Chapter 4
Nothing Random about Taste:
Toni Morrison and the Algorithmic Canon

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ABSTRACT

In our digital age, "Is there an app for that?" gets asked and answered for books, but not the canon, until the invention of an online, tessellating medium of personal choice expansion called TasteKid. Its voter-influenced algorithm continuously updates users' personalized canons seeded from whatever writer or title they choose. This atypical engendering of literacy challenges—perhaps inadvertently—what the canon is and how it can be experienced for readers new to critical or cultural literacy and Toni Morrison fans alike. In fact, her works get linked to other media by the thumbs up or down responses of site visitors. In this way, technology eclipses the canon's previous assumption of "the center" because only a reader's choice can occupy it. Likewise, with the distance between authors decreasing, (at the pace of the site visitors' unpredictable orders), the obsolescence of "margins" effects a power shift.

INTRODUCTION

Catch a "shock of recognition," to use a phrase of Toni Morrison's, while reviewing the eerily predictive notion of Michel Foucault from 1969:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. (Archaeology)

Today's network (the canon) has been exponentially transformed by the Internet which means that its nodes (literature) have been too. "Science and technology have always influenced the practice and materiality of culture and our technological landscape is increasingly becoming multimodal and multifocal. This has important implications for exploring the concept of so-called digital humanities within the larger framework of (multi)literacies" (Rutten & Vandermeersche, 2014). Consequently, to understand

Toni Morrison's canonization, we should consider the digitization of knowledge—how its future archaeologies are being uniquely configured today in cyberspatial clouds. As contemporary readers have grabbed up "intermediality," the publishing industry has readapted at the galloping pace of IT. From the book club's poststructural canon with a twist, to the Kindle queue (choose your own canon), and online communities that keep you 'cover(ed),' readers' choice has crossed paths with "the construction of a personal space in a web-based social environment" (Dettori, 2011). The experimental mix and match permits them to work through the canon asynchronously. How do these options shift Morrison's locations within it? What new intertextualities emerge? And on the university front—where her work magnetizes the practice of theory—how do sequent syllabi hold up against the surfing and searching done online?

Among the various "technologies" which go to make up any society, one in particular seems to me to have been much ignored, and that is what might be called "moral technology." A moral technology consists of a particular set of techniques and practices for the instilling of specific kinds of value, discipline, behavior, and response in human subject: and one rather important type of moral technology in our own day goes under the name of Literature (Eagleton 97).

Once a critical motif, technology is now literature's collaborator, for as pages are turned, readers update their status. Through this pair of disciplined behaviors, literacy refracts into reading, composing, and "publishing," in the Composition and Rhetoric sense, online, one digital footstep at a time. And when readers' paths are cross-analyzed (as well as traced), we might find that modern accessibilities are cracking the canon from within. Rather than digress from the issue of canonization, social and digital media's effect on book selection illuminates its terms, satisfies questions raised by its previous debates, and refreshes its premises altogether.

BACKGROUND

Remember when book clubs were the new discourse communities? Discussion questions, typically published at the end of printed editions, ferried authors and readers to their "destination." But unlike the meaning Roland Barthes had in mind, the "text's unity" was also bookended by its origin, the author. No reader made that clearer than Oprah Winfrey, who would go on to spotlight four of Toni Morrison's novels: *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*. ("List") Undoubtedly America's most star-studded discourse community, "Oprah's Book Club" dramatized how real and embodied an author could actually appear while casting readers in the role of audience (whether studio, at home, or fan club). With its social revision of poststructuralism, the book club's popular canon drew authorship back into the reading process and amplified writers' celebrity.

Next, came the postmodern canon. As publications emerged in digital and online versions for rent, purchase, and trial, readers' consumption patterns began to determine not simply what went unread, but what went out of print and/or circulation. As a compass or divining rod, the canon continually shapeshifted with readers' selections via multisensory platforms including Audible and Nook. Meanwhile, "master works" showed up in cyberspace for free, their survival having exceeded the bandwidth of their copyright. Ironically, accessibility seemed to reduce value in the free market, and this further reshaped common knowledge about which titles needed to be read, and by whom, to prove or indicate what values. An important exception, perhaps, was the increased popularity of several genres of early African

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