

Discussion Questions for *Eos* Reads: Toni Morrison’s “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1988/1989)

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We quote from the pagination of the pdf of Morrison’s Tanner lectures at the University of Michigan, delivered in 1988 ([open access copy](#)). The text of the lecture was subsequently published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28/1 (Winter 1989). In the text below, we use *UTU* as shorthand for “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”. To help foster discussion and debate, and to give an indication of some of the themes and debates that occur to us reading Morrison’s essay as classicists, we have grouped these discussion questions under thematic headings.

Stakes of Criticism / the responsibility of criticism

“In any case, as far as the future is concerned, when one writes, as critic or as author, all necks are on the line.” (Morrison 1989: 163; last sentence of *UTU*).

What challenges does Morrison throw out for scholar-writer-critics in *UTU*? When we think of our scholarship under the guise of criticism, how do we combine textual and philological criticism with the work of cultural comprehension? What cultural work in the present are we uniquely qualified to do as classicists?

In her 1987 novel *Beloved*, Morrison famously plays tricks with language and etymology to articulate what can only be recalled, thought of, and spoken of with great difficulty playing on the noun memory and the verb remember (rememory, rememories, disremembered). The modern discipline of classics and the ideology of classicism are variously entangled with epistemic violence.¹ Do we need a new critical language to make the scope of our cultural work as classicists less self-evident and more urgent?

Universality & Universalism

“Is the text sabotaged by its own proclamations of universality?” (Morrison 1989: 138).

Morrison’s quarrel in *UTU* is not with the idea of the canon per se, but with culturally exclusive canons that pretend to universality. What insights and warnings does Morrison’s essay have for the terms in which we articulate the significance and relevance of the works that we study as part of the canon of Greek and Latin literature?

¹ Using the phrase “epistemic violence” after Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988, rev. 1999). For an overview of scholarship on “epistemic injustice” in the philosophy of race, see José Medina “Epistemic Injustices and Epistemologies of Ignorance”, in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race*, edited by Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martin Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson. Routledge, 2018: 247-260.

On a related note, turning to a passage from Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, how do universalizing discourses about the study of Greek and Roman classical antiquity intersect with the presence or absence of race in our discussions about classical scholarship:

“What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal” or race-free?” (Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992, xii)

Silence & Invisibility

- “Silences are being broken, lost things have been found ...” (Morrison 1989: 132).
- “We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there’.” (Morrison 1989: 136).
- “What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion?” (Morrison 1989: 136).

What important silences in extant sources from ancient Greece and Rome are being unvoiced and where can and should we be focusing more attention? Where has the idea of “voicing the silences” been used to greatest effect in classical scholarship of the past fifty years?

On a related note, what are the salient silences in our disciplinary community in this moment? What channels of advocacy have been forged and do we still need to forge to help to amplify silenced voices and marginalized / minoritized perspectives in our teaching and scholarship? Without appropriating them to dominant voices?

Or, to put it more directly: what knowledge do we think we are responsible for in the Classics classroom?

Canon & Empire-Building

“This canon fodder may kill the canon. And I, at least, do not intend to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville, etc., etc., etc. There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them.” (Morrison 1989: 128)

“Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense.” (Morrison 1989: 132).²

² See John Levi Barnard *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p.166: “‘Canon building is Empire building’ as Morrison has put it, and Chesnutt earlier argued that to ‘know a nation’ we must ‘read its books.’ But by extension, the works of these writers suggest a corollary: to *change* a nation, *change* its books.”

How workable is Morrison's conception of "enhance[d] canon readings"? Since Morrison published *UTU* in 1989, how far have we moved from the centrality of the canon in classical scholarship? And how much progress have we made in decentering the idea of a classical canon even as we continue to structure our curricula around it?

Morrison on Greek tragedy

"A large part of the satisfaction I have always received from reading Greek tragedy, for example, is in its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the chorus of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy. In other words, that is part of the reason it has quality for me — I feel intellectually at home there. But that could hardly be so for those unfamiliar with my "home," and hardly a requisite for the pleasure they take. The point is, the form (Greek tragedy) makes available these varieties of provocative love because *it* is masterly — not because the civilization that is its referent was flawless or superior to all others." (Morrison 1989: 125).

Consider Morrison's use of the word "masterly" in this passage. In what ways does Morrison remaster ideas about the form of Greek tragedy in this passage?

The cultural politics of Black Classicism / classica Africana

Insofar as this workshop seeks to identify fruitful ways of using a classic of Afro-American literature (to use Morrison's terminology in *UTU*) in the Classics classroom, this is a meta-reflexive question. There are pitfalls here. Consider the following remarks by Morrison about the approach to Afro-American literature.

Compare: "Finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to place value only where that influence is located it is pernicious." (Morrison 1989: 145).

With: "I want to address ways in which the presence of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture both resuscitate the study of literature in the United States and raise that study's standards." (Morrison 1989: 126).

What happens if we substitute the noun "Classics" for the second mention of "literature" in the following sentence, as follows?

"I want to address ways in which the presence of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture both resuscitate the study of **literature Classics** in the United States and raise that study's standards."

Africanism and Hellenism

Morrison offers an account of the rediscovery of Greek antiquity in the Renaissance in terms of the cultural reinvention of Greece: “The triumph of that process was that Greece lost its own origins and became itself original.” (Morrison 1989: 130). Morrison then explores the idea of Greece’s gain as Africa’s loss by reflecting on the significance of the first volume of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (*ibid.*, 120-132). What particular insights does Morrison bring to the debate about Black Athena and to the relationship of Africanism and Hellenism?