

‘TRUST THEM TO FIGURE IT OUT’: TONI MORRISON’S BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

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Toni Morrison has joined the ranks of those writers whose work includes texts for both adults and children. This paper examines this less known side to Morrison’s work in an attempt to define its characteristic features and its place within ethnic and African-American children’s literature. The texts will be read in the light of the ideas of such thinkers as John Dewey and Martha Nussbaum, among others, who advocate a liberal model of education that fosters autonomy and critical thinking. Depictions of children in Morrison’s adult fiction, for the author has shown a life-long interest in childhood, will also be engaged.

Key words: Toni Morrison, ethnic children’s literature, African-American children’s literature, picture books, fables, liberal education, critical thinking, crosswriting, African-American history, James Baldwin

Critics Sandra Beckett and David Galef have identified an increase in the number of authors who crosswrite or write for a dual-audience, producing both children’s and adults’ literature (Beckett 1999: xi; Galef 1995: 34). This crossover can occur, Galef points out, in different directions. Authors of adult fiction may decide to take up children’s literature in the middle of or late in their careers, Roald Dahl being a famous example. Conversely, authors of children’s fiction may turn to writing for an older audience, which is rarer. A third type is comprised of ‘polygraph[ic]’ writers such as A. A. Milne or Louisa May Alcott who managed to produce both kinds of texts from the beginning of their careers (Galef 1995: 29). It is true, however, that the number of authors who are able to succeed in both genres is more limited. Whether Toni Morrison will join the canon of children’s literature remains to be seen, but the truth is that after the publication of *Paradise* (1998) she has put out a substantial number of books addressed to younger audiences. These comprise two picture books, *The Big Box* (1999) and *The Book of Mean People* (2002), a series of retellings of Aesop in comic strip format under the title *Who’s Got Game* (2003) and a pictorial book titled *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004). As much children’s literature is a collaborative effort, Morrison has worked alongside book illustrators Giselle Potter and Pascal

Lemaître, as well as her son Slade Morrison, a painter by profession, in the first three pieces. The extent of Slade Morrison's collaboration in the texts is difficult to determine. Morrison has admittedly used the stories that he imagined as a child as a source of inspiration for the two picture books (Capriccioso 2003) and they have devised the revisions of Aesop together ('Scribner Signs Six Book Deal With Toni Morrison and Son').

Morrison, who has admitted to having "a twinge of envy for novelists who write for all ages" ('Scribner Signs Six Book Deal With Toni Morrison and Son') is likely to be fulfilling a desire to target children directly as an audience, after showing a long-standing concern for them. In a 1981 interview by Charles Ruas, Morrison expressed her preoccupation with children as follows: "Certainly since *Sula* I have thought that the children are in real danger. Nobody likes them, all children, but particularly black children. . . . Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth. There may be a lot of scorned people, but particularly children" (Ruas 1992: 103). Although the theme of childhood is not at the center of all her works, Morrison has often deployed the *child archetype*, to borrow Rocío Davis's terms, to respond to her country's "evolving socio-cultural climate" (2001: 12). The child-characters in her fiction are portrayed as the innocent victims of their families, communities and their nation. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is driven insane by the pervasive power of the white ideal of beauty and the lack of a loving family. While dismembering the normative narrative of the *Dick and Jane* primer throughout the novel, Morrison puts under scrutiny notions of childhood innocence and complacent American family life. She draws our attention to the way children's behavior and personalities are shaped by their environment. Instilled prejudice leads some of her characters, such as Maureen Peal or Junior, to oppress other children. Junior, whose mother, Geraldine, "had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers" (1994: 87), harasses Pecola in the "SEETHECAT" section of *The Bluest Eye*. Sula and Nel are bullied by a group of Irish immigrant boys in *Sula*. The narrator reveals that the bullying stems from the need of the newly arrived Irish immigrants to integrate in the white community by "echo[ing]" (1982: 53) its bias against blacks. In addition, Morrison is concerned with how children are affected by a society obsessed with success and driven by consumerism. This alienation cuts across class and racial boundaries. Adults, she insists in the above interview, are "interested in self-aggrandizement, being 'right' and pleasures" (Ruas 1992: 103), proving inattentive to the real needs of children.

Scholarship on this part of Morrison's oeuvre is still scarce, although her texts have drawn several reviews, to which I will refer in the course of my analysis. Nina Mikkelsen's article on black esthetics, published in the *MELUS* 2002 issue on ethnic American children's literature, discusses Morrison without mentioning the author's own venture into the field. A miscellaneous article by Chia-yen Ku (2006) relates Morrison to key issues in the field of children's literature such as censorship, power relations, didacticism or genres. Veronique Bragard's piece (2007) focuses on one of the retellings of the *Who's Got Game* series, 'The Grasshopper or the Ant?'. Neal Lester devotes one of the chapters of his 2007 volume *Once Upon a Time in a Different World: Issues and Ideas in African-American Children's Literature* to an analysis of the representation of adult control in the picture books *The Big Box* and *The Book of Mean*

People. None of these critical pieces touches upon the non-fiction photo-essay *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*. All of them fail to determine Morrison's overall intent as a children's author, to contextualize her within the field of ethnic children's literature, as well as to highlight the distinctive African-American elements that she incorporates into her texts. This paper addresses these issues through an exploration of Morrison's seemingly disparate works for children, which range from picture book and comic to photo-essay. The comprehensive nature of my approach precludes an in-depth analysis of each of the texts under discussion.

A brief introduction to the development of ethnic and African-American children's literature becomes necessary at this juncture. As Pat Pinsent explains, in the 1960s and 1970s Anglo-American critics and authors became increasingly alert to the critical role played by children's literature in the socialization of children and the transmission of values: "It could help make future citizens aware not only of past oppression, but also of how literature itself had been complicit in this oppression, both by using language, characters and situations which took it for granted and by rendering such groups invisible". This led to the reexamination of children's classics as well as to the production of new works aiming to redress the invisibility or misrepresentation of minority groups (2005: 177). Naturally, "ethnic self-definition" has been central to the development of ethnic literature for children (Davis 2002: 155). It will not escape readers that the agenda of ethnic children's literature described by Pinsent and others resonates with that of ethnic literature for adults. In fact, critic Katharine Capshaw remarks that many ethnic American writers have also written for children, and underlines the importance of ethnic children's texts within American ethnic literature (2002: 7). Capshaw shows how, in addition to highlighting orality and folklore, both literatures share a thematic concern with "issues of identity, assimilation, nationalism, cultural pluralism" (5). "Traumatic past events" such as the internment of Japanese-Americans or African-American slavery are not glossed over in order to "fill the gaps of historical memory" (6). Regarding its audience, ethnic children's literature is often aimed both at "insider and outsider groups". Whereas minority children will be encouraged to counter prejudiced representations of their culture, Capshaw argues, cross-cultural understanding will be instilled in mainstream children (4). Overall, contemporary ethnic children's literature promotes a culture of mutual understanding, tolerance and rejection of racial stereotypes.

Certainly, the work of African-American authors has been a vital contribution to the field. African-American writers soon learnt to exploit the "formative influence" this literature exerts on "social relations", to borrow Capshaw's words (2002: 3). Although this body of literature flourished in the 1960s and 1970s fueled by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, its emergence dates back to the Harlem Renaissance's program of racial uplift developed in the 1920s and 1930s (Capshaw 2004: xv). The Renaissance's commitment to childhood and education as channels for racial progress were instrumental in the development of texts for black children. The touchstone publication for this era was the magazine *The Brownies' Book*, launched by W.E.B. DuBois in 1920, which aimed to counter the prevailing racial stereotypes and historical misconceptions about blacks echoed in mainstream publications for children such as *St. Nicholas* (Johnson 1995: 140). Langston Hughes —*The Dream Keeper* (1932)— became

prominent as a children's author in that period. The 1960s witnessed a "renewal" (quoted in Smith 1995: 34) of the Renaissance's uplift ideology and it was in this decade that Walter Dean Myers, one of the most prolific contemporary African-American writers for children and young adults, gained popularity. Speaking of his goals he stated: "I want to tell Black children about their humanity and about their history and how to grease their legs so the ash won't show and how to braid their hair so it's easy to comb in frosty winter mornings" (Smith 1995: 37). Such well-established authors for adults as James Baldwin also produced texts for children in this period. In *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (1976), dedicated to artist Beaufort Delaney and written in black dialect, Baldwin touches upon the joys and sorrows of ghetto life, which he knew first hand, by recording one day in the life of three Harlem children. He has his child protagonist, TJ, recount how some of the boys in his block "go up to the roof . . . and they shoot that dope in their veins and they come out and sit on the stoop and look like they gone to sleep" (24). Yet TJ is loved by his mother, whose skin is "the color of peaches and brown sugar" (56), and his self-affirming father, who "always say" "I want you to be proud of your people" (59). In his only piece for young readers, Baldwin aims to empower black children by emphasizing family and community bonds, orality, the importance of education, as well as the beauty of blackness. Contemporary African-American children's literature is still concerned with, though its scope is not limited to, these issues, as shown in texts like bell hooks's (Gloria Jean Watkins) *Happy to be Nappy* (1999), about the racial politics of hair, or Walter Dean Myers's *The Beast* (2003), about a teenager's transition from the streets of Harlem to a prestigious school.

Morrison is included in surveys of African-American children's literature such as Neal Lester's and, furthermore, she is the recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award. This medal, which commemorates the life and work of Martin Luther King and honors his widow Coretta Scott King, is granted to African-American authors and illustrators of children's books (Bernd 1995: 135). As I hope to show in my discussion of the texts, although Morrison's work incorporates to varying degrees features and themes characteristic of ethnic and African-American children's literature, she pursues more general goals. Indeed, the "elusive but identifiable style" characteristic of Black literature (Morrison 2008: 61) can be traced in several of her pieces. In the fable 'Poppy and the Snake', Morrison draws on story-telling and black folklore and uses the figure of the ancestor. Orality is emphasized through the rap rhythm pervading 'The Grasshopper and the Ant' as well as in the choral narrative of *The Big Box*. In terms of themes *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* illustrates a traumatic chapter in the history of education in America, in order to fill a gap in the historical memory of contemporary American children. It should be noted, however, as Chia-yen Ku argues, that Morrison does not confine herself to the exploration of "racism, black aesthetics and African American history" (2006: 638). All her children's texts except for *Remember*, which foregrounds racism and African-American history, deal with experiences that are universal to children—schooling, relationship with adults, bullying— or retell stories that are well known to them. Regarding her readership, Morrison targets an integrated audience of children from different ethnicities, as her choice of themes and characters indicates. With the exception of 'Poppy and the Snake', which features black characters in a rural Southern setting, and 'The Grasshopper and

the Ant', whose anthropomorphic insect protagonists speak like black urban youngsters, Morrison's texts either depict animals, as 'The Lion and the Mouse' and *The Book of Mean People*, or represent children from both insider and outsider groups. Thus, the three protagonists of *The Big Box* have different skin complexions and hair textures. Both black and white children and their parents and teachers are portrayed in the photographs that make up *Remember*.

Rather than producing texts for and about African-American children alone, what concerns Morrison is inculcating her readers with values that are in keeping with a liberal ideal of education. The author has criticized a model of education solely based on the uncritical imposition and acceptance of a strict set of rules and goals. Something is lacking, Morrison claims, when children simply comply with norms and expectations: "they don't have their own lives and their own experiences" (Capriccioso 2003). Her position as a professor of Humanities at Princeton enables her to witness the aftermath of such an approach. She complains that many university students aim at succeeding for success' sake, which precludes a genuine learning experience: "You keep wondering and you want to scratch them a little bit to see what's really underneath that enormous burden and commitment" (Capriccioso 2003). On no account is Morrison undermining parental authority or advocating anarchy through these statements. Her point instead is that a central goal of education should be to encourage children to think and decide for themselves: "trust the children to figure it out. . . . give them the opportunity to figure it out and applaud them not because they are beautiful or because they ate their food but when they figure something out on their own" (Capriccioso 2003). Morrison's views on the education of children dovetail with those of a writer she greatly admires and whose influence she has acknowledged, James Baldwin. In his 1963 essay 'A Talk to Teachers', included in a revival collection edited by Morrison herself, Baldwin reminds teachers that their mission is "to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not" (Baldwin 1998: 678). This idea is voiced by TJ's father in *Little Man, Little Man*: "TJ's father read *Muhammad Speaks* sometime, but then he say, 'Don't believe everything you read. You got to *think* about what you read'" (emphasis in the original) (Baldwin 1976: 70). Both Baldwin and Morrison argue for self-reliance and critical thinking as liberating life skills. Their own work and struggles rest on this vision.

It is worth reading Morrison's children's texts, therefore, through the prism of a liberal philosophy of education, one that prepares children to live in modern democratic societies. In fact, her remarks reverberate with the ideas of such thinkers as John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum and others, who argue for a system that does not restrain children but guides them from dependency into adult autonomy. John Dewey, the touchstone for American educational reform in the first half of the twentieth century, approached education as an experimental, child-centered process. For Dewey, the founder of the Chicago Laboratory Schools still in operation today, education should not revolve around the acquisition of factual knowledge out of certain fixed materials, but should "begin with the child's ideas, impulses and interests" (1990: 37). His revolutionary philosophy of education dismissed a system based on "listening", which promotes "passivity", the "dependency of one mind upon another" and

precludes the individualization of children. It is only when children are allowed to “act” that they become distinct individuals set off from the mass (33-4). Traditional education, Dewey complains, restrains the child’s communicative instinct by having him use language to repeat lessons rather than to express his own thoughts. As a result, children end up “having to say something” instead of “having something to say” (56). Echoes of Dewey’s self-reliant, articulate child are found in the work of contemporary thinkers. Acknowledging Dewey’s influence on liberal education and also drawing on the ideas of Socrates, the Stoics and Seneca, Nussbaum (2003: 180) alerts us to the fact that very often our words and actions are not our own but “the voice of tradition or convention, the voice of the parent, of friends, of fashion” (28). The education of future citizens, Nussbaum insists, should equip them to live what Socrates called “the examined life” (9), one in which they are able to question received knowledge and authority. Similarly, Anthony Appiah remarks that the life we should live is not necessarily the one that fulfills others’ expectations of the good life, but that which best fits our “chosen sense of the meaning of [our] own life”, as long as our goals are morally acceptable (2003: 58). In order to become autonomous adults, children need to be encouraged to “speak up” early in their schooling (66) and discouraged from being totally “deferential” (Callan 2004: 153). The works that will be discussed in the coming pages are a perfect embodiment of these ideas.

The Big Box, advertised for ages 8 and up, tells the story of Patty, Mickey and Liza Sue, three children who are put into a metaphorical brown box for misbehaving. The book begins with a quick scene that draws the readers into the story. Giselle Potter’s pastel-color illustration features the children in their imprisonment, isolated despite sharing a room cluttered with carpets, beds, a swing and a slide, sweets and fast food, different kinds of toys, a door that “has three big locks” and a window “with shutters to keep out the day”.¹ The scene continues on the next page, where the parental figure is introduced as the weekly provider of all these consumer goods, as well as of presents meant to artificially preserve the natural world away from which the children are kept — “a picture of the sky”, “a butterfly under glass” or “an aquarium thing with plastic fish”. In contrast, the next illustration portrays the children with smiling dreamy faces playing together in a natural setting surrounded by seagulls, rabbits and a beaver. The corresponding text introduces the refrain that with slight variations runs through the story, in which a third person narrator complains that “Oh, the seagulls scream/And rabbits hop/And beavers chew trees when they need’em./ But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue—/ Those kids can’t handle their freedom”. Soon we learn the reasons that have led to the children’s confinement. Patty, Mickey and Liza Sue are realistic characters that children can easily identify with. They have different skin complexions, as do all the characters featured in the book, and different social backgrounds, Patty representing the suburban girl, Mickey the urban child and Liza Sue country life. What they all share is a love for nature and freedom, and a disagreement with appropriate children’s behavior in adult terms.

¹ The picture books and the comics are unpagged. Page numbers will therefore only be provided for *Remember: the Journey to School Integration*.

At the center of the picture book are the protagonists' individual stories of misbehavior and punishment, each child a further addition to the big box that they will all end up inhabiting. Patty, Mickey and Liza Sue engage in typical childish mischief that prompts adults to overreact as if there were no place for pranks in the lives of children. The big box into which they are put, overfed and stuffed with consumer goods, embodies adult control over children's energy and critical thinking. Patty, who will not play with dolls and who will talk in the library, gets a Barbie doll and a Spice Girls tee-shirt. Mickey, who disturbs the peace of his neighborhood by playing handball where it is not allowed or screaming in the hall, gets an autographed basketball and a big cake all for himself. Liza Sue, who frees the horse from his bridle and feeds honey to the bees, gets a restaurant-cooked stuffed duck. Prior to being sent to the big box, each child is given a reproachful speech by parents or teachers in a rather anti-Deweyian school atmosphere, to which they invariably respond with the refrain "I know you are smart and I know that you think/ You are doing what is best for me./ But if freedom is handled just *your* way then it's not freedom or free". This refrain, through which the children comment on the action as it goes on, gives the story a choral note that Morrison has defined as characteristic of Black art (2008: 60). The children's responses, however, receive no recognition from the adults in the book. They may sound "unchildlike" or "sophisticat[ed]" as the reviewers for *Publishers Weekly* (Roback 1999: 95) and *School Library Journal* (Fader 1999: 277) have respectively suggested. Yet they embody Morrison's ideal of the child who figures things out for himself, or Nussbaum's child countering the voice of the parent with his own reasoned account of things. Childlike or not, such a statement is meant to provoke questions and reflections in the young readers. Underlying some of these children's harmless pranks –such as Patty's reluctance to play with dolls or her spoiling the US flag when made to pledge to it, or Liza Sue's refusal to take the eggs away from the chickens and her feeding of the bees with honey– are attacks on received ideas regarding gender roles, patriotism or the environment.

The story ends on a happy note, as the children manage to escape from the big brown box aided by the rabbits and the beaver. They step out of the dreary box and into the natural world, which in the story is the epitome of freedom and well-being. This resolution does not follow the traditional circular "home-away-home" pattern typical of so much children's literature (May 1995: 44), for the children do not return to the safety of the adult world but escape into an unpredictable natural setting. Whatever they do there is left open for the child to imagine, the final words in the text being "Who says they can't handle their freedom?" Clearly, there is no reconciliation between the child's and the adult's point of view and the former takes center stage. In this regard, it should be noted that when Morrison was designing the story, she was warned that the child-adult division would render her book "unsalable", since it is adults and not children that buy children's books. She did not heed this warning, considering it "a strong dismissal of children's intelligence" ("Toni Morrison Talks about *The Big Box*"). The disagreement between Morrison and potential publishers for the story highlights a central issue in children's literature. As Jack Zipes has pointed out, writing for children faces more "censorship" than writing intended for adults. The implied audiences of a children's book include in order of importance "an editor/agent/publisher", "a

teacher/librarian/parent” and finally children of a specific age group (2002: 44). Works like *The Big Box* challenge the marketing that according to Zipes dominates the institution of children’s literature and undermines “the value of critical and creative thinking” (40-1). Morrison turns children into the repository of these values, while making adults stand for the stifling world of consumerism and convention.

Commenting on *The Big Box* and *The Book of Mean People*, Neal Lester has perceptively remarked that “Morrison’s subversiveness comes in creating children’s texts that are not tools for adult control over children’s behavior but rather tools adults can use to better understand children’s emotional positions and children’s perspectives on and interpretations of adult behavior” (2007: 137). *The Book of Mean People* places even more emphasis on the child’s perspective and interpretations of the adult world than its predecessor. The protagonist, an unnamed little rabbit in overalls accompanied by his dog friend, narrates the story in the first person, cataloguing the ‘mean’ people in his life for the reader. These people are mostly adults. They include his mother, who screams at him; his grandparents, who tell him to sit up or down; this brother, who tells him how to play chess; the teacher, who corrects his handwriting, or the babysitter who wakes him up in the morning. In keeping with a younger target audience, 4 to 8, the book features rabbits with anthropomorphic personalities as characters. The visual experience dominates and the text is kept to a minimum. *The Book of Mean People* has received better reviews than its predecessor. One reviewer claims that the portrayal of the child’s point of view has improved, and praises the way Lemaitre’s cartoon-style illustrations make the adults look “silly as well as ugly and mean” (Rochman 2002: 413). Another, however, complains that readers are not allowed to see the slightest glimpse of kindness in the mean people depicted in the book (Constantinides 2002: 132). These interpretations miss the full grasp of the word *mean* in the story, which is more about meaning than about meanness. In fact, Morrison has stated that she didn’t intend the characters to be ‘villains’. Rather, they are mean insofar as they are the meaning-makers in a complex world through which the six or seven-year-old child is trying to elbow his way (Capriccioso 2003). The little child-rabbit takes adults to task in an effort to make sense of the arbitrariness of a world whose language and meanings are already given to him. The child’s reasoned but playful retaliations show him actively engaged in the meaning-making process. When his brother says “The knight can’t go there”, frowning down on him from the other side of the chess board, he replies “He knows the night goes every day” and the corresponding illustration shows him running along the beach under a starry sky wielding the chess knight. While the babysitter urges him to wake up in the morning saying, “Hurry up. You are wasting time!”, he muses “How can I waste time if I use it?”, the accompanying illustration featuring him jumping around the sky with his little dog in a dream. The child disturbs the logic of opposites when he claims that whereas mean people tend to shout, “some of the MEANEST people whisper” or that “frowning people scare [him] when they smile”. Interestingly, the rabbit’s witticism is reminiscent of Brer Rabbit, an African-American folktale character popularized by the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris. Harris collected and put down the tales that he heard slaves narrate on plantations, using the frame of an old man telling the stories to a little boy. The trickery of Brer Rabbit, who has come to be regarded as a “revolutionary black figure” (Cochran 2004: 21), allows him to survive in

the dangerous world of the forest, where he is constantly threatened by his antagonists Brer Fox, Brer Wolf or Brer Bear. The tales depict the adventures of these characters as they steal food from each other, lie, trick or try to kill each other. As the title of *Tar Baby* indicates, Morrison drew on one of Harris's most famous stories in this novel, but it is unclear whether she had Brer Rabbit in mind as she designed *The Book of Mean People*, whose plotline and remaining characters are unrelated to and much simpler than the animal fables of Uncle Remus.

Faced with so much confusion, the rabbit in *The Book of Mean People* decides to retreat into the forest. In what could be taken as a curious reversal of Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and its sequel, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, once again the story ends with the rebellious character fleeing the socialized world to the forest, leaving a trail of clothes and his watch behind. Intentionally or not, *The Book of Mean People* subverts the circular structure of Potter's classic tales. Peter Rabbit, who lost his clothes and shoes after his naughty adventures in Mr. McGregor's garden, returns with his cousin Benjamin in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* to retrieve them from Mr. McGregor's scarecrow. In both tales, the rabbits return to the safety of home after their forbidden outings. The loss of clothes is an unwanted punishment for their defiance of adult control. In contrast, Morrison's protagonist challenges adults as he enters the forest exclaiming "How about that!". Clearly, Morrison connects children with the natural order, as opposed to the social status quo. In *Sula*, the two girl friends resort to daydreams about nature as a way to escape the oppressive atmosphere of their homes. Nel, for instance, watches the poplars from her porch and pictures herself "lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair" (1982: 51) in an effort to flee from the overwhelming neatness of her mother's house. The novel closes with Nel visiting Sula's grave, where the breeze moving the tree tops carries Sula's whisper to her (174) and the two childhood friends are bonded forever despite the conflicts that separated them as adults.

With their open endings, thought-provoking statements, and critique of parenting, Morrison's texts fall under the category of innovative books that resist market trends. The retellings comprising the *Who's Got Game?* series are even more so. The title of the series recalls an MTV reality show where participants compete in New York City's basketball courts (Bragard 2007). *Having game* therefore refers to being skillful enough to win a competition. Unlike closed texts, which "deny the plurality of meaning" and "cut the child off" from the reading experience (Moss 1990: 50), open texts like these highlight the instability of meaning and call for reader collaboration. Their inquisitive titles—"The Grasshopper or the Ant?", "The Lion or the Mouse?", "Poppy or the Snake?"—open up the classic tales to new interpretations. Addressed to both young readers and readers of all ages, these renditions of Aesop destabilize the "reassuring" nature of traditional fables with their "clear-cut distinctions" between winners and losers or right and wrong, as Ruth Maharg explains in her discussion of modern fables (1984: 72). Morrison not only weaves new twists into old tales, but leaves it to readers to decide who outsmarts whom, if anybody. This project is not new. Aesopian writing since early modern times has been "a flexible and constantly renewable system of metaphorical substitutions" (Patterson 1991: 52), so that different treatments have been given to the same fables. In fact Morrison is not trying to be innovative but simply puts

the versatility of the fable at the service of her penchant for instilling critical thinking skills into her young readers, who are not presented with repetitions of traditional tales but with clever revisions. The comic strip format chosen by illustrator Pascal Lemaître increases the contemporary character of the retellings.

'The Lion or the Mouse?' draws on the traditional association of the lion with despotic power, but takes great liberties with the plot. In this rendition, the focus is not on the lion's generosity in freeing the mouse, which is later rewarded when the mouse frees him from the hunter's net, here a thorn in his paw, but on the impact this action has on the mouse's personality. The mouse wakes up the next morning feeling and acting like a lion, but receives no recognition from the jungle animals who laugh at his pretence. While at the end of the story the mouse concludes that the only way to feel powerful is hiding in the lion's den and sitting on his throne where laughter cannot reach him, the lion gladly exchanges his royal abode and apparel for a quiet hill. In his retirement the lion and the reader are left to ponder on the question "Is he who wants to be a bully just scared to be himself?". Whereas the balance is tilted towards the lion in the previous fable, what distinguishes 'Poppy or the Snake?', a variant on 'The Farmer and the Snake', is the even-handed treatment of the characters. The conventional focus on the need to be prepared for ungratefulness and betrayal shifts to the importance of being alert to the power of language, which requires concentration. Poppy, an old Southern man from the bayou, tells his grandson Nate, who cannot concentrate in school, the story of how once he was bitten by a snake whom he had run over with his truck and had taken home to be healed. Instead of condemning the snake, Poppy claims that what saved him was being alert to the snake's words, which prompted him to buy an antidote: "He never said he wouldn't bite me, just that he wouldn't think of it. . . . Paying attention is what saved me". The moral is that being able to speak up and think for oneself, which are recurrent ideas in *The Big Box* and *The Book of Mean People*, should be consistent with the capacity for attention, a life-saving skill in this fable. In addition to functioning as an Aesopian Uncle Remus, Poppy signals the presence of an ancestor in the story, a distinctive element of African-American literature that Morrison defines as "an elder . . . whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective" (2008: 62). Finally, the point of view in 'The Grasshopper or the Ant?' is given to the bohemian grasshopper, a musician called Foxy G. His friend Kid A plays the role of the ant who "did the chores and shopped the stores" and therefore refuses to give his friend shelter when the winter comes. The conventional industriousness of the ant is coupled in this tale with consumerism and complacency. The favoring of the artist rather than of the pragmatist is not new, for we find it in other retellings such as Leo Lionni's *Frederick*. What makes this rendition distinct is the transposition of the story to a modern New York black urban setting peopled by different kinds of anthropomorphic insects. Critic Veronique Bragard has noted the African-American subtext of this fable, apparent in "the basketball courts and street corner hang-outs [that] suggest the outdoor context of the 'ghetto' of black expressive culture", as well as in the rhythm of the text, which "resonates with rap music" (2007). The tale ends on an innovative metafictional note that turns the reader into a collaborator. The last word is given to a teenage ladybird that was featured early in the story engrossed in a cell phone conversation. She has now abandoned her gadget for a glass snowball containing the

final scene of the story. Seeing her puzzlement, the reader is prompted to decide whose project is worth pursuing, the safe but uninteresting life of the ant or the artistic though unpredictable career of the grasshopper, neither of which is presented as a clear winner.

Morrison's latest children's book, *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*, is a memorial photo-essay intended to make contemporary American children aware of the struggle that led to the achievement of Civil Rights for African-Americans. A landmark in this fight was the desegregation of schools triggered by the *Brown v. Board of Education* court case in 1954. *Remember* gathers over fifty archival photographs to which Morrison has added imaginary captions voicing the thoughts and feelings of the children, mostly African-Americans but also white Americans. The author takes up once more the role of the historian archeologizing the past, as in *Beloved*, where she reconstructed the story of Margaret Garner, but addressing children this time. Her description of this process in the essay 'The Site of Memory' is applicable to *Remember*: "on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (Morrison 1987: 112). Morrison's journey through the racial strife of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s is divided into three sections. 'The Narrow Path' introduces readers to the impact of the separate-but-equal policies on the school education of black children, which led a group of parents to sue the Board of Education with the support of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1952. 'The Open Gate', the longest section, depicts American society's reluctance to accept school desegregation in the aftermath of the Supreme Court Ruling. The final section, 'The Wide Road', touches upon segregation of other public facilities and features emblematic events such as Martin Luther King's 1963 'I Have a Dream' speech or the Montgomery Bus Boycott sparked by Rosa Parks in 1956.

In a conversation with Cornel West, Morrison stated that what interested her about the school integration process in addition to the racial politics was the fact that it was children that were "on the frontline", involved in something "bigger than they were" (Goodman 2004). Many of the photographs in the book portray children as helpless protagonists of a struggle that shaped history. One of the photographs shows a child being walked by his father to his first day in a previously white school. The accompanying text articulates the thoughts of the child as he faces the school's entrance: "I can't see anything but the dark inside the door. My father is strong and smart. He holds my hand in his big fist. When he leaves me here I'll have to be strong too. I can do it. I know I can, even though all I can see in front of me now is the dark" (Morrison 2004: 48). The caption emphasizes the notion that the children were eventually left alone to bear all the weight of social rejection that followed the Brown decision. One of the possible scenarios was finding themselves alone in the classroom, after the white children had been taken out by their parents in protest (31), eating alone in the diner (40) or being banned from entering the school. The caption to another photograph portraying a group of rejected girls reads, "No, no, they said. You can't come in here. Get away from the door. This school is for white children. Only them" (32). The sepia photographs are evocative not only of the period, but, more importantly of the children's feelings, which range from fear, shyness and innocence to perplexity and determination.

The aim of this pictorial and narrative journey through American history is not to stir “blood memory”, to borrow Nussbaum’s (2003: 173) words, but to move contemporary American children to empathy through exposure to a traumatic event of their historical past. Even though *Remember* focuses on the experiences of African-American children more than any of the previous works, it does so within the framework of American history. It is worth noting that, in addition to self-reliance, a liberal education should foster a capacity for empathy, which fulfills an important civic function insofar as compassionate citizens are more likely to be able to treat others fairly (Nussbaum 2003: 92; Callan 2004: 133). The photographs may be poignant, but Morrison avoids demonizing white children and their parents. While one photograph shows three male teenagers protesting desegregation at their high school, the caption suggests that they are not moved by hatred but by the need to remain popular among their peers (28). One of the pupils at a black rural school wishes he had a desk and well-lit classroom, but he does not take his criticism further and instead pictures himself outside, where “the sky is blue and the peaches are sweeter than cake” (14). Besides, scattered through the book are photographs featuring images of togetherness across racial lines. Morrison states her aim in the introductory pages by addressing her child readers thus: “None of that happened to you. Why offer memories you do not have? Remembering can be painful, even frightening. But it can also swell your heart and open your mind”(5). As children read *Remember* and look at the touching illustrations, they will imaginatively enter the lives and feelings of others. They will be exercising what Nussbaum calls the “narrative imagination”, or “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of a person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (2003: 10-11). That way they will be better equipped to understand the multicultural society they live in and to face the new challenges it may place on them. Morrison acknowledges that this journey can be a difficult experience for her audience. Yet, as Nussbaum insists, the exposure to disturbing experiences has more “moral value” than the exposure to situations that make identification easy (2003: 98). In her coda, Morrison dedicates the book to the four girls who died in the racist bombing of a Birmingham church in 1963, exhorting her readers to remember why things are “much, much better now” (72). As they become aware of the cost of social progress, American children will hopefully be more respectful for and less complacent about what they have been handed down.

This paper has brought to the foreground a little known facet of the work of an otherwise well-established author. Though Toni Morrison is a latecomer to children’s books, she has shown a long-standing interest in childhood, as we gather from her interviews and the child-characters in her adult fiction. Whereas the children in her novels are usually portrayed as victims of social injustice, the characters in her children’s books have independent minds that enable them to challenge the adult world. What all her books share is a concern with an education for autonomy that enables the child to become a thoughtful adult. She endorses a way of life characterized by non-consumerism, critical reflection, sensitivity to language and the arts, non-violence and empathy with others. The texts discussed challenge rather than affirm the parents’ and community’s values and way of life and therein lies their innovative

character. If children's literature has been regarded as a conservative genre due to the need for works to reflect adult notions of childhood and appropriate behavior, Morrison's texts fall under a more subversive category. In keeping with this, her texts are open, at times metafictional and intertextual, critically revisiting traditional children's stories. As I hope to have shown, several of them display features characteristic of African-American writing, although in dealing with themes and experiences common to children regardless of race, they target an integrated audience. Morrison's concerns include but are not limited to issues of racism and African-American history, which have been the traditional focus of African-American writers for children since the 1920s. The author's venture into children's literature should be seen in the light of her life-long concern with childhood, but also as evidence of a trend towards crosswriting. Speaking of established authors who cross over to children's literature, David Galef has said that they "often have the audience to make these plans a reality, if not a success" (1995: 34). It is too early to decide if this will be the case with Morrison, but the truth is that her books elicit capacities which are much needed by children today.

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