

How Toni Morrison's Facebook Page Re(con)figures Race and Gender

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Abstract: In her article "How Toni Morrison's Facebook Page Re(con)figures Race and Gender" Beatriz Revelles-Benavente explores Morrison's Facebook page and comments on it. In 2010, Morrison opened a Facebook page where she received a large amount of comments and created debates and Revelles-Benavente analyses how these comments navigate questions of race and gender. Based on theoretical considerations about issues of race and gender in cyberculture and applied to the narratives posted on Morrison's Facebook page, Revelles-Benavente argues that the problematics of race and gender are relational and the question needs to be centered on the object of study as the relation between different forces instead of binary race and gender designations.

Beatriz REVELLES-BENAVENTE

How Toni Morrison's Facebook Page Re(con)figures Race and Gender

Nobel in Literature Toni Morrison has not stopped denouncing social injustice and agitating her audience against it since she wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. She is a writer committed to politics and has made visible her support for Barack Obama when he ran for president. She is also a public figure who received the U.S. Medal of Freedom in 2012. In *Playing in the Dark*, she summarizes her own literary technique which makes her novels interactive sites of political engagement: "my writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do ... The reader supplies the emotions ... My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience" (25). Her statement shows that her language is a dynamic force relating feelings, people, literary products, subjectivities, and new social horizons. She encourages readers to (re)create the novel with her by filling the holes of her language with feelings they are experiencing daily. Thus, her novels are created as spaces of agency for her readers where they are able to produce alternative realities and engage with a different society.

Morrison promoted interactive communication with her readers more than two decades ago, but only recently has she started to engage with social networking sites (sns) in order to reinforce this communication or shift the way it is recreated. In 2010, Toni Morrison opened a Facebook page <<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor>> which not only features her publications, conferences, interviews, and other news related with her public persona, but also postings with quotes from her novels. These quotes receive a large amount of comments and create debates in which people try to develop a new understanding of the novel or the quote presented by relating it to contemporary issues. Some readers also voice the urge to read the novel in question again. The literary communicative process is shifting within present society of information (see Revelles-Benavente 243). According to a survey carried out from March 2007 to October 2011 by *comscore.com*, social networking accounts for the largest amount of time spent online (see *It's a Social World* <http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Presentations-and-Whitepapers/2011/it_is_a_social_world_top_10_need-to-knows_about_social_networking>). The core of participating in sns-s is "being in relationship to others, part of a group" where being part of a group is an interaction "with others and [seeing] one another as embedded in social networks; and [tracking] the group(s) to which they belong (or wish to be part of)" (Van House 424). Thus, the participants exchange information about themselves while at the same time they create virtual images of themselves and their surroundings based on community sharing.

Facebook is one of several important social networking sites because of three reasons: it has a large community of active participants; the interaction between Facebook participants is almost or often simultaneous, and there is thus intensive communication (although to different degrees) between participants (see, e.g., Baruah). I argue that social networking sites are spaces where participants as active agents are able to engage with contemporary political matters while referring to the past: "history is no longer the realm of mechanical laws but of possibilities, of embryonic forces that make themselves available for transformation" (Bourassa <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1311>>). Communication on Morrison's Facebook page can result, just like with any other Facebook page exchanges just like the political messages appear in her novels. Yet, owing to her Facebook community, Morrison reaches a different audience with this type of communication. The opening quotes on the Facebook page always have to do with the author and the main characters of her work, but the following quote stands out: "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate" (<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>).

The above quote has 340 responses and 4535 people who like it (the last comment in this discussion was on 10 August 2013 at 05.09 U.S. local time). In proportion to the people talking about the webpage, this amounts to almost thirty percent of the community, opening a debate regarding the "race" of an "American" person. At first sight, Morrison seems to be denouncing racism in the descrip-

tive term of "American" which is part of what Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell call "racial apathy" (36). They point out the emergence of what they consider a "racial apathy" coming from the post-civil rights era, which is also where Morrison's work can be contextualized. The authors provide a thorough literature review on three possible ways to analyze racism and one of them describes an inclusion of a "colorblind" practice which enhances this apathy, indicating that a possible solution would be a non dual theory of social justice and social justice action. Alan Bourassa provides a similar argument regarding Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* when he critiques the supposed neutrality of science and the societal rules of culture: "the racial and the personal become one and the same. It is not simply a matter of race, nor simply a matter of character, but in the intertwining of the two, we see the narrator working out a position in the world" (<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1311>>). Thus, if we explore the different axes embedded in a subject—the racial and the personal—there is a need to shift what we mean by these referents. The referent needs to be a dynamic relation, an intertwining. At the same time, this intertwining provides a solution to escape from the rigid normativity which structures subjects in hierarchies of power and inevitably oppresses others.

Although the problematics of race has been one of the most important axes of signification in understanding the work of Morrison, gender takes also a special part in the development of the political message conveyed in her novels. Likewise, many postings on the Facebook page have to do with the engendered presentation of her main characters, as the following one quote shows: "Like any artist without an art form, she [Sula] became dangerous"

(<<https://www.facebook.com/vintageanchor/photos/a.259991295295.300314.69761195295/10154352799670296>>). However, it may be because of the English language—which does not have grammatical gender or because of universalism implicit in the criticized concept "American" insofar as it is always used as the referent for people from United States when it refers to the whole continent, a hegemonic appropriation—that gender appears at first sight (in)visible or less important in this Facebook debate. If Morrison engages with always-already gendered main characters who happen to structure the novels she writes, novels which contain strong critiques of the U.S. society, ignoring the (in)visibility of gender in this Facebook post would be inaccurate. In the present study, I propose to see "gender" as a dynamic processual ontology of politics. This ontology is rooted and shifted within the discussions around the "Americanness"—i.e., US-American-ness—of subjects in this particular context. Subjectivities are always gendered and gendering. It is precisely one of the aspects emphasized in Morrison's work that determined situations and relational oppressions empower gendered subjects. Morrison creates new corporeal bodies, which embody the materiality and discursivity of a whole community and highlights the embodiment of slavery in *Beloved* (the main character of *Beloved*), which is a good example of the relation among different selves and multiple kinds of oppressions (see Lukić and Sánchez). For example, *Beloved* is at the same time the personification of a murdered daughter and of the silence becoming speakable, the becoming alive when her name is spoken by a man, Paul D. Similarly. In *A Mercy*, Florens is a slave girl who does not present her life or her reality as a slave girl until her loved one, the Blacksmith, voices this fact. On the other hand, this does not mean that men are the creators of knowledges or realities. It means that a focus shifts in the patriarchal order and that it is a focus on relations as active forces of realities.

Thus, in order to analyze the debate regarding the properties of an "American" person, let us read the statement closely: "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." As the majority of the responses to the quote indicate, this statement is denouncing the two elements identified in this neo-racist society mentioned by Perry and Shotwell: racial apathy and race blindness. In Parry's and Schotwell's categorization racial apathy is defined as the "indifference to and/or ignorance of the social reality of race" and this indifference "is enough to keep that reality intact" (36). However, included in the 340 responses to this opening statement is the following one: "[American] Means white men. I would like us to all change that. Women are a completely overlooked group" (<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>). After one hour of discussion and 115 comments, the explicitness of the sexism in the statement is clear, although largely ignored. The debate produced in the Facebook community remains largely geographical. That is to say, is it right to say Euro-American? Do we want to select our origin? Is it racist? It appears few participants are interested in the question of gender.

Using Perry's and Shotwell's argumentation, it could be said that we are facing an example of "gender blindness" and "gender apathy" created in the Facebook community in this particular instance. In contemporary US-American culture there is a tendency to ignore feminist matters. As an example, social blogs such as *Who Needs Feminism?* (<<http://whoneedsfeminism.tumblr.com>>) are being created in order to make people aware that we still need feminism. Morrison's Facebook page shows an indifference to a gendered reality, in which a gendered complexity is overlapped with the social reality of race. However, according to Perry and Shotwell an analysis based on social dualist theory is not enough. Another example of the Morrison Facebook discussion is when someone raises the question again, but this time it is to criticize the fact that being in a minority group has turned out to be special, and, because of that, desirable: "yet I understand the desire to be part of a 'special' group,' so it doesn't bother me"

(<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>). That is to say, by trying to include women in this equation, the discussion leads to a pluralistic approach in which the commentator holds that women are in a privileged position in spite of being oppressed. The following day and when the discussion is becoming less intense, the last reference to gender appears in the debate and it comes linked to religion and sexuality: "Let's be more specific. White Christian male heterosexual..... Then everyone else has to....." The ellipses by this participant reinforce the relativistic and multiple points which were emphasized before. The multiplicity of options is infinite because identities are built of several aspects: religion, sexuality, race, and gender are four of the most important ones. This occurs as a consequence of a social practice based on dual poles. We try to define one term by comparing it negatively with another thereby creating an asymmetrical power of One versus Other. Thinking dually, we also remain in a realm in which identities are reinforced. The community creates its preferences regarding which identities are going to be highlighted in this specific moment. In the case of Morrison's Facebook post and its replies, these preferences concern geographical location and race.

The reason for the above-mentioned preferences is to focus attention toward the statement: "America" is a geographical location and "white" is the race. However, if we look closer and step away from dualist poles, we can see that the quotation is more than just that because it invokes a picture of Morrison and participations in the debate highlight the importance of introducing gender in the critique of "Americanness" and, of course, Morrison's whole trajectory as a writer. Rather than stopping short at the linguistic surface of this sentence and its reactions, we need to unveil patterns of gendered oppression. Therefore, it is important to (un)gender a discourse which departs from a supposed "neutral" statement that denounces social inequalities without referring to gender explicitly. Bourassa would define this situation as a "false problem" (<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1311>>). The concept remains linguistically invisible since the people who commented upon the "whiteness" of "America" deny other axes of oppression. Using an intersectional approach prioritizes the racial issue and conflates ontologically the multiplicity of the "others" in the statement. The intersectional approach recreates a system of inclusions and exclusions (see Fotopoulou 23) which has, apparently, excluded gender from oppression. Thus a patriarchal system emerges in which the participants tend to discard that privileges granted to whites also apply to males. Conceptualizing the universalism of the concept of "American" in a binary pole makes women an ontologically oppressed Other and positions their bodies as silent victims of the system. However, in Morrison's novels women are not the silent victimized Other and because of that we should read the debate as the possibility to break up the silence and let them speak for themselves. In order to acknowledge the complexity of the problem without categorizing in absolute poles or relativizing the multiple axes active in this case, we need to frame the concept through different lenses. That is why this article proposes a methodology based on Karen Barad's concept of "apparatus" ("Posthumanist" 816). According to Barad, the apparatus is "not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather apparatuses are dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted" ("Posthumanist" 816). Using Barad's apparatus, I formulate the problem by considering Facebook as a dynamic (re)configuring of the world in which a specific (gendered) "practice" is excluded from the boundary which a specific community is building. Morrison is shifting her literary communication with her readers by engaging in a simultaneous and interactive Facebook conversation. When we now reflect on the gendering processes in which this communicative relation are enacted, results

would be different. Thus, I ask a different question and move away from dichotomies: How do readers and authors on Facebook make gender (in)visible in their debate around "Americanness"?

However, in order to explore this connection we need to clarify one core characteristic of social networking sites, namely continuity. van House defends the necessity to explore such sites as sites of continuums and not as dichotomies (424). Social networking sites provide a particular agency and complex selves which we cannot explain in terms of either/or. Selves are entangled in more than one simple way in which context, affects, and social discourses are intervening in multiple ways. Fluxes of information give preference to dynamic relations over static categories. This, in turn, implies that gender and race are mutually dependent on each other and are not previously defined before their encounter with each other. If we think of research dealing with gender issues only, binarisms in socio-demographical approaches are predominant. The concept of gender highlighted in this type of research is based on the male/female dualism. Nevertheless, this dualism implies a dichotomy oriented approach that will disrupt the continuum needed for the analysis of social networking sites. Thus, a shift in the concept of gender as a continuum, or more precisely, a relational would allow a referential shift much like the shift which has already taken place in race studies as I suggest previously. This initiative has been carried out by Alexis Shotwell and Trevor Sangrey in their article, "Relational Understanding" where they conceptualize gender as relational in order to "see gender operating in [specific] moments; and then suggest a re-reading for these moments aimed at investigating relational models of selfhood" (60). In other words, gender needs to be located within specificity and understood as a process. This allows the researcher to provide alternative readings of the mechanisms creating injustices. When we shift our attention from results to processes, we are able to produce a change in the oppressive mechanism before it materializes. In this sense, when we relate gender and social networking sites instead of categorizing oppression in dichotomous sex-related poles, a processual ontology of feminist politics is enhanced. That is to say, specific conversations, debates, images become gendered in a dynamic way and this is how we may alter gender injustices. In social networking sites gender becomes a permanent movement within a specific context and is not the establishment of different categories. As Shotwell and Sangrey put it, "gender and gendering are relational processes" (72). Coming back again to the Facebook page of Morrison and Morrison as a writer, this definition helps us to understand the processes and relations created in the digital context since relationality is key to the way in which Morrison as person and as novelist. Through analyzing the relations between the participants and situating them in a global and local context—since social networking sites relate globally, while each embodied experience remains local—we can visualize patterns in which inequalities are (re)produced.

Gender is a core concept in feminist politics, but it is becoming (in)visible precisely because of the multiple communication modes with and in which different subjects engage: digital, analogical, literary, etc. Feminist theory has been exploring gender in terms of dichotomous poles which stereotype people according to their biological gender into men or women. Judith Butler started to problematize this categorization with her *Gender Trouble*. Other interventions come from postcolonial feminism and the material turn, that is, the idea that artistic material itself has agency. Some feminist scholars criticized Judith Butler for trapping the body into endless social discourses (see Dolphijn and van der Tuin). In their chapter compiled in *Deleuze and Race*, Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin criticize the opposition between gender and sex as ontologically and politically disadvantageous to feminist theory. They express their discomfort with terms such as "gender," "identity politics," and "intersectionality" because, according to them, Butler has encapsulated these concepts into the realm of the symbolic and the linguistic. Dolphijn and Van der Tuin criticize Butler of producing a mechanistic determinism in which matter is released as passively represented through always active linguistic webs. As a consequence, gender becomes a linguistic inscription on bodies which, in turn, become socially constructed. Therefore, "difference" is either socially constructed or a pluralist diversity rooted on essentialist terms. To Rosi Braidotti and Sara Ahmed, this type of difference is the ontological encapsulation of the "Other" as always less than the "One," a never-ending trap. Morrison refers specifically to this division as a "western notion" (*Playing* 112) since the body is neither sexually just conceived nor should it be disassociated from the mind or the cultural regulations of each context.

Turning again to Morrison and the comments on her Facebook page about "whiteness" and "America," out of 340 comments just eleven pointed to the fact that "American" not only means "white" but

"male": "it means white men. I would like us to all change that. Women are a completely overlooked group. I'm not black or hispanic but I've been treated with a great deal of negative prejudice. I do feel like a second class citizen. 'Hey Baby let me get that' (that's nice), 'Hey Bitch who do you think you are,' 'Listen honey why don't you find a man and get married,' etc."

(<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>). This means that centering on the collapse of "American" and "white" is a false problem since the omission of the maleness in the concept of "America" is a concern for some of the participants of the debate. Further, some participants were arguing that there was a need for "American" society to move on from hyphenations and everyone was "American" as long as they were born in United States (I note again that the widespread use of "America" when reference is made to the U.S. and thus a hegemonic appropriation of a whole continent was caught by one single participant). Other participants noted that this was an example of neo-racism and an attempt to make invisible the problem which persists in the society of the United States. With gender we could have a similar argument: if we do not distinguish male or female in the term "American," are we moving on or are we glossing over problems?

Contemporary feminist philosophy claims that this paradox is produced because we depart from the normative concept of "man." That is to say, we depart from the logic of the same reinforcing systems of oppressor and oppressed. The first response with a focus on gender is expressed after the geographical confusion about what is meant by "America" occurred. Without addressing explicitly it, participant mentions that "American" is also male and that this is part of the problem stated in the quotation that opens the debate. In addition, the participant goes on to prescribing "American" as a discursive concept which needs to be changed. However, I argue that this would not be enough because we would not be changing the material meaning of "American" since this discursive concept belongs to the realm of a linguistic and patriarchal system. As another participant makes clear, "universalisms: Mankind." It is precisely after the commentators have brought up this "geographical injustice" when the gendering of the discourse begins: "a picture of an 'American' ... almost always was some variation of a blonde white guy in a fancy red convertible with money! ... 'Americans' change and the meaning of what it means to be American must as well"

(<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>). Barad defines this pattern as belonging to the physicality and conceptuality of the agents of observation, as well as part of the technologies of subjectivation of the apparatus since it makes reference to the boxes they need to tick according to their race and/or birthplace, that is, regulative laws of the country (80).

The concept of gender becomes visible when the talk turns to where the bodies at issue are from, their geography. According to the participants, universalizing all races under "mankind" (and often religion) is another aspect of what is subsumed under "American." Being "American" also has special requirements when dealing with many different forms and this is why "hyphenation" acquires a material sense which makes differences in order to complete special forms and which is why changing the discursivity of the concept would not be enough. At the same time, we are also divided by maleness and femaleness. Just like legal boxes do not work for bi-racial or multi-racial people, these boxes do not work for people who do not fit into any one of these two categories. However, no one points this out in the discussion. The discussion is based on the geographies of places and not on geographies of bodies. Likewise, while the anti-racist message is conveyed in the debate, gender becomes an issue just in specific moments.

Coming back to the structure of the apparatus of binary gender concepts, we need to take a final step: analyzing Morrison's subject formation. Her work is characterized by her protagonists, namely Black women who struggle against a patriarchal system rooted in the slavery past of the United States. Nevertheless, this preference does not correspond to an antagonism against Black men or the White community as a whole. Several male characters help her protagonists to follow the path of knowing, which is the power of Morrison's literature: what Paul D does with Beloved and Sethe in *Be-loved*. Another case in point is Amy, a White woman, who helps Sethe give birth in the middle of the forest. This subject formation can be seen in the photograph that Morrison posts of herself where she appears as a strong woman due to her facial expression and as a member of the hyphenated "American." At the same time, she points out that labels are imposed, not chosen. She chooses to write and

chooses to accept the labels imposed on her. But these labels do not define her work since her imagination is beyond labels. As we can see through the pictures and her comments, she departs from herself. As a Black woman: "I'm already discredited. I'm already politicized, before I get out of the gate. I can accept the labels because being a black woman writer is not a shallow place but a rich place to write from. It doesn't limit my imagination; it expands it" and about her identity as a writer and her own work, she says that "I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment"

(<<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683.67924.175462542465962/479801052032108>>). The following posts enact a relational understanding, as well as a relational community building which points out how important it is that we think about how we name oppression. At the same time, participants are engaging materially with the different attributes of this oppression. That is, the debate voices a different awareness and different points of view about the same oppression. One final conclusion is not reached, but neither desired by the participants, namely the openness and multiplicity of directions that characterizes the debate. Thus, coming back to Shotwell's and Sangrey's proposition, we need to see how processes are being gendered and gendering. Gender is invisible when thought as a linguistic term. However, it is not invisible when looking at the pictures, the related comments, or Morrison's own work.

In conclusion, I argue that it is necessary to go beyond a femaleness-maleness discourse. It is necessary in order to analyze how we construct gender in a context as active and dynamic as social networking sites, a context where concepts are not defined through linguistic determinisms, but embedded in the subtle details of the different discourses. I posit that feminist ought to be about transgressions and visualizing inequalities and this would point at inequality in the form of universalisms while denying at the same time mere pluralism. Morrison individualizes each of her characters with special needs by focusing on the possibility of relating selves in order to dismantle a patriarchal system and she reminds us that "gender"—as race—"does not crumble into some passive personal inwardness, but transforms history into a material flow" (Bourassa <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1311>>). Adjusting our hypotheses and methods in feminist scholarship allows us to move away from never-ending paradoxes built upon binaries. Importantly, empirical material available with the use of new media technologies provides the context in which data can inform theory. Gender is relational and the question needs to be centered on the object of study as the relation between different forces instead of unreal binary gender designations.

Note: "How Toni Morrison's Facebook Page Re(con)figures Race and Gender" is a revised excerpt from Revelles-Benavente, Beatriz. *Women's Literature and Social Networking Sites*. Ph.D. Diss. Barcelona: Open U of Catalunya, 2015. Copyright release to the author.

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