

Geopoetics as a Component of the Nigger Joke in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract

The analysis of the setting in Toni Morrison's *Sula* helps better appreciate the passage of the Bottom from a rural to a suburban area. It also allows to understand the urban expansion of the city of Medallion. This paper shows how the description of the city comes as an ingredient to nourish the work of fiction. It demonstrates how the mode of perception is generated by space. In other words, space as an habitat determines language, bringing in figurative codes of representation. It is at the creation of the narrative dynamics. Then, this paper questions in the poetics of the text the existing correlation within language as a generator of a trope. The nigger joke coming through the description of the city gives way to a subversive discourse.

Keywords : City, Gentrification, Geopoetics, Nigger joke, Suburb, Urbanization.

Résumé

L'étude de l'espace dans le roman *Sula* de Toni Morrison permet de mieux apprécier le passage de Bottom de zone rurale à banlieue. Elle permet aussi de saisir la dynamique urbaine d'expansion de la ville de Medallion. Le présent article montre comment la description de la ville définit la fiction morrisonienne qui se fonde sur le mode de perception généré par l'espace, en stimulant à son tour la dynamique narrative de l'écriture. C'est ainsi que le présent travail examine à travers la poétique du texte la corrélation langagière donnant lieu à l'expression d'un trope. L'humour noir perceptible à travers la description de la ville engendre un discours subversif.

Mots-clés : Ville, Gentrification, Géopoétique, Humour noir, Banlieue, Urbanisation.

Introduction

Geographically, the story occurs in Medallion. The choice of the name of the city is interesting. By designating a round and two-sided metal used as an ornament, the shape of the object and its function build the poetics of the text. In the topography of Medallion, the veiled part is called the Bottom, because it is the suburb. The term "the Bottom" helps locate this part on the outskirts of the city. The text with this representation evokes the cartography of the city.

A movement is also described between Medallion and the Bottom. It reinforces the magnetic effect that tells the dynamics of urbanization. The attraction of these two spaces to mean the growth of the city is built in the image of a coin. Pile and Face, separate but identical, reveal the setting of the story. It is the space of actualization, even though the Bottom is absorbed by Medallion, as it reads in :

The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby.

There will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, since it wasn't a town anyway: just a neighborhood (*Sula*, p. 3-4).

As opposed to ghettorization, the expansion of Medallion could be partly assimilated with gentrification. It especially covers the urbanization of the Bottom with the disappearance of elements of nature. In other words, gentrification which brings about modernisation occasions the destruction of "beeches", "pear trees", "oaks", "maples", "chestnuts", "the river", "nightshade and blackberry patches". All providers of energy (D. Maximin, 2006, p. 14). Toni Morrison's writing expresses some ecologic concerns, as this part of the town at the diegetic level is no more.

The narrative does not only allude to the physical and sophisticated transformation of space in the expansion of the city. The mood is both nostalgic and sorrowful, as it leads to the souvenir of a place that does not exist any longer. The

narrative stimulates through evocation a process in which the description of the Bottom is made possible, as it is perceived at the beginning of the text :

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom (*Sula*, p. 3).

Morrison's writing tells memory through the description of space. The remembrance of the Bottom induces a historical rendering.

Even though the first chapter of the novel does not have a year for title in comparison with the rest of the text, the description that is made of Medallion and the Bottom helps contextualize the setting. It becomes factual, by associating literary discourse with historicity. The urban change goes with, for instance, the investment on facilities. The Medallion City Golf Course brings about the transformation and modernisation of Medallion. It is a sufficient indicator of the Roaring Twenties as it emphasizes not only the urbanisation of rural areas, but also the establishment of mass culture. The Roaring Twenties is the epoch during which American had known dramatic social, cultural, and economic change. The economic growth had turned the nation into a consumer society. History is inscribed in the evolution of the cartography of the city.

The knowledge of the Bottom comes through the nigger joke. In other terms, the awareness of the past of this suburb is contained in a trope, a figurative language. Geopoetics is also associated an historical treatment, since both Medallion and the Bottom recall the era of segregation. They depict the American society as being racialized and racist. The Bottom situated on a hill, a dry land is for Blacks, while Medallion in a valley rich and fertile belongs to the white community. Human occupation articulates the geography of this area, as it informs the living conditions and position of its inhabitants. Spaciality is here determinant in grasping different characters.

However, the study of space in the case of the Bottom is particular, since this place only exists in the past. Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* presents at this level Medallion as an heterogeneous city not from a racial or ethnic perspective. Its heterogeneity is rather narrative, as it results from the association of an account on the one hand, on history which makes real the past existence of the Bottom; on the another, on the geographic dynamism that sustains the modernisation of the city. These two ingredients have an incidence on the nature of the discourse produced. They participate in the fabric of the nigger joke. Toni Morrison's novel entitled *Sula* unfolds a set of nigger jokes built on the dynamics of spaciality.

I. Nigger joke built on the Bottom

The nigger joker is a space of recollection of the Bottom. It helps in other terms, perceive the origin or the past of this place. The study of the nigger joke is here built on the Bottom. It reveals the correlation between language and locality. Language becomes spatial, because it carries the memory of the Bottom which is now absorbed by Medallion. It reads in the text : "A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of town where Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom" (*Sula*, p. 4). In fact, the nigger joke is subsequent to the place. For it is created from the dynamics of spaciality.

The nigger joke is grasped through the appreciation of geographic elements. As for location is concerned, the Bottom is situated on the top of a hill, where because of the altitude, the land is dry and there is less oxygen. It makes difficult any possibility of farming. In fact, at the beginning of the story the nigger joke is presented in the form of an analepsis. It evokes the context of slavery, where one of the main economic activities was agriculture (L. Mumford, 1970, p. 388). This paranomic view is set in the nigger joke through the enactment of both a farmer (White) and a slave (Black) - two essential protagonists symbolizing the Peculiar Institution.

The nigger joke informs that the part of the hill after being given to the slave becomes a black suburb, whereas the other remains the possession of the master. The

valley has a white community. This organization is an evidence of racialization in the American society (Rita A. Bergenholtz, 1996, p. 90-91). It is perceptible in the setting that describes a black neighbourhood in the city of Medallion. Urban organization is as well an historical indicator, as the configuration of Medallion tells the past of racism and slavery. Cartography permits to understand social issues in a city like Medallion which shows an ambient racism, as it is contained in the nigger joke :

A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy - the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said the thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, « Oh, no ! See those hills ? That's bottom land, rich and fertile. »

[...].

So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. He preferred it to the valley. It was done. The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter (*Sula*, p. 5).

The position of the Bottom on a hill does not reflect the name given to the place, because there is a deceitful use of the term. In Geo-morphology - the study of land shapes, the bottom literarily the lowest land corresponds to the valley, as the slave thought "valley land was bottom" (*Sula*, p. 5). Visibly, the mode of perception determines representations, as the nigger joke is elaborated within the logic of Judeo-Christian canons. The emphasis on "the bottom of heaven" leads the slave to accept the piece of land in the top of the hill, because in Christianity heavens are the privileged space where God and all saints dwell. The slave sees himself having this privilege as well. But what is interesting in the nigger joke built on the Bottom is to see how affects influence perception. This leads to question if the notion of city is not affective.

The appreciation of a place in the Morrisonian geopoetics is not essentially based on urban norms. An affective value also derives from the use of the nigger joke. Beyond the history of racism, slavery, and the origin of the settlement of communities,

the Bottom is expressed in a short, funny, and curious story. It is rendered in the form of an anecdote with two functions – one is historical as evoked above. The other builds an aesthetics of language in which the nigger joker is figurative, as it reads :

The kind white folks tell when the mill closes down and they're looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn't come, or comes for weeks, and they're looking for a little comfort somehow. (*Sula*, pp. 4-5).

It is important to consider the circumstances of its use, to understand how the nigger joke participates in the aesthetics of language. It comes in the perception of a need expressed within a racialized and/or racist society. Black as well as white people use it for the same purpose to provide "a little comfort". But white people's little comfort is not black people's little comfort. The structure of this passage draws a social ladder. The closing down of the mill does not affect people as does the absence of rain for weeks.

The economic, social, and cultural status or position marks the difference between races. The nigger joke is indeed a reappropriated speech. It is an adapted verbal response to each particularity. Even though the two sentences in the passage above are from a structural point of view identical, the meaning of "a little comfort" changes from one community to another through an effect of intensification, graduation, and gravity marked by the unprivileged position of Black people in the American society.

Used in parallel, the nigger joke expresses irony to dedramatize the harsh living conditions of black people. It reinforces the awareness of social difference expressed in the comparative study of Medallion and the Bottom. The closing down of mill parallels with the rain that does not come for weeks. This image accentuates sarcasm on the state of poverty and plight in the black neighbourhood. Writing reveals the reality in the black ghetto – the Bottom through the absence of the symbol of rain, water being the expression of life. Since the vitality of the city of Medallion through its expansion leads to the absorption of the Bottom, it is then interesting to see how language, especially the nigger joke adapts to the new circumstances of modernity.

II. Nigger joke built on Medallion

With urbanization, the Bottom is transformed and absorbed by Medallion. Despite its change into a urban area, the Bottom is still present, not as the autonomous suburb that it was before at the time of settlement, but as a memory. Though it has disappeared or merged, the representations of the place are still apparent, making the Bottom ever real. Geopoetics in Toni Morrison's *Sula* shows how through the resurgence of the nigger joke the memory of the Bottom impregnates the city of Medallion. Geopoetics in Morrison's writing is not essentially based on spaciality. It also involves timelessness (L. Mumford, 1970, p. 3). vehiculed through the nigger joke, which in the case of the novel studied originates from the Bottom.

The novel *Sula* introduces other forms of trope. They are preceived through the dynamics of oral traditions. They are indeed transmitted from one generation to another. The nigger joke built on the Bottom stands as the prime trope in the text. It is used at slavery time. In the black community, it passes on from slaves to freed people, as stated in the novel. In this transmission, the prime trope changes and adapts to the new context which is not only historical, political, and cultural.

A urban dimension is here to consider, since the first trope built on the Bottom gives way to another, this time, built on Medallion. But the difference between the two is only contextual. Medallion is the setting depicted in the diegesis as a modern city. While the Bottom absorbed by Medallion has no such a status, since it is only evoked in an analepsis. Similarity comes from the fact that the description of these places in *Sula* is based on the prime trope, the nigger joke.

The nigger joke says the creation of the Bottom. Built on the Bottom, the nigger joke informs Medallion. But its urban transformation does not alter the perception of what used to be the Bottom, as it can be justified and elucidated in the National Suicide Day. (*Sula*, p.14). The National Suicide Day is a nigger joke built on Medallion this time. It is an annual parade "on the third of the new year" (*Sula*, p. 14). It consists in organizing

a march in the streets of the city. Initiated by Shadrack, this parade grows throughout time with more and more participants, mainly with people from the black community.

The National Suicide Day could be assimilated with a moment of demonstration, during which in a given itinerary people publicly chant and shout. It is not a protest as it looks like, even though Shadrack is portrayed as a veteran, both disregarded and ostracized in the society. It stands as a reason to march. Historically, U.S. veterans would claim for their rights, their reintegration in the society. To back up, Shadrack's status and social conditions recall the context of segregation and discrimination in the United States. But the National Suicide Day in the text cannot only be limited to an historical representation or factual treatment that tells the experience of black people in America.

The National Suicide Day should be apprehended as a cultural mode of representation of black people. More than an annual event, the perception of this initiative changes with familiarization which derives from its systematic organization each year. Repetition and insistence construct a new semantics that reveals it as an inscription. The National Suicide Day is synchronized in the collective unconsciousness, despite people's reluctance, opposition, and rejection.

Absorption shows it as being an integral part of the black community. It is made possible through similarity in both forms of expression. The nigger joker transpires through the National Suicide Day. The latter that functions as a structure contains it, as it reads in the text: "In fact they had stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives." (*Sula*, p.15). Habituation does not stem from its acceptance as an established holiday. The non-rejection of the National Suicide Day is due to the fact that it is a disguised nigger joke. Similarity is here raised. Perceived in a different way as it discloses the tradition and culture of black people. The celebration of the National Suicide Day comes definitely as a means of transmission of cultural items, which allows the perpetuation of the nigger joke.

The National Suicide Day is a reproduction of the nigger joker in a modern context of urbanization. Its incidence on the architecture of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* has some literary and aesthetic implications. The National Suicide Day feeds imagination from the functions that it plays in the economy of the text. The National Suicide Day is therapeutic, because it is an exercise that intends to make "a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (*Sula*, p. 14). It comes in other terms as a cure for the participants having psychological concerns. Shadrack who institutionalizes it, is ravaged by the experience of war. It reads : "He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it". (*Sula*, p. 14). It has a cathartic dimension, as it contributes to liberate the members of the community of their fear, trauma, sorrow, pain, anguish, etc.. The nigger joke appears as a means of emancipation.

This idea of emancipation is central in the geopoetics of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The treatment of the setting is inscribed in a narrative scheme which leads to liberation. This narrative dynamism emanates from sacrifice. The death of Sula, one of the main protagonists, who stands for the scapegoat, is redemptive, as is the structure of the setting. The nigger joke built on the Bottom recalls the story of the promised land in the Bible. Led by Moises, the people of God had to cross the Red sea so as to get to the promised the land. This land – the New Israel – was indeed in a desert. There are some similarities with the nigger joke built on the Bottom.

Intertextuality helps better assess the idea of sacrifice, as it is linked to the geopoetics of the text. It permits to draw a parallel between the Bottom – the piece of land given to the slave by the master and the desert which stands in the Bible as the promised land. The people of Israel endured sufferings. They were enslaved. When set free, they were purchased by the pharaoh. And they were inconsolable to reach the desert which was indeed the promised land. Sacrifice in *Sula* is articulated in the collapse of the tunnel which sees the death of participants to the National Suicide Day.

Even though the tunnel is the symbol of racist and capitalist powers, and the participants protestors, the description that is translated does not only show the destructive nature of industrialization, urbanization, or modernization (M. Pessoni, 1995, p. 450). But the generalized death appears as a sacrifice, which occurs at the

advent of urbanization. Consecutive events reveal the narratorial intention to present the urbanisation of the Bottom as an outcome of this sacrifice. The Bottom is now absorbed. In *Sula*, it is no more, as the desert in the Bible becomes the promised land. The Bottom is now an urban area, part of the city of Medallion. Urban dynamics definitely informs the poetics of the text.

Conclusion

If urbanization marks the evolution of a society through the passage from a rural to urban area, from village, countryside to town, city, etc., this dynamism is also inscribed within language, in the mode of expression of any given community. Language vehicules in other terms the aspiration of a people, as it is perceived in people's transformation of their habitat. The nigger joke built on the Bottom is interesting in that it is a reappropriated discourse by the black community. It becomes subverted with the change of space as well. Urbanisation shows a people's desire for the improvement of their living conditions. Urban transformation has an incidence on their mode of representation and perception, as the nigger joke gives way to the National Suicide Day. And the generalized death of the participants to the National Suicide Day opens up not only to a new area, but also a new figurative language that shows the cultural dynamics of black people (C. M. Jones, 1993, p. 625).

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