

3 What Does Educative Justice Look Like?

Or: What Happened as I Read Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*

Torill Strand

I will here use my experience of reading Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif"¹ as an entry point to elucidate Badiou's theory of justice. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the question: What may educative justice look like?

I adopt a philosophical methodology with the dual ambition to describe Alain Badiou's theory of justice in light of his later writings, and to acquire deeper insights into the distinctiveness of Badiou's philosophy for conceptualizing educative justice. However, before going further, I should clarify the distinction between educational and educative justice. *Educational* justice refers to the promotion of justice in, for, and through education by applying various theories, principles, or doctrines of justice. *Educative* justice, by contrast, refers to the ways in which justice – as a tangible phenomenon – may educate.² Badiou's philosophical system models educative justice. According to Badiou, justice emerges as generic truths-in-worlds imbued with educative potentials. Justice is "not a concept for which we would have to track down more or less approximate realisations in the empirical world" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 99). On the contrary, justice belongs to our being in the world, not to philosophy. Moreover, encounters with justice transform the thinking subject and propose a radically different direction in regard to true life. The task of philosophy is therefore not to promote doctrines of justice, but rather to think educative encounters with justice. My experience of reading Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* is here taken to illustrate such an encounter.

In brief, Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* tells a story about the friendship between two 8-year-old girls of different races. However, we never get to know which of these girls is black and which is white. When I read the short story, I was eager to guess, but I was never sure. Despite following the girls as they grew up and occasionally met as adults, I still do not know. In this way, this short story comes forward as a puzzle, a riddle, a mystery that played with my mind. Educative justice seems to be the name of that game.

As I read the short story, I was at first fascinated by the narrative of the two girls' ethical-political formation. Next, I became captivated by Toni Morrison's style of writing, her technique of playing with, and thereby teasing and enchanting, annoying and fascinating the reader. Third, I came to realize – because of my long-lasting and in-depth engagement with Alain Badiou's philosophical texts – the way in which this short story acted on my

mind, and thereby intrigued, disturbed, challenged, and educated my idea of what justice looks like.

To follow the itinerary of my experience of reading Morrison's *Recitatif*, I start with a brief summary of the narrative of this short story. Next, I comment on Toni Morrison's method of suspending the finitude of identity politics as she twists the story toward unnamable truths. Third, through the lens of Badiou's philosophical system, I explore the ways in which this short story promotes encounters with justice before I sum up by responding to the question, What does educative justice look like? However, before taking a closer look at the short story, let me briefly summarize Badiou's theory of justice.

On Alain Badiou's Theory of Justice

To Badiou, justice designates an ethical orientation generated, upheld, and justified by the axiom of equality (Badiou, 1996, 2005a, 2019). To hold equality as an axiom implies that Badiou conceives equality to be self-evidently valuable and true. Also, the postulate of equality serves as a premise and starting point for his further reasoning and arguments for justice. Accordingly, the value of equality represents the very essence of justice. Moreover, the phenomenon of justice appears under the condition of the political. "Justice' is the qualification of an egalitarian moment of politics *in actu*" (Badiou, 2005a, p. 99). Badiou thus conceptualizes justice as a *truth in action*.

Let me briefly explain: Within Badiou's philosophical system, there are four spheres through which truths emerge; art, science, love, and politics. "Truths", to Badiou, are existential, ongoing, and open-ended ontological operations emerging in tangible situations. Truths designate "the ensemble of the production in time and space of something that we may, for solid reasons, assume to have a universal value" (Badiou, 2022a, p. 11). Truths thus belong to real-life situations, not to philosophy. The task of philosophy is therefore *not* to produce truths, but rather to identify and strengthen emerging truths-in-worlds, be it within the sphere of art, science, love, or politics. Political truths, however, stand out by having *the axiom of equality* as a premise and by being concerned with the collective. The sphere of politics³ is thus the only sphere in which truths are "generic" – or universal – both in their condition and in their outcome. Consequently, politics, to Badiou, is not about the seizing of power. True politics is not a form of the state. By contrast, true politics concerns the collective and "is organically linked to the category of justice" (Badiou, 2019, p. 5), as it is an immanent orientation holding equality as valuable and true. True politics thus begins with an "either-or" choice of sides. Either to side with power or to side with justice. "And by consequence, we are within justice, or we are not" (Badiou, 1996, p. 30).

In other words, justice designates an *orientation* generated by and affirming the axiom of equality. Consequently, justice is a phenomenon impossible to capture by a clear definition. We cannot achieve justice by applying a

theory of justice. Nor can we achieve justice through a programmatic approach, by obeying to a set of rules or submitting to some pre-given norms of conduct. By contrast, justice is a thought in action, a political orientation, a truth procedure immanent in true life (Badiou, 2017).

[J]ustice, which is the philosophical name for the equalitarian political maxim, cannot be defined. For equality is not an objective of action, it is an axiom of it. There is no political orientation linked to truth without the affirmation – affirmation which has neither a guarantee nor a proof – of a universal capacity for political truth. Thought, on this point, cannot use the scholastic method of definition. It must follow the method of *the understanding of an axiom*.

(Badiou, 1996, p. 30, my accentuation)

Badiou's theory of justice thus describes an operational, axiomatic, and immediate figure designating not what must be, but rather what is. "We are within justice, or we are not" (Badiou, 1996, p. 30). In this way, justice is imperative to philosophy since justice signifies the philosophical seizing of a latent egalitarian axiom. In short "we shall call 'justice' the name by which a philosophy designates the possible truth of a political orientation" (Badiou, 1996, p. 29). So what can we learn about educative justice from reading Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*? To explore, let me start with a summary of the short story.

A Recitative

In brief, *Recitatif* tells a story about the development of the friendship between Twyla and Roberta, two girls of different races, from their early childhood encounter until they as adult women again occasionally meet a few times. Narrated in Twyla's voice, the short story opens with Twyla telling about how she and Roberta met as 8-year-old wards of the state,⁴ placed in the same room at St. Bonaventure shelter.⁵ There, they stay together until Roberta leaves after four months. Later, they meet a few times as young adults – at a service area, a shopping mall, a protest march, a diner – and talk a bit about their time together at the shelter. Their memories are rather blurred, so the plot of the short story is their joint recollection of memories in light of the different situations in which they later meet. The short story closes with Roberta in tears. "Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison, 2022, p. 40).

The title of the short story – *Recitatif* – is French for "recitative," which denotes a free, rhythmic vocal style that imitates natural speech. A recitative is often used for the dialogue or narrative parts in operas, oratorios, and cantatas (Wikipedia, 2022). A recitative allows the singer to imitate the rhythms and music of ordinary speech, so the recitative resembles ordinary speech more than a formal musical composition. Morrison's short story may thus be Twyla's recitative, her free vocal delivery of a narrative that resembles, but is never similar to or representative of, the reality of the drama she

portrays. Nevertheless, Twyla's recitative paints a picture of a – to her – line of noteworthy, emotional, and unexpected events occurring over several years, from the day she as an eight-year-old girl was taken away from home and placed in a shelter until she as a grown-up woman unexpectedly bumps into her earlier roommate on a Christmas Eve. In short, Twyla's recitative narrates a drama in five episodes, each episode portraying situations taking place at different moments in time and at different sites.

The very first episode of the drama takes place at the shelter and opens with Twyla and Roberta's first meeting. We would immediately assume that girls of different races would distance themselves from each other. However, Twyla and Roberta soon become allies against "the real orphans" and "the big girls on the second floor".

We didn't like each other all that much at first, but nobody else wanted to play with us because we weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were dumped. Even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us.

(Morrison, 2022, p. 5)

Twyla and Roberta were both outcasts. "So for the moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper" (Morrison, 2022, p. 7). Moreover, they were equally fascinated with Maggie, an old woman working in the kitchen and who had even lower status than they did.

The kitchen woman with legs like parenthesis. ... Maggie couldn't talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parenthesis and how she rocked when she walked.

(Morrison, 2022, p. 7)

Maggie had no voice. The girls did not relate to her as a person, but rather as a strange and silent object working in the kitchen. "She wore this really stupid little hat – a kid's hat with earflaps – and she wasn't much taller than we were". At one occasion, they observed how Maggie fell over while the big girls laughed at her.

"But what about if somebody tries to kill her," I used to wonder about that. "Or what if she wants to cry. Can she cry?"

"Sure," Roberta said. "But just tears. No sounds come out."

"She can't scream?"

"Nope. Nothing."

"Can she hear?"

"I guess."

"Let's call her," I said. And we did.

"Dummy! Dummy!" She never turned her head.

“Bow legs! Bow legs!” Nothing. She just rocked on, the chinstraps of her baby-boy hat swaying from side to side. I think we were wrong. I think she could hear and didn’t let on. And it shames me even now to think there was somebody in there after all who heard us call her those names and couldn’t tell on us.

(Morrison, 2022, p. 8)

When Roberta leaves St. Bonaventure, the girls lose contact. However, eight years later, they meet by chance. In this second episode of the drama, Twyla’s recitative depicts a different situation. Twyla and Roberta are now teenagers, belonging to different youth cultures. Twyla is working behind the counter at Howard Johnson’s, a service area on the east-west highway.⁶ Roberta and her friends stop by on their way to the west coast to keep an appointment with Jimi Hendrix.⁷ It soon turns out that Twyla does not know about Jimi Hendrix, so Roberta and her friends giggle, “Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole. He’s only the biggest – Oh, wow. Forget it.” They leave without saying goodbye.

The third episode of the drama takes place 12 years later when they again meet by chance at the Food Emporium, a new gourmet grocery store. Roberta approaches Twyla in the checkout line. “Twyla!” “You look great.” Roberta was “dressed to kill. Diamonds on her hand, a smart white summer dress.” However, despite the obvious socioeconomic differences, they get along well. They even have a good laugh when Twyla mistakes Roberta’s driver for her husband: “You married a Chinaman?” (Morrison, 2022, p. 23). They agreed to have a chat over a coffee. Twyla recalls,

We went into the coffee shop holding on to one another and I tried to think why we were glad to see each other this time and not before. Once, twelve years before, we passed as strangers. A black girl and a white girl meeting in Howard Johnson’s on the road and having nothing to say. One in a blue and white triangle waitress hat – the other on her way to see Hendrix. Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long. Those four months were nothing in time. Maybe it was the thing itself. Just being there, together. Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew – how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed.

(Morrison, 2022, p. 23)

As they sit down in the booth at the cafe, they start to chat casually about their present lives. Roberta demonstrates that she has learned to read. They exchange information about their husbands and children – but very soon, they begin to reminisce about their time together at St. Bonaventure.

“I don’t remember a hell of a lot from those days, but Lord, St. Bonny’s is as clear as daylight. Remember Maggie? The day she fell down and those gar girls⁸ laughed at her?”

Roberta looked up from her salad and stared at me. “Maggie didn’t fall,” she said.

“Yes, she did. You remember.”

“No, Twyla. They knocked her down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard.”

“I don’t – That’s not what happened.”

“Sure it is. In the orchard. Remember how scared we were?”

(Morrison, 2022, p. 25)

Roberta’s story truly worries Twyla. Yes, she nods politely to Roberta’s invitation to stay in touch but admits to herself that she is quite upset. “‘Okay’, I said, but I knew I wouldn’t. Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?”

The fourth episode of the drama takes place during racial strife over forced integration in schools.⁹ Twyla drives by the school and spots Roberta among a group of protesters, demonstrating with a poster saying “mothers have rights too”. Twyla stops the car, pulls down her side window, and confronts Roberta. “What are you doing?” When they start to quarrel, the other protesters surround Twyla’s car and start rocking it forcefully back and forth.

I swayed back and forth like a sideways yo-yo. Automatically I reached for Roberta, like the old days in the orchard when they saw us watching them and we had to get out of there, and if one of us fell the other pulled her up and if one of us was caught the other stayed to kick and scratch, and neither would leave the other behind.

(Morrison, 2022, p. 31)

However, this time the police came to the rescue. “Okay ladies. Back in line or off the streets”. Roberta was not willing to help.

“Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you’re not. You’re the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot.”

[...] What was she saying? Black? Maggie wasn’t black.

“She wasn’t black”, I said.

“Like hell she wasn’t, and you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream.”

“Liar!”

“You’re the liar! Why don’t you just go home and leave us alone, huh?”

(Morrison, 2022, pp. 32–3)

Twyla recollects,

It didn’t trouble me much what she had said to me in the car. I mean the kicking part. I know I didn’t do that. But I was puzzled by her

telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it, I actually couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that. What I remembered was the kiddie hat, and the semicircle legs. I tried to rescue myself from the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. We watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked. And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't – just like me and I was glad about that.

(Morrison, 2022, pp. 36–7)

The fifth and last episode takes place years later, possibly in the early 1980s, when Twyla and Roberta unexpectedly meet at a diner on Christmas Eve. Roberta spots Twyla, seated in a booth by herself, and sits down next to her.

“I have to tell you something, Twyla. I made up my mind if I ever saw you again, I'd tell you”

“I'd just as soon not hear anything, Roberta.”

[...]

“It's about St. Bonny's and Maggie.”

“Oh, please.”

“Listen to me. I really did think she was black. I didn't make it up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure. I just remember her as old, so old. And because she couldn't talk – well you know, I thought she was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day – wanting to is doing it.”

(Morrison, 2022, p. 39)

And here, at a diner on Christmas Eve, the short story ends with Roberta in tears: “Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?” (Morrison, 2022, p. 40).

Suspending the Finitude of Identity Politics

So how may my reading of Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* illustrate encounters with justice? In general, to read Tony Morrison's *Recitatif* is to be confronted with the many faces of silenced, muted, and unacknowledged suffering. To me, it was deeply uncomfortable, even painful, to read about

how Maggie, the mute old woman, was treated like nobody. Also heart-breaking to hear Twyla admitting that “she [Maggie] wouldn’t scream, couldn’t – just like me” (Morrison, 2022, p. 37). Moreover, it was extremely challenging to relate to Roberta’s deep desire to hurt Maggie: “I wanted to [...] I wanted to do it so bad that day” (Morrison, 2022, p. 39). However, as the short story closes with a question, Morrison does not offer any solution on how to cope with that pain. The only thing she does is to uncover it.

One of Morrison’s techniques of doing so is to suspend the finitude of identity politics and thereby brilliantly reveal the silent suffering of the women and children at the shelter, the teenagers longing for recognition, and the anger, fear, and hopelessness of the grown-up women taking part in the racial strife. A good example is the way in which Morrison creates a sharp contrast between the straightforward friendship of the two 8-year-olds, to whom “it didn’t matter that we looked like salt and pepper” (Morrison, 2022, p. 7) and the later awkward incidents when they meet as two adult women, to whom identity politics clearly matters. Morrison herself states that this short story – originally published in 1983 in an anthology of African American women – was specially intended as “an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial” (Morrison, 1993, p. xi). Yes, Morrison’s *Recitatif* touches upon societal power relations, such as race, class, and disability. The five episodes of the drama clearly illustrate the situatedness of these power relations by portraying how they alter according to time and place. However, the genius of Morrison’s style of writing, Zadie Smith (2022) holds, is that she is continuously experimenting with the readers’ thoughts on these issues. She does so by removing any given racial codes and thereby leaving it to the reader to interpret the signs, and thereby identifying blackness and whiteness. Not even the rhythm and music of Twyla’s recitative can be identified as either African American or white natural speech. Additionally, Morrison disrupts any attempt at categorization, by frequently twisting the deeply embedded cultural, racial, and class codes that represent familiar ways of characterizing “blackness” or “whiteness.” Morrison thus renders common signifiers – such as the food Twyla and Roberta eat, the way they do their hair, the music they like, where they live, or how they work – invalid. One example is Twyla’s comment on how the school parents every now and then shifted sides during the protest against forced integration. Third, Morrison is clearly contesting binary thinking. The most striking example is how the five-episode drama portrays how the girls’ relationship changes in accordance with racial politics in the United States, while concurrently making the racial discourse irrelevant. On the one hand, the particular codes of a youth culture, community, or social group evidently matter to Twyla and Roberta. On the other hand, the plot illustrates how the two girls are crossing socially constructed boundaries between “us” and “them,” and between “we” and “the others”. Overall, Zadie Smith (2022) identifies

Morrison's style of writing as a "unique mixture of poetic and scientific method". By withholding crucial details, undermining any attempt at categorization, and contesting binaries, Toni Morrison is clearly experimenting with the readers' preconceived beliefs. The result is a transition from knowledge to thought.

Transforming the Thinking Subject

Following Badiou (2014, 2022b), such a transition – from knowledge to thought – implies that the effect of literature takes place at the level of thought. Literature carries the power to contest and transform thinking. In general, literature creates a sensation of being confronted with something unthinkable, of seeing a reality at the edge of disappearance, of encountering an existence at the very limit of thought. To read literature is thus to take part in a form of thinking.

The idea that literature thinks [...] can only mean that it opens up the realm of the particular – subtle psychological insights, social differences and cultural specificities – to the field of knowledge. For that must mean, as we know from experience when a novel secures a victory in our minds, that literature's effect takes place at the level of thought.

(Badiou, 2014, p. 133)

Consequently, the potential power of literature is to transform the thinking subject. First, because literature signifies an encounter with a real that is situated in the fluctuation between story and history. Second, because literature uses language to mercilessly express that which has been covered over, silenced, and not yet said. Third, because literature – by speaking about the unspeakable – invites our thinking into a hidden, closed, and silenced place. This also goes for Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*.

First, by merging a historical and fictional world, Morrison's *Recitatif* opens up to a real that oscillates between story and history. On the one hand, the plot of this short story clearly adheres to tangible and recognizable historical-geographical events that coexist with encyclopedic facts, such as Jimi Hendrix's iconic status during the 1960s or the racial strife over forced integration during the 1970s. On the other hand, however, the fictional plot follows open itineraries. To illustrate, Toni Morrison uses a dance metaphor to link Twyla's "dancing mother", the protesters' rocking of Twyla's car, and Maggie's way of "rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked" to the movements of Twyla's educational journey. "I swayed back and forth like a sideways yo-yo", Twyla recalls. Thus, in weaving together the historical and fictional world, a closed world and open itineraries, Morrison's *Recitatif* points to a reality worthy of recognizing. This unique real is situated in the flux between story and history. Samuel Beckett writes about flux (quoted from Badiou, 2008a, p. 251):

Flux causes
 That every thing
 Even in being,
 Every thing,
 Thus this one here,
 Even this one here,
 Even in being
 Is not.
 Let's speak about it.¹⁰

The flux is a site in which the real simultaneously can “be held in the place where it is and in the place where it is not” (Badiou, 2008a, p. 251). This real is not in the synthesis of being and non-being, as a Hegelian scholar would like to believe. Nor is it a transcendent real, as a Heideggerian would like to believe. It is rather the very site of being, which is at the edge of disappearance. In this way, Morrison’s short story leads our attention toward a unique reality, a being, in the breaches of history and story. Thereby, the short story directs our thinking toward a being that takes place outside of our thinking. In other words, Morrison’s *Recitativo* opens to a pure being, a generic humanity that, according to Badiou, may be “the essence of all reality” (Badiou, 2014, p. 137).

Second, Morrison marks this reality with the seal of the unique as she uses language to reveal this silenced and hidden being. Adopting a Badiouian terminology, we can say that *Recitativo* uncovers something that has been covered over. To cover over is to neutralize “any detection of an infinite potentiality in a situation” (Badiou, 2022b, p. 198) by superimposing a kind of finitude over the potential infinities in it. Covering over does not happen in the background of a brute denial of these potentialities. It is rather an outcome of the assumptions and considerations we derive from the initial situation and which next serve to conceal “any supposition of infinity and render it [the situation] unrecognizable” (Badiou, 2022b, p. 198). Badiou states,

The essence of covering-over by finitude is to assign every figure of what appears to be “that one,” that thing, assigned its place and meaning by category of language.

(Badiou, 2022b, p. 206)

Thus, the stroke of genius in Morrison’s style of writing is that she manages to use language to describe the mechanisms and consequences of such covering-over operations while concurrently articulating the unnamable phenomena that have been silenced and covered over. A key example is Twyla’s recitative, which testifies to the birth of a new language. Usually, a recitative intends to imitate the music of natural speech. However, the language and rhythm of Twyla’s recitative differ from any music and tone of everyday black or white speech. This unlikely language thereby avoids naming

situations with old meanings. In this way, the unique and somewhat unlikely “music” of Twyla’s recitative avoids covering the situation with untrue identities. In allowing another language to take root in the language itself, Twyla’s recitative produces something artificial that contests, not only natural speech but also the covering-over operations embedded in given conceptions of the world that it signifies. In this way, *Recitatif* generates something artificial that contests the given.

Third, Morrison’s *Recitatif* invites our thinking into a hidden, closed, and silenced place. It does so by interweaving two ontological sites that are opposite to each other and thereby opening a space at the intersection of what is and what is not. Morrison’s technique is to speak about the unspeakable by offering an image that contains a contradiction inscribed in the image itself, such as how she frequently refers to deeply embedded cultural, racial, and class codes while she concurrently twists our ideas of what they might signify. This contradiction between two incompatible elements, of what is and what is not, is never a representation. Rather, the contradiction offers an image that in itself is a comment on and a new way of thinking the real. This incompatible, contradictory image refutes calculative thinking. By contrast, the impossible, contradictory, and paradoxical image offered by Morrison’s *Recitatif* invites our thinking to follow an uneven path while concurrently thinking about the obstacles to that path.

[I]f you are navigating a situation in a state of wandering and risk, it is only when you encounter a paradoxical phenomenon, a point of impossibility, that you are put to the test of the real of the situation.

(Badiou, 2022b, p. 37)

Consequently, Morrison’s short story does not only contest our ideas about “blackness” and “whiteness.” It also guides our thinking into a place that challenges the orthodoxy of preconceived thoughts. In doing so, *Recitatif* invites the reader to sense the conflict between what is of value and what is not.

Acts of Truths

I must admit that I sensed this conflict throughout my reading of *Recitatif*. My experience of reading this short story triggered a deep sensation of conflicting values and worldviews. Consequently, my experience of reading *Recitatif* does not adhere to an intellectual exercise of demystifying Morrison’s writing technique. Rather, it was a sensation of diving into the narrative and recognizing the conflictual values inherent in the situations portrayed: Yes, I liked that I could recognize some geographical places and historical events, such as the service area at the I-90 freeway, the busing, and the hype around Jimi Hendrix. Yet, the narrative on Twyla and Roberta’s ever-changing relationship was the thing that really swept me away. It was heartbreaking to imagine the two 8-year-olds being taken away from home, comforting to know how they took care of each other, painful to read about

how the girls at the shelter treated Maggie, somewhat disturbing to see the clash of cultural and social codes, and I was really upset by the serious fights among the protesters. In short, I should describe my reading of Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* as inseparable from the sensations created by the shifting faces of Twyla and Roberta's relationship. Taking a Badiouan outlook, this sensation can be associated with the act of a truth, a truth that calls for a vital decision. Because I somehow came to realize that either "we are within justice, or we are not" (Badiou, 1996, p. 30). So how does Badiou conceptualize the acts of truths? To explore, let me briefly explain Badiou's theory of truths.

Alain Badiou develops his theory of truths in his Being and Event trilogy (Badiou 2005c, 2009, 2022b).¹¹ Taken together, these three books are key to his overall philosophical system. However, the three books – published over a period of 30 years – also clearly demonstrate that his philosophical system, and thereby his theory of truths, has developed and matured over the years.

In the first book, *Being and Event*, Badiou develops his main concepts of *being*, *event*, and *truth*. Here, he exposes an ontological position that elegantly deconstructs the idealism and romanticism in Heidegger. *Being*, to Badiou, is an inconsistent multiple. However, as we necessarily base our understanding of being on operations of thought that constitute the features and elements of a situation, it is beyond our intellectual capacity to grasp the inconsistent multiplicity of being. The only theory that can grasp this multiplicity is mathematical set theory.¹² Consequently, Badiou claims that set theory¹³ is the appropriate discourse on being.

However, there is an inconsistency between being and appearing, which takes the form of an *event*. Thus, an *event* is a conceptualization of the possibility of change. The event is unexpected and unpredictable, something that vanishes and disappears. Nevertheless, it may institute a radical rupture, as it brings to pass conventional outlooks, knowledge, and opinions. An event will never appear sensible in the light of everyday rules of life or the rules that usually apply to the situation because it strikes a radically different logic. Thus, an event is "an ultra-one relative to the situation" (Badiou, 2005d, p. 507). As such, the event is an ontological "impossibility" because it is both situated and something that goes beyond the situation: On the one hand, an event is conditioned by a lack – a situated void – around which a plenitude of outlooks, knowledge, and opinions circulate. On the other hand, an event carries the possibility of a deep-seated change that implies that it is impossible to see the world in the same way as before the event. Within Badiou's philosophical system, *truths* are subject to such unpredictable events. Truths go beyond the situation as they reveal or unfold something entirely new, something that we cannot grasp or apprehend by the already-established categories of thought. Truths are thus immanent exceptions that emerge, appear, and disappear depending on the conditions they are part of. Accordingly, truths imply some kind of "logical revolt" against the situation. This also goes for the truths we come across while reading Morrison's *Recitatif*.

In the second book of his trilogy, *Logic of Worlds; Being and Event II*, Badiou attempts to describe in more detail the appearing and disappearing of truths. “I insist, since this is the very problem that this book is concerned with: truths not only are, they appear” (Badiou, 2009, p. 9). Truths emerge as immanent exceptions in tangible worlds. Subsequently, in his second book, Badiou leaves the idea of a world as an ontological closed set. Here, he states that we have to conceive a world, or situation, in both its being and in its appearing. “The world is the place in which object appears. Or the ‘world’ designates one of the logics of appearing,” (Badiou, 2009, p. 598). Thus, truths appear. Badiou comments,

I basically moved from being qua being to being there: To appear is to be localized. It could also be said that, after the thinking of being, I developed a thinking of existence. In particular, after showing in 1988 how truths, in the form of universal, generic multiplicities, may be exception of the particular laws of the situation in which they arise, in 2005 I demonstrated how truths may appear and really exist in a particular world.
(Badiou, 2022b, p. 24)

Consequently, during the '90s Badiou explored truths and their subjects as post-evental forms of being. However, after the turn of the century, he explored truths and their subjects as real processes in particular worlds, as existential forms that all the same have universal value. This shift in Badiou's logic helps to understand better the link between Twyla and Roberta's tangible lived experience and the emerging ethical-political truths.

In the third book, *The Immanence of Truths; Being and Event III*, Badiou reverses the perspective by examining truths, not from the point of view of the worlds in which they are created, but from the point of view of truths themselves. Truths are existential, ongoing, and open-ended ontological operations that do not belong to any epistemic category. Badiou now returns to the notion of immanence, while stating that truths are immanent, or integral, in a threefold sense: First, truths are immanent creations of a particular world. Next, truths are at the same time exceptions to that particular world. Third, becoming-subjects are always immanent to a truth procedure. Consequently, this third book in the Being and Event trilogy strengthens the pedagogical theme of Badiou's philosophical system.

“The immanence of truths” has this threefold sense: the immanence of production of truth to a particular world; the immanence of truth to a certain relationship between the finite and the infinite as a sign that it touches the absolute; and the immanence of any subject thus constituted, above and beyond its particular individuality, to a truth procedure.
(Badiou, 2022b, p. 28)

Taking the narrative in Morrison's short story as an example, it illustrates – for one – that the ethical-political truth emerging in Twyla and Roberta's

world is necessarily conditioned by that world. Hence, despite being universal, this ethical-political truth is a local construction difficult to separate from the time and place in which it appeared. Second, Morrison's short story illustrates how this truth is an exception to the world in which it emerged. Truth unfolds something entirely new, an insight that goes beyond the situation. The simple reason is that a truth has universal value. So, "even though it is produced in a particular world, it retain its value when it is transported, transmitted, translated, to other possible or actual worlds" (Badiou, 2022b, p. 27). Third, Morrison's short story portrays Twyla and Roberta as becoming-subjects to this truth. In other words, at one level, the short story portrays Twyla and Roberta's ethical-political formation. At a profounder, and more important, level, however, the short story depicts how the girls, after several unpleasant back-and-forth confrontations, submit themselves to the pedagogy of this ethical-political truth. "Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison, 2022, p. 40). So, by depicting the many faces – pretty and ugly – of Twyla and Roberta's joint recollection of what happened at the shelter, the short story portrays how Twyla and Roberta's ethical-political formation depends on their abilities to embody an ethical-political truth. Badiou claims, "an individual's or a group's becoming-subject depends on its ability to be immanent to a truth procedure" (Badiou, 2022b, p. 27). Morrison's *Recitatif* may thus stand out as an example of truth as a unique driving force imbued with educative potentials. Moreover, this truth bears witness to the absolute. Not only in the fabric of the particular world in which it emerges, but in any world in which its universality enables it to revive.

In sum, in *Being and Event*, Badiou addresses the being of truths, claiming that truths *are*. In *Logic of Worlds. Being and Event II*, Badiou underlines that truths not only are, truths *appear*. In *Immanence of Truths. Being and Event III*, however, he addresses the *action* of truths, claiming the possibility of being subject to their effects. It is upon this background we should read Badiou's theorem that "the only education is an education by truths" (Badiou, 2005c, p. 14).

An Education by Truths

Although Badiou has not written extensively on education, the pedagogical theme is vital and ongoing throughout all of his work (Strand, 2020). In an essay on art and philosophy, Badiou formulates his theorem that "the only education is an education by truths" (Badiou, 2005c, p. 14) and conceptualizes education as transformative, open-ended, and ongoing procedures. In his latest book, the *Immanence of Truths*, he further explores the educative works of truths, and in his hypertranslation of Plato's *Republic* (Badiou, 2012), he illustrates how the tangible open-ended pedagogical operations of truths cultivate the young (Bartlett, 2011, Strand, 2016). Furthermore, in an essay based on lectures delivered to groups of youths in high schools and seminars, Badiou encourages the students "to struggle against prejudices, preconceived

ideas, blind obedience, arbitrary customs, and unrestricted competition” (Badiou, 2017, p. 8). Because an education by truths operates through a subtraction from the state of the situation and proposes a different direction as regards true life (Bartlett, 2006; Heyer, 2010). Literature carries the power to open up for encounters with such educative truths.

To Badiou, art is a key to education. Art

is pedagogical for the simple reason that it produces truth and because ‘education’ has never meant anything but [...] to arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that some truths may come to pierce a hole in them.

(Badiou, 2005b, p. 9)

This goes well with Badiou’s claim that literature creates a sensation of being confronted with something unthinkable, of encountering an existence at the very limit of thought. Therefore, we cannot use literature to promote any philosophies, theories, or doctrines of justice. On the contrary, literature – as a form of art – conditions philosophy. Art may even produce thinking that is generative to philosophy. Badiou’s long engagement with the work of the Irish poet, novelist, and playwright, Samuel Beckett stands out as an excellent example (Badiou, 1994, 2003, 2005b, 2008a, 2022b, Lecercle, 2010), as Beckett’s texts inspire Badiou to introduce new concepts and procedures to his philosophy.¹⁴ Hence, within Badiou’s philosophical system, literature conditions and generates philosophy. There is no such thing as a philosophical truth because truths belong to other spheres of life. However, philosophy contains the resources to reveal and preserve the appearance of truths-in-worlds. “Philosophy is the place of thought where the ‘there is’ (*il y a*) of these truths, and their compossibility (sic.), is stated” (Badiou, 2008b, p. 23). Badiou’s philosophy thus deals with logical transformations, the effects of truths as creation. Hence, Badiou’s claim that art is a key to education may substantiate my assumption that my experience of reading Toni Morrison’s *Recitatif* was experiencing a truth procedure at work.

Accordingly, to recognize a Badiouan conception of what happened as I read Toni Morrison’s *Recitatif* is to recognize his novel position on the triadic knot of art, philosophy, and education. Badiou links education – the transformation of the thinking subject – with finite and infinite conditions. Moreover, he considers the work of art as a truth procedure *sui generis*. In art, truth is both immanent and singular. “Immanent” indicates that art coexists with the truths that it generates. “Singular” indicates that these truths exist in art only. Consequently, a didactic, romantic, or classical model of the triadic knot of art, philosophy, and education fail to seize the immanent and singular truths in art.

A *didactic* model fails as it reflects an idea that truth is external to art. This model turns art into an instrument, a device to “shape” the students within an already given template, or an apparatus for “educating” the young. A *romantic* model fails because it reflects an idea that only art is capable of truth. It glorifies art and makes art absolute. The *classical* model fails because

it mirrors an idea that art is “innocent” of truth. As the classical model delegates to art to capture, mirror, and shape communal desires and ambitions, it limits art to those aspects recognized as meaningful. Moreover, it reduces philosophy to aesthetics. In short,

Didacticism, romanticism, and classicism are the possible schemata of the link between art and philosophy – the third term of this link being the education of subjects, the youth in particular. In didacticism, philosophy is tied to art in the modality of an educational surveillance of art’s purpose, which views it as extrinsic to truth. In romanticism, art realizes within finitude all the subjective education of which the philosophical infinity of the idea is capable. In classicism, art captures desire and shapes [*éduque*] its transference by proposing a semblance of its object. Philosophy is summoned here only qua aesthetics: It has its say about the rules of “liking”.

(Badiou, 2005c, p. 5)

To Badiou, these three models distort the relationship between art and philosophy and cover over the potential truths of arts. With the ugly consequence that the pedagogical theme collapses. “None of these schemas operates a pedagogical form that is both singular and immanent” (Bartlett, 2006, p. 53). Badiou thus proposes a fourth model based on the consideration of art as a truth-procedure *sui generis*:

Art itself is a truth procedure. Again; the philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought, or rather, the truths that it activates are irreducible to other truths – be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy.

(Badiou, 2005c, p. 9)

The pedagogical form is simply a question of encountering art itself. Because art itself is a truth procedure. The task of philosophy is simply to unveil these artistic truths in their very being. In this way, philosophy is the go-between in the encounters with artistic truths. Because philosophy has the power to point to the configurations of these truths, reveal their thinking subjects, and help to distinguish truth from opinion. In short, Badiou’s undeniably novel position on the triadic knot of art, philosophy and education firstly recognizes literature and art as genuine truths in action; secondly refuses to mix philosophy up with these truths while concurrently stating that the task of philosophy is to make these truths visible; and thirdly claims that the only education is an education by truths. In short, “education amounts to nothing more and nothing less than establishing the effect of an encounter as a transformation” (Bartlett, 2006, p. 55). Again, with reference to my experience of reading Morrison’s short story, it is pertinent to state the question: What may educative justice look like?

What May Educative Justice Look Like?

To sum up, Badiou conceptualizes justice as an ethical-political truth procedure generated, upheld, and justified by the axiom of equality (Badiou, 1996, 2005a, 2019). This implies, first, that equality constitutes the very essence of justice; second, that justice emerges as truths-in-worlds; third, that justice concerns the collective; and fourth, that justice is not merely the absence of injustice, but rather an act of a truth imbued with educative potentials. “‘Justice’ is the qualification of an egalitarian moment of politics *in actu*” (Badiou, 2005a, p. 99). What is more, as Badiou theorizes justice as a truth procedure and conceives art – including literature – as a truth procedure *sui generis*, it is tempting to assert that my experience of reading Morrison’s *Recitatif* signifies the work of an ethical-political truth. However, according to Badiou, we cannot jump to that conclusion. There are three objections. First, the fact that there is a clear distinction between the four spheres of life. Second, the fact that a truth has to be embodied. Third, that educative justice calls for a decision.

First, it is vital to take into account that Badiou distinguishes between four spheres of life: the spheres of art, science, love, or politics. Educative justice belongs to the sphere of politics. My experience of reading Morrison’s *Recitatif*, however, belongs to the sphere of art, not to the sphere of politics. To Badiou, it is vital not to mix up art and politics because the truths in the two spheres have different characteristics, and their work is based on different grounds. The works of artistic truths are based on an object – namely the artwork – while the works of political truths are based on becoming – namely a utopian idea of the good society. To put it simply, artistic truths are based on material objects. In the case of my reading of Toni Morrison’s short story, the work of truth is based on the tangible text written by Toni Morrison, as it appears in the materiality of the very book and the symbolic sphere that the text is a part of. “Every work pertaining to the artistic truth procedure is in the form of an “object” containing its own ending” (Badiou, 2022b, p. 472). An ethical-political truth, by contrast, is future oriented. Political truths are preoccupied with collective forms of action and based on an understanding of novelty in terms of “revolutionary transformations where that which was not shall in the end be all” (Power and Toscano, 2010, p. 94).

Second, to consider what educative justice may look like, it is not sufficient to conceive justice as an ethical-political truth generated by the axiom of equality and based on a utopian idea of equality for all. In addition, it is vital to recognize that the work of any truth requires that a subject embodies the truth. For a truth to emerge and have an impact, it needs subjective incorporation. In other words, to understand a truth fully is to embody it. On the very first page of his latest book, Badiou states that a truth is “a-subjective (universal) while at the same time requiring a subjective incorporation in order to be grasped” (Badiou, 2022b, p. 19). So again, for justice to emerge, we cannot adopt a scholastic method of definition. Justice, as an ethical-political

truth in action, requires that we follow the method of understanding. This is the only way to breathe the axiom of equality into life.

Third, but not least, educative justice calls for a decision. To be attentive to and understand fully the phenomenon of justice, we should develop a deep sensitivity and an ontological awareness. Moreover, we have to make an ethical choice. Badiou argues that we cannot prove fully the axiom of equality through a theory of justice, convince people by arguments at the level of abstraction, or demonstrate the validity of justice. In doing so, we adhere to the methods of covering-over. “What I call fundamental ethics recapitulates all of this. It is the commitment to what must be undertaken in order to be on the side of the good, as I understand it – that is, on the side of the thesis according to which it is not true that everything can be covered” (Badiou, 2021). Consequently, in the end, we have to take a stance, choose a side, and make an ethical choice. In other words, justice calls for a decision: “Either we are within justice, or we are not” (Badiou, 1996, p. 30).

Notes

- 1 “Recitatif” is Tone Morrison’s only short story, initially published in 1983.
- 2 See Strand (2022) for a further clarification of this distinction.
- 3 To Badiou, “politics” is not a form of the state or an act of governing. “Politics” rather designate a mode of the activities or the truth procedures that are oriented towards the collective (Bosteels, 2012, pp. 29–30).
- 4 “Ward of the state” refers to a minor or incapacitated adult placed under the protection of a legal guardian. It is common to think of non-adopted, parentless, or abandoned children or foster children as wards of the state, which implies that they are under the state’s care through one or more of its agencies.
- 5 St. Bonaventure, New York is today a Franciscan shelter for homeless people and other people in need.
- 6 The Howard Johnson’s at the Thruway opened in 1970 and remained a Motor Lodge and Restaurant until 1993. The service area was close to Buffalo’s airport and sited immediately along I-90, the east-west transcontinental freeway.
- 7 Jimi Hendrix (1942–70), guitarist and songwriter, was a youth culture icon during the 1960s. He was playing the role of both a rebel and a revolutionary during a youth movement of love, peace, music, and sex. It is worth noting that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (2022) now describes him as “arguably the greatest instrumentalist in the history of rock music”.
- 8 “Gar girls” – a pun of gargoyles, a fantasy or horror monster – is Twyla and Roberta’s nickname for the older girls staying at St. Bonaventure.
- 9 In an effort to branch out racial segregation in schools, the US Supreme Court ruled in 1971 that students could be transported to schools within or outside their school districts. This forced integration met substantial opposition from both white and black people.
- 10 This is Steven Corcoran’s translation of one of Samuel Beckett’s irregular, small poems (*mirlittonades*) recited in Badiou’s text on Beckett (Badiou, 2008a, p. 251). In French: *Flux cause / Que toute chose / Tout en étant / Toute chose / Donc celle-là / Même celle-là / Tout en étant / N’est pas. / Parlons-en.* (Beckett, 2012).
- 11 Alain Badiou’s Being and Event trilogy contains three books on his logic. First, *Being and Event* (2005c), published in French in 1988; next, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (2009), published in French in 2005; and third, *Immanence of Truths: Being and Event III* (2022b), published in French in 2018.

- 12 Badiou's philosophical system is based on the theorem that "mathematics is ontology" (Badiou, 2005c, p. 4). The fact that ontology equates mathematics, however, does not imply that being is mathematical. What it does imply, is simply that mathematics is the appropriate discourse on being.
- 13 Set theory studies sets, or collections of mathematical objects. Since every mathematical object can be viewed as a set and every theorem of mathematics can be logically deduced from the axioms of set theory, pure set theory has today become the standard foundation for mathematics. Badiou names this theory "a pure theory of Multiple". He writes, "[B]eing itself is pronounceable in the field of a pure theory of the Multiple. The entire history of rational thought appeared to me to be illuminated once one assumed the hypothesis that mathematics, far from being a game without object, draws the exceptional severity of its laws from being found to support the discourse of ontology" (Badiou, 2005c, p. 5).
- 14 In their introduction to the 2003 collection of Alain Badiou's essays on Beckett, Nina Power and Alberto Toscano write, "[W]hilst Badiou's writings on Beckett function to some extent as occasions for rehearsal or *mis-en-scène* for the principal components of his philosophy – event, subject, truth, being, appearance, the generic – they are by no means a mere 'application' of Badiou's doctrine to a figure writing (ostensibly) in another discipline. Rather, we shall argue that the encounter with Beckett forces Badiou to introduce concepts and operations which, if not entirely new to his thinking, nevertheless constitute considerable, and possible problematic, additions to, or variations upon, the fundamental tenets of his enterprise" (Power and Toscano, 2003, p. xii).

References

- Badiou, A. (1994). Beckett's generic writing. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 4 (1), 13–22.
- Badiou, A. (1996). Philosophy and politics. *Radical Philosophy*, 96 (July/August 1999), 29–32.
- Badiou, A. (2003). Being, existence, thought. Prose and concept. In: Badiou, A. *On Beckett* (pp. 79–112). Manchester: Clinamen Press.
- Badiou, A. (2005a). Truths and justice. In: Badiou. *Metapolitics* (pp. 96–106). London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2005b). Being, existence, thought. In: Badiou, A. *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (pp. 89–121). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2005c). *Being and event*. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, A. (2005d). Art and philosophy. In: Badiou, A. *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (pp. 1–15). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2008a). The writing of the generic: Samuel Beckett. In: Badiou, A. *Conditions* (pp. 251–284). London: Continuum.
- Badiou, A. (2008b). *Conditions*. London: Continuum
- Badiou, A. (2009). *Logics of worlds. Being and event II*. London: Continuum.
- Badiou, A. (2012). *Plato's republic. A dialogue in 16 chapters*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Badiou, A. (2014). What does literature think? In: Badiou, A. *The Age of the Poets. And Other Writings on Twentieth-Century Poetry and Prose* (pp. 132–139). London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2017). *The true life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Badiou, A. (2019). *In praise of politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Badiou, A. (2021). The theory of covering and the ethics of the idea. *Epoché*, Issue #42, July 2021. Retrieved July 2022 from <https://epochemagazine.org/42/alain-badiou-the-theory-of-covering-and-the-ethics-of-the-idea/>

- Badiou, A. (2022a). *Badiou by Badiou*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2022b). *The immanence of truth. Being and event III*. London: Continuum.
- Bartlett, A. J. (2006). Conditional notes on a new republic. *Cosmos and History. The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 2 (1–2), 39–67.
- Bartlett, A. J. (2011). *Badiou and Plato. An education by truths*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.
- Beckett, S. (2012). *Collected poems*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Bosteels, B. (2008). Force of nonlaw. Alain Badiou's theory of justice. *Cardozo Law review*, 20 (5), 1905–1926.
- Bosteels, B. (2012). *Badiou and politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Heyer, K. (2010). *Thinking education through Alain Badiou*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lecerle, J.-J. (2010). *Badiou and Deleuze read literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Morrison, T. (1993). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. New York: Vintage.
- Morrison, T. (2022). *Recitatif*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Power, N., & Toscano, A. (2003). Editors' introduction – Think, pig! In: Badiou, A. (Ed.). *On Beckett* (pp. xi–xxxiv). Manchester: Clinamen Press.
- Power, N., & Toscano, A. (2010). Politics. In: Bartlett & Clemens (Eds.). *Alain Badiou. Key Concepts* (pp. 94–104). Durham: Acumen.
- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. (2022). *The Jimi Hendrix experience*. Retrieved July 2022 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20130201174555/>; <http://rockhall.com/inductees/the-jimi-hendrix-experience/bio/>
- Strand, T. (2016). Alain Badiou on political education. In: Papastephanou, M. (Ed.). *Cosmopolitanism. Educational, Philosophical and Historical Perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Strand, T. (2020). Alain Badiou and education. *Oxford Encyclopedia of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1457>
- Strand, T. (2022). Educative justice in viral modernity. A Badiouan reading. *Ethics and Education*, 17(2), 240–253.
- Smith, Z. (2022). The genius of Toni Morrison's only short story. *The New Yorker*, January 23. Retriever July 2022 from <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/toni-morrison-recitatif-short-story-zadie-smith>
- Wikipedia. (2022). *Recitative*. Retrieved July 2022 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recitative>