu vrstu književnosti koja se bavi reprezentacijom života i političke borbe Afroamerikanaca. Takođe, rad se oslanja na teorijske koncepte „rasnog realizma“, afroameričke ili „Crne“ estetike i „anomalnih“ afroameričkih tekstova kako bi izgradio teorijski okvir. Na osnovu ovoga, „Recitativ“ Toni Morison se sagledava kao „anomalni“ tekst zbog toga što dovodi u pitanje tradicionalna shvatanja afromeričke književnosti. Kako bi istražio i bliže analizirao način na koji ova kratka priča podriva ova shvatanja, rad se oslanja na teoriju i metodologije koje su se razvile u okviru relativno nove književnoteorijske grupacije poznate pod imenom Novi formalizam, čiji su osnovni ciljevi istraživanje mogućih tenzija i kontradiktornosti između književne forme i društvenog ili političkog konteksta. Rad se u velikoj meri oslanja na teorijske postavke i metodologiju Kerolajn Levin koja se posebno fokusira na društvene ili političke kategorije i hijerarhije. Stoga, glavni deo rada predstavlja analizu kratke priče „Recitativ“, koja se prvo bavi naročitom upotrebom različitih kategorija kao što su rasni identitet, seksualnost i klasne razlike, i način na koji one stupaju u međusobne odnose kroz interakciju dve glavne junakinje. Ovakva analiza pokazuje da sam tekst vešto destabilizuje ili oduzima moć rasnoj hijerarhiji da strukturiše i uredi sve ostale hijerarhije ili kategorije. Takođe, drugi deo analize se bavi upotrebom tačke gledišta u priči koja upotpunjuje destabilizaciju rasne hijerarhije, i tako ukazuje na kontradiktornost između jednog formalnog elementa i samog sadržaja priče.

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