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From Invisibility to Unmarking: Reflections on African-American Literature

Discussions of literature in terms of ideological content or political implications typically focus on one or more of three major categories—race, sex and class—often adding ethnicity as an alternative or complement to race. The ambiguity of whether race and ethnicity are the same or different, even though the first has certain biological connotations by contrast with the stronger cultural connotations of the second, suggests that these terms are unstable, lacking inner coherence. While race, sex, and class are all culturally constructed, the latter two have a material basis which race lacks. Even if gender characteristics in any concrete social instance always have a cultural character, it would be difficult to maintain the argument that there are no biological differences between males and females. And even if class requires the conscious differentiation of us and them, economic differences are still the condition for this consciousness to arise. With race however, things are different.

It might appear that race is a biological category, having to do with the physical characteristics shared by those belonging to the same gene pool, and expressing itself in terms of skin color, body proportions, special facial features and so on. But this superficial notion of race not only leaves unanswered the question of what possible implications such differences could have for social relations; even a simple criterion such as skin color proves inadequate for determining race. Let us perform a simple thought experiment to test this criterion. It is commonly said that the current president of the United States is black, or African American. Why? Because his partly African parentage is expressed in physical features such as skin color. Imagine, however, that the majority of Americans were black. It would then logically follow that anyone showing traits of whiteness would belong to the minority group, just as anyone recognized as being partly of African descent in the United States today is considered to be black, and usually self-identified as black. In that hypothetical United States with a black majority the current president of the United States would be—using the same logic as we use today—white. What is the race of a particular person? Logically speaking, it depends, and if we add that racial classification is not complete without reference to shared cultural traits and traditions, things get even more complicated. In fact, President Obama's racial identity has been problematized in the American press with regard to his unique cultural background.

This thought experiment supports the notion that race is metaphysical, a mental construct mystically appearing in the form of a timeless, unchangeable reality. But does it then follow that all problems having to do with racial difference can be eliminated by an act of demystification? Unfortunately not. As one prominent African-American literary critic complained, the notion that race is a metaphysical illusion was for him easily refuted by his repeated failures to hail a taxi in mid-town Manhattan. Even though the term race as commonly applied has no clear material basis, it acquires material characteristics as a consequence of social actions.

One might wonder, however, whether racial issues would disappear if we could promote a colorblind society. For example, if race was not a category in government census-taking or in any other institutional procedure, wouldn't it ultimately wither away? Again, unfortunately, things are not that simple. For one thing, colorblindness would be inconsistent with affirmative action policies having the goal of compensating the historical legacy of oppression that has produced the current state of unequal opportunity. For another, resistance to racism demands group solidarity. More importantly, African Americans as a self-defined group have an interest in identifying themselves as both same and different—in terms of a common humanity and in terms of a separate community that preserves its own integrity and values, its own culture and politics. As long as whiteness is the primary and privileged term, with blackness as the derivative, race distinctions constitute a dilemma. As long as white is the unmarked and black is the marked race, black people will be caught in a double bind. If a literary character is not assigned a race in an American context or even within Western culture in general, he or she is assumed to be white. The dominant culture requires that departures from the white norm have to be explicitly named. But if race is not marked in some way, that is also an expression of white hegemony. Same or different? An impossible choice from a subordinate standpoint.

The assertion of the identity of all human beings can be liberating, a blow against racism; but it can just as well mask racism and cover up the inequality actual opportunity. The assertion of difference can be a means of cultural resistance and self-respect, but it can also be self-defeating if it is derivative, a reaction to a prevailing cultural hegemony that is tacitly taken for granted. Since blackness and whiteness are not essences, that is to say not realities in themselves but defined in opposition to each other, neither the assertion of identity nor the assertion of difference can serve as a permanent strategy or attitude. The effect of such assertions always has to be gauged in terms of specific situations, and this goes for all political categories and strategies concerning race. Let us assume, for example, that there is among the reading public or in the academy a prevailing notion that all African-American literature should properly address the politics of race, that there is no place

in it for the aestheticism of the dominant culture. In this situation, I would argue, the assertion that one is primarily a writer, and without a political agenda, may paradoxically come to be loaded with great political significance.

In what follows, I will discuss African-American texts from the late 50s up to our time, in terms of three strategies to resolve the dilemma of racialized identity I have just described:

- a double attitude, involving a subversive or covert opposition, or irony, sometimes using a reversal, turning the dilemma around as belonging to white people;
- self-criticism, relocating or redefining the problem in terms of black people's inadequate or excessive valorization of race, as internalized racism or its denial;
- the relativizing or un-marking of race, not identifying characters in terms of race, or only doing so indirectly when the plot requires it.

These three strategies follow each other in roughly chronological sequence. Since World War II, African-American literature has undergone a development with respect to racial themes that can be divided into three moments: the Civil Rights and integration movements of the 50's and 60s; the twin claims of Black Aesthetics and Black Power of the 60s and 70s, now bringing the intersection of race and gender categories into focus; and the multiculturalism from the 80s up until the present time. My purpose in this selective survey will be to present some texts, mainly short stories, in terms of their educational value in teaching about race at the upper secondary or beginning university level. Naturally, these texts would not lend themselves so well to this purpose if they were not also excellent choices for teaching English and literature as such. I begin with Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, from which I select the stand-alone first chapter "The Battle Royal", then take up an essay from the same period by James Baldwin entitled "My Dungeon Shook". In this group I also consider an illustration of how history is not a perfect linear pattern, the 1993 novel *A Lesson before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, which returns to a civil rights theme. The next group consists of two stories, "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara and "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker. In the final group, I take up two texts that in different ways express a multi-cultural orientation, Charles Johnson's novel *The Middle Passage* and Toni Morrison's single short story, "Recitatif".

Published in the period of global decolonization and just before the demand for civil rights became a dramatic national issue in the United States, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was a sensational publishing event. Twelve years later, it was to be judged the best novel since World War II by two hundred prominent literary critics. Closely

modeled on the life of the author, who rose from working-class beginnings in the South to an academic career in northeastern United States, the novel portrays the identity crisis of a man who leaves his southern college for New York City to fulfill his promise of personal success. He discovers, however, that all his associations in the North are subtly yet profoundly characterized by racial politics, among blacks as well as whites. Unable to find personal recognition or an authentic existence among others, he retreats underground, literally and symbolically. The unnamed protagonist hibernates, as he says, in a closed-off basement where he awaits a time for returning to a world where he can genuinely be seen. The invisibility of the differently colored man is the great theme of the novel, signifying lack of personal recognition and the relegation to a state of symbolic nonexistence.

The prologue of the novel and its first chapter can be read as independent texts, and they are often anthologized. This is especially true for the first chapter entitled “Battle Royal”, which was first published as a short story. It is about a young man who is to receive an award for his excellent academic record but who is instead mocked by those who would keep him in his place. A group of white men subject the protagonist and his fellow distinguished students to a humiliating collective and blindfolded boxing match. When they are invited to claim their reward in the form of money thrown across the floor, the young men receive electric shocks. The story reads like an allegory of the lives of black Americans, falsely offered rewards for their achievements and their aspirations to equality, tricked into competition with each other and lured by the false promise of financial success. As the first chapter of *Invisible Man*, it is a prophecy of the protagonist’s betrayal and disillusionment, the failed project of self-actualization that eventually leads him to his underground existence.

As might be seen in this very brief summary, Ellison draws the conclusion that, for the time being, no significant social action can be taken—or at least openly advocated—to address problems of racism. Black people remain caught within the split identity that DuBois had earlier described as “double consciousness”. The only action available to the protagonist is symbolically represented by his theft of electricity from the aptly named “Monopolated Light & Power“, something which allows him to bask in the light of hundreds of light bulbs that make him eminently visible. The novel is a forceful confrontation with a white reader, at the same time openly expressing despair over the racial double bind. As such, *Invisible Man* succeeds in asserting the ambivalence and ambiguity of black identity, finding in the form of literature an alternative which is not present in the world. Yet the message is also that subversion and an ironic attitude is the only possible form of social

existence. Figuratively, the protagonist reproduces his grandfather's strategy of social survival.

On his death-bed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight [. . .]. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction [. . .] I was warned emphatically to forget what he said [. . .] It had a tremendous effect upon me, however, I could never be sure what he meant [. . .] Whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. (17-18)

The narrator/protagonist is ambivalent about this advice, evidently because it is a legacy from the post-Civil War era of "Reconstruction" that represents white reaction against the Emancipation of slaves. On the one hand, the grandfather's advice implies the necessity of subjection; on the other, it involves an effective form of covert resistance, a form of passive aggression. Adding to the ambivalence is also the fact that the strategy which appears to have been a necessity for the grandfather runs the risk of becoming a factor in the perpetuation of racial subjection for later generations.

A similar emphasis on a double if not duplicitous form of behavior characterizes some of James Baldwin's early works. A contemporary of Ellison's, Baldwin was the more prominent public figure, a spokesman for African-American civil rights. Though exposing Christianity as a sham in his autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin's ethics remain Christian, as is evident in his well-known essay book, *The Fire Next Time*. The most important part of Baldwin's message reverses the received form of the racial dilemma. It is not black people who have a problem and who need to be recognized by whites as equal; it is rather white people who are compromised as oppressors. Black people are by virtue of their politically subordinate position in a superior position of understanding the other, and it is therefore, Baldwin counsels, that they must love white people.

On the face of it, this is simply a matter of Christian ethics—love your enemy. But one might sense in the outraged tone of the book another transformation of the grandfather's advice in *Invisible Man* to "undermine 'em with yeses". After all, Baldwin's title, *The Fire Next Time*, is an Old Testament allusion signifying the wrath of God as the future consequence of continued sinfulness. It is a militant love that Baldwin advocates, much like the non-violent resistance of Martin Luther King, Jr and approaching his disciplined control of anger in speeches and actions for peaceful change. This message is clear in the first, shorter essay in the book entitled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of

the Emancipation”. As if updating and upgrading the grandfather’s advice in *Invisible Man*, while echoing Ellison’s key metaphor of invisibility, Baldwin seeks to prepare his nephew for a rough world:

most of them do not yet really know that you exist [. . .] There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them* [. . .]. And if the word *integration* meetings anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are.” (16-21)

This forceful love aims to confront white people with the guilt and the alienation from humanity that results from racist domination. The propitious historical moment for such a strategy, however, seems to have passed, not only with the end of Civil Rights demonstrations and the assassination of King, but also with the transformation of political conditions. When institutionalized racism begins to disappear, at least in its most obvious forms such as segregationist legislation, opposition to racism increasingly has to be directed against an internal as well as external agent.

It would be wrong to claim that all works of literature are arranged in some linear progression, however. There are works close to our time that still adhere to civil rights ideology and method, for example, Ernest J. Gaines’ *A Lesson before Dying*, which portrays a transcendence of racial division by couching resistance to white racism not as opposition or rebellion, but in terms of a universal level—existential courage in the face of death. The author was born on a plantation in Louisiana, a member of the fifth generation to live in that same place. He spent most of his childhood picking cotton, going to school only five to six months of the year. This is the sort of world that is reflected in *A Lesson before Dying*, which returns not only in its setting to the segregated South of the 1940s, but also in its ideology to the Civil Rights movement that was soon to follow. The emphasis in this instance is on the transformation of consciousness, not the eradication of institutionalized segregation. In its sharp differentiation of black and white experience, the novel might seem to take the sort of identity politics position that is common within the multicultural approach, but the assertion of a universal value is its major theme.

A Lesson before Dying is a moral tale. It is the story of a young black man who learns to face his moment of execution with dignity, though his conviction for murder is wrongful—the racist verdict of the jury of twelve white men. The main issue in the novel is not proving the innocence of Jefferson, the wrongly convicted man, but in challenging the inhumanity of his defense by the white, court-appointed lawyer. In order to convince the jury that the accused could not possibly have committed

premeditated murder, the defense attorney refers to Jefferson not as a man, but as “anything that acts on command,” and unintelligent animal—“a hog.” This assertion is something the young man’s godmother cannot accept. She convinces the most educated black man in town, a schoolteacher, to visit Jefferson in his jail cell in order to rescue his humanity. She wants her godson to face death with courage and dignity—not as a “hog” but as a man. After a series of reluctant visits, the schoolteacher is ultimately successful, and in his success—or rather through the courage of the condemned man—the schoolteacher finds a new meaning in his life. The condemned man has redeemed the community in breaking the cycle of escapism, the flight from responsible manhood that is all too familiar in reports about African-American families.

The next two texts in my selective survey belong to the new historical moment that follows what we might call the cultural revolution of the 60s. It now becomes important to locate an internal oppressor and to realize that also the personal is the political, to use the slogan of the new women’s movement. In Toni Bambara’s short story collection *Gorilla, My Love* the story entitled “The Lesson” portrays the experience of a Harlem school class that encounters for the first time the affluent and predominantly white culture of downtown Manhattan, as exemplified by an exclusive shopping district. By contrast, Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” from *In Love and Trouble* portrays the idealization of the poor black background from the perspective of someone who has begun to assert her black identity in a middle class context. The first story contains a critique of that relatively straightforward distinction between racially defined “us and them” whose moment of primary importance has passed. The second contains a critique of the excessive valorization of race in black nationalism, which is shown to ignore the rights of women as well as idealizing African-American culture.

Toni Bambara’s experience as a New Yorker deeply committed to social work and welfare programs is evident in the focus of her fiction on marginal characters, poverty, children and youth. “The Lesson” is representative in this regard and in its use of the African-American vernacular. It is a story of mixed success with an experiment in practical education. A well-meaning woman attempts to teach a group of children in the Harlem district of New York City about social and economic inequality—the vast disparities in wealth which become readily apparent as one travels from uptown Harlem to downtown Manhattan with its fancy Fifth Avenue shops. As they visit a famous toy store called F. A. O. Schwarz, the teacher aims to teach the children a lesson by confronting them with their ignorance of social inequality, shocking them into awareness. In particular, she uses the example of a toy boat that only extravagantly wealthy people could afford, its price striking the

children as what an actual boat might cost. The narrator of the story, a tough, semi-delinquent young girl, rejects the moral of the lesson at some expense to herself, though she elicits the reader's sympathy. She will not be a good girl and accept Miss Moore's self-righteous and dogmatic lesson, which disregards how the children's fantasies are caught up in this luxurious world, and how ashamed they consequently are of their own poverty and ignorance:

Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it? Where we are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don't necessarily have to be that way, she always adds then waits for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie and don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place. But she ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't gettin it Messin up my day with this shit.
(94-95)

Though the story ends without resolution of conflict, its overriding message is positive: the affirmation of a child's perspective through humor and the reproduction of vernacular speech, an affirmation in its own right.

Like Bambara's "Lesson," "Everyday Use" takes up a self-critical perspective on African-American culture, while the critique of the dominant culture remains implicit. A young woman returns to her childhood home with renewed interest in her cultural heritage. Though she had earlier rejected this poor rural existence, her recently assumed black assertiveness, reflected in her new African name, causes her to assign her humble background a new symbolic value. When she takes Polaroid pictures of her mother and sister, she makes sure that the picturesque little house, with its tin roof and porthole-like windows, is visible in the background. And she would like to bring back a trophy from this brief visit to her childhood home. She wants the quilts which her grandmother had made out of old scraps of clothing.

The mother, however, upholds the right to inheritance of the homely and shy, younger daughter who has stayed at home, realizing that the older daughter has made a success of herself in an urban setting that does not genuinely value the quilts. The mother asserts that they are not to be put up on some wall but intended for "everyday use" when the younger daughter receives them on the day of her planned wedding. Since the mother appears as the first person narrative voice, it becomes apparent that she arrives at a new insight about her life, and a new self-possession, as she takes side with the younger daughter. She then affirms the integrity of her life as she has lived it, detaching herself from the image of success represented by the older daughter. In

her daydreams, she had earlier seen herself acknowledged in a TV talk show as the mother of this glamorous person. Now she experiences something like a conversion in reacting to the older daughter's symbolic reappropriation of her roots:

[S]omething hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open. (54-55)

Disappointed, the older daughter then abruptly leaves, while accusing her mother of not understanding her heritage.

The quilt can be read as a symbol of female cooperation and solidarity that combines work and friendship, the practical and the aesthetic. It can be seen as a kind of bricolage in which the whole is pieced together from fragments, a triumph over the meager circumstances of poverty and the constraints of country life. The story alludes to these symbolic dimensions but ultimately emphasizes an anti-symbolic, practical meaning, as it satirizes the reclaiming of African culture among Black Muslims and the idealizing aspects of the Black Power movement. It can be discussed, however, to what extent the first-person perspective resolves the central conflict in a sentimental way, at the expense of acknowledging positive aspects of black self-assertion. The absence of an authorial narrative point of view opens up interpretative alternatives.

The next two texts I will discuss attempt to disengage characters from typical literary conventions. Charles Johnson's *The Middle Passage* and Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" both challenge the reader, though by different means, to examine what Morrison calls the "lazy habits of mind" that are often the essence of our perception of race. With these two texts, we have moved into a period of multiculturalism.

Charles Johnson studied journalism and philosophy, then worked as a political cartoonist and photojournalist. He is now a professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle. In 1990, his novel *The Middle Passage* was awarded the National Book Award. The title alludes to the transport of Africans to the Americas under abominably crowded and unsanitary conditions that could often cause one third of the human cargo to perish. This was not a problem for the slave traders, however; rather, it was consistent with their aim to maximize profits and their total lack of a humane attitude—as one might expect from those treating human beings as commodities without any rights or claims to freedom. The middle passage, with its

loss of millions of lives, can be compared to the more well-known genocides of the twentieth century.

If Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* can be classified as a historical novel, then we must surely admit the postmodern comparison of historical and fictional narrative, where a great deal of poetic license can be taken with the received facts of the historical record, and where received notions of guilt and blame and the slave/master relation are greatly complicated. The free black American Rutherford Calhoun arrives from his native Illinois in New Orleans, where he proceeds to live a dissident and extravagant life as a petty thief and drunkard.

New Orleans, you should know, was a city tailored to my taste for the excessive, exotic fringes of life, a world port of such extravagance in 1829 when I arrived from southern Illinois—a newly freed bondman, my papers in an old portmanteau, a gift from my master in Makanda—that I dropped my bags and a shot of recognition shot up my spine to my throat, rolling off my tongue in a whispered, '*Here, Rutherford is home.*' (1-2)

Indulgence in excess and extravagance, however, eventually transforms his pleasant new home into a place of insecurity and confinement. Forced to flee from the double threat of unforgiving debtors and enforced marriage, he stows away on *The Republic* which, ironically enough, is a slave ship on its way to Africa.

As the ship returns to America with its human cargo, the cruelties of slavery and the so-called "middle passage" are graphically portrayed, but the novel ultimately has no clear-cut villains and heroes. While slavery is clearly wrong, it is not unambiguously personified in a single white character. The white captain proves himself to be a slave of sorts, captive to his financiers, the ship owners, one of whom is actually the black New Orleans crime boss, the debtor who Rutherford sought to escape in going on the voyage. After surviving a bloody mutiny by the captured Africans and rebellious members of the crew, and after violent shipwreck on the high seas, Rutherford is finally picked out of the water by a passing ship. This ship proves to carry as passengers both Papa Zeringue, the very same New Orleans crime boss, and Isadora, the virtuous, well-educated woman who sought to trap Rutherford into marriage. The story ends with Rutherford outwitting Zeringue and turning himself completely around, transformed by the middle passage, as he successfully proposes to Isadora.

Like the male protagonist of *A Lesson before Dying*, Rutherford renounces an unprincipled attitude toward life and ultimately proves his manhood. But the two novels are quite dissimilar in other respects, since *The Middle Passage* seeks

liberation from the historical legacy of slavery through the use of humor and the avoidance of just about all familiar types as well as stereotypes of events and characters. In Johnson's imaginative reconstruction of the horrors of the middle passage, good and evil are shown as constituting anything but a simple dichotomy, and they are certainly not aligned with a racial dichotomy.

This third strategy for resolving the dilemma of racial discourse is already implicit in the stories by Bambara and Walker I have discussed, since their primary concern is with African-American consciousness rather than the direct confrontation with a racial hierarchy. In a sense, race is by this means unmarked since racial characterization only occurs indirectly as an inevitable consequence of thematic development. For example, the designation of characters in "Everyday Use" as African-American is essentially a matter of the characters themselves raising issues of racial identity. In the works of Toni Morrison we find this strategy used in a self-conscious and methodical fashion, beginning with her single short story entitled "Recitatif". In this story, as she explains, she performed an experiment involving the removal of all racial tags from a story which nevertheless dramatizes conflict involving racial difference. As a result, the reader is left wondering which of the two young women protagonists is black, and which white: is Roberta, who appreciates the music of Jimi Hendrix, black? Or is it rather Twyla, the lower class woman? And is it opposition to or support of school busing, an issue on which the two women stand opposed, which is genuinely favored by African Americans?

One of these two characters, Twyla, narrates the story. She begins by explaining that she and Roberta were both sent to a shelter for children in New York City because they had been abandoned by their mothers. One mother has evidently left her girl at the shelter because she "danced all night" and the other is said to have been "sick". When the two mothers visit the shelter, the overt hostility between them does not seem to threaten the two eight-year-olds, despite their growing awareness of racial tension. As Twyla puts it, the two of them are a "salt and pepper" combination, slang for a white and black couple or friendship. Eventually the two girls leave the shelter, and lose touch with each other. Next time they happen to meet, however, communication between them fails and there is a distinct note of hostility in their conversation.

On their second meeting after the having left the shelter, the former note of hostility between them escalates into complete confrontation. Roberta reproaches Twyla for not remembering that a kitchen worker at the shelter named Maggie was pushed down and laughed at one day by the other girls. On their next meeting, reference to this event leads to a violent argument which culminates in the breakdown of their

friendship. When each calls the other a liar, the destruction of their friendship is complete. After the event, however, Twyla remembers how she and Roberta had both watched the other girls kick Maggie. Recognizing the growing importance of Maggie as a symbol in her relationship with Roberta, Twyla reflects that "Maggie was my dancing mother" (2430).

The final meeting between the two women in Twyla's narrative returns to the question of Maggie. This time Roberta confesses that although she is not sure if Maggie was black, neither one of them kicked her, although she, Roberta, wanted to. She attributes her motive for doing so to the resemblance between her mother and Maggie: both have been brought up in institutions. "We didn't kick her. . . . But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day – wanting is doing it" (2469-2470). This initiates a reconciliation between the two women, and the story ends with Roberta's anguished question to Twyla: "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (2471) Roberta's concern reclaims Maggie from the scapegoat position and reverses a covert, escalating racism between the two women that is evidently a displacement of their ambivalent relation to their mothers. Repressed anger at their mothers, at first expressing itself in their girlhood treatment of Maggie and then in their estrangement as adults, is here acknowledged when they realize Maggie's symbolic function as a racialized person.

The word "racialized" acquires a special meaning in this context, since the point is that Maggie is treated as if she were a black person; or conversely, the way she is treated might be taken to imply that she is black. Since the objective status of Maggie's racial identity is uncertain, race functions in this context purely as a symbolic value. This is the episode in the story, however, which provides the best basis for determining which of the two women is African-American. Roberta's initial accusation raises the possibility that she is herself black, since she implicitly describes Twyla's behavior as racist. Whether Maggie is black or not, Roberta's accusation that Twyla had kicked a black person seems to be based on racially based defensiveness.¹

Although Morrison only departed from the novel form in this single short story which she wrote as an experiment, it proved deeply significant for her further development as novelist. It was the last piece of fiction she wrote before her most celebrated novel, *Beloved*, which is generally considered the major achievement behind her Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. The story seems to have enabled her to detach herself, not only from racial marking and its preconception, but also from the accommodation of an implied white audience. Extending this process of detachment

from racial ideology in her recent novel *A Mercy*, which is set in the early colonial period, Morrison demonstrates that there is no natural or inevitable connection between black Africans and slavery. The enslavement of Africans in particular was the outcome of complex factors inherent in the colonizing enterprise. Thus Morrison continues to undo racial markings and associations that tend to be made natural and permanent by certain habits of language.

The texts I have discussed respond to the dilemma, or double bind, of racial identification in various ways. While invisibility is negative for Ralph Ellison, writing in the 1950s, the unmarking of race is positive for Toni Morrison, three decades later. The issue is gaining visibility as a human being while remaining invisible, under certain circumstances, as a racially identified being. The question whether, when and how to identify oneself or not to identify oneself in racial terms remains a challenge, but we can see in the changing answers to these questions over a half-century that there is a need to respond to the requirements of specific times and places. Evidently there is also a type of change which we could call progress, based on accumulating knowledge as well as on new and perhaps more advantageous social conditions. Or, possibly, all three strategies discussed here may remain significant over time, as older works remain a resource for the imagination. Literature is a kind of experimental laboratory where solutions can be imagined that are not available in our real lives, though they may still prove to be so, through a creative detour.

Teaching Resources

The following short texts discussed in this article are available on the Internet at the indicated URLs, though these may not be permanent:

“The Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison:

<http://www.brainmass.com/homework-help/english/creative-writing/39668>

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara:

<http://cai.ucdavis.edu/gender/thelesson.html>

“Everyday Use” by Alice Walker:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/walker.html>

“Recitatif” by Toni Morrison:

<http://amb.cult.bg/american/5/morrison/recitatif.htm>

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ⁱ In "Black Writing, White Reading", Elizabeth Abel corroborates this point based on extra-textual information relating to the setting of "Recitatif". Able explains that Roberta's superior class position vis-à-vis Twyla has a possible basis in trade union policies in Albany, New York, favorable to African Americans.