

“What the Hell Happened to Maggie?”

The Politics of Race and Disability in Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif”

KANEMARU Satoshi

“Recitatif” (1983), the only short story that Toni Morrison has ever written, repeatedly forces its readers to rethink and challenge their own racial stereotypes. The main purpose of this critical essay, however, is not to interpret the text according only to the author’s racial politics but to link the race issue with the disability embodied by a crippled, mute, deaf old woman, Maggie. In doing so, I attest in the paper that the interrelation between race and disability is the very pivot around which the narrative revolves, and that Morrison’s awareness manifested in “Recitatif” remolds the race politics by means of disability.

History endorses a political affinity between race and disability. In *From Good Will to Civil Rights* (1984) which explores the process of empowering disabled people, the author Richard Scotch demonstrates that the black civil rights movement had the great effect of producing the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 of which requires that the civil rights of disabled people be confirmed. Race politics thus became relevant to disability in the 1970s.

In “Recitatif,” it is in the representation of Maggie that race overlaps with disability. Yet readers often choose to read the narrative from the racial perspective at the expense of Maggie’s disability. It seems that race is the overriding issue. Nevertheless, the narrator Twyla thinks of Maggie not as a racialized but as a disabled figure, while Roberta, her comrade since they were sent to an orphanage called “St. Bonny’s,” affirms that Maggie is “a poor old black lady.” Moreover, when taking into consideration Twyla’s obsessive self-reproach at having called Maggie names, I can conclude that the representation of Maggie may subvert the parameters of racial interpretation and narration.

Twyla’s relationship with her mother testifies to the fact that the representation of Maggie is an interface between race and disability: Maggie appears as “a mother

figure.” Clearly enough, Twyla equates Maggie with her mother. As racial strife comes into prominence and Twyla begins to be conscious of Maggie’s “race thing,” the repressed image of Twyla’s mother returns to her memory from the depths of her consciousness. In contrast with Twyla’s case, Roberta has had in mind the memory both of her mother and of Maggie’s race. In terms of the mother and race issue, their recollections of Maggie reveal a slippage between the two. Moreover, their memories of Maggie’s disability are critically different: Twyla is impressed by her physical handicap; Roberta perceives her as a mentally handicapped person. In spite of the deep rift between them, however, they make an attempt to establish a dialogue with each other. In spite of a variety of binary oppositions, a dialogue burgeons out of the representation of Maggie which gets them involved in negotiation. Morrison herself also directed her race politics toward the horizon of negotiation. Not only did she search for a genuine black literature, but she also sought an interaction among race and other issues.