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Portrait of the postcolonial intellectual as a wise old woman: Toni Morrison, word-work, and The Foreigner’s Home

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ABSTRACT

The Foreigner’s Home is a documentary film that is grounded in footage shot at the Louvre in November 2006, when the African American writer and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison was guest-curator at the famous Parisian museum. It experiments with form to further public dialogue about citizenship, belonging, the legacies of slavery, and the power of art, articulating interviews, archival film footage, animation, and music in a homage to and amplification of Morrison’s intellectual and artistic vision. In this article, I discuss the documentary’s cinematic representation of Toni Morrison as a postcolonial intellectual, exploring its treatment of her as object of filmmaking, and inquiring into the ways in which this contributes to revisiting notions of aesthetic engagement and political intervention into the public sphere. Analyzing the film and bringing it in dialogue with other texts by and about Morrison, I examine the ways in which the documentary weaves and modulates the notion of the public intellectual Morrison represents. Dialogue, I argue, stands at the heart of this vision. Therefore, I especially attend to the dialogues the film stages, not only between people but also between texts, media, artworks, and artforms.

KEYWORDS

Toni Morrison; postcolonial intellectual; Louvre; The Foreigner’s Home; dialogic praxis

A title first used for a lecture she delivered at the University of Toronto in May 2002, ‘The Foreigner’s Home’ is a key theme in the African American writer and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison’s work. ‘[M]atters of home are priorities in my work’, she says in her keynote address to the Race Matters conference at Princeton University in 1994; ‘how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home?’ (Morrison [1994] 2020, 132, 133). Subsequently used as theme for her guest-curatorship at the Louvre in 2006, ‘The Foreigner’s Home’ more recently became the title of a documentary film by Rian Brown and Geoff Pingree. A portrait of Morrison and a documentary about her 2006 Louvre exhibition, The Foreigner’s Home (Brown and Pingree 2017) centres Morrison’s enduring and ‘aesthetically and politically unresolved’ (Morrison [1994] 2020, 133) concerns about home, inclusion, belonging, estrangement, and ‘the blatant, violent uses to which foreignness is put’ (Morrison [2006] 2020, 19). Grounded in footage her son Ford Morrison shot at the Louvre in November 2006, when his mother was guest-curator at the famous Parisian museum, The Foreigner’s Home articulates interviews, archival
film footage, animation, and music in a homage to and amplification of Toni Morrison’s intellectual and artistic vision through a visual and visceral language that brings the message that has been hers ever since her 1993 Nobel Prize Lecture home.

In this article, I explore the documentary’s cinematic representation of Toni Morrison as a postcolonial intellectual. As Engin Isin writes, ‘what makes postcolonial intellectuals postcolonial is [their] understanding of their location in imperial-colonial orders and what makes them intellectual is [their] understanding of their location in knowledge-power regimes’ (2018, xiii). Following Isin and Habed and Ponzanesi (2018, xxxvi), I understand ‘postcolonial intellectual’ to be ‘the site of a problem’, a location and an understanding of that location; a location, moreover, which, in the context of Europe and the North-Atlantic continental juncture, was entangled, and continues to be entangled, with colonial modernity. In this article, I inquire into the ways in which The Foreigner’s Home articulates this ‘site of a problem’, exploring its treatment of Morrison as object of filmmaking and discussing the ways in which this contributes to revisiting notions of aesthetic engagement and political intervention into the public sphere. Analyzing the film and bringing it in dialogue with other texts by and about Morrison, I unravel the strands of material that have been assembled to explore the ways in which the documentary weaves and modulates the notion of the public intellectual Morrison embodied and construed through her work and vision. Dialogue, I argue, stands at the heart of this vision. Therefore, I especially attend to the dialogues the film stages, not only between people but also between texts, media, artworks, and artforms, and trail echoes as they create a space of cultural resonance.

Two representations of the postcolonial intellectual

In June and July 1993, at the invitation of the BBC, the Palestinian American literary theorist Edward Said delivers his Reith Lectures examining the role of the intellectual in modern society. In these prestigious radio lectures, broadcast by the BBC and subsequently published as a book by Random House, Said defines the intellectual as an outsider and an exile. For him, an exile perspective offers a certain distance and necessary freedom from the status quo. Offering ‘restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others’ (Said 1994, 39), exile as metaphorical and metaphysical condition provides a double, comparative perspective, enabling one ‘to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way’ and ‘as contingent, not inevitable, . . . the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings . . . ’ (45).

A few months later, the African-American writer Toni Morrison is awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and in December 1993, delivers her Nobel Prize Lecture. In this lecture, she reconfigures Said’s representation of the intellectual, re-presenting, and reclaiming her as a blind wise old Black American woman:

“Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise.” Or was it an old man? A guru, perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

“Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.”
In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement. (Morrison 1993, [1993] 2020, 102)

The first Black woman to have won a Nobel Prize, Morrison surely agrees with Said (Morrison [1994] 2020, 44) that ‘An intellectual life is fundamentally about knowledge and freedom’. Her parable of the blind wise old woman visited by a group of young people and asked to answer a riddle – the question whether the bird one of her visitors says to be holding in their hands is living or dead – and her exploration of the situation from several perspectives, demonstrate wisdom while exhibiting knowledge and freedom – of thought, of narrative, and of the imagination. Inevitably familiar with the double, comparative perspective that Blackness bestows on African Americans – W.E.B. Du Bois’s (and later, Paul Gilroy’s) ‘double consciousness’ – Morrison makes clear that her ‘double’ intellectual perspective is more-than-two and includes the (intersecting) dimensions of race, gender, age, and geographical location, and so complicates Said’s equation of outside/exile with intellectual freedom. In Morrison’s Nobel Prize lecture, the intellectual as a (rural) wise old woman engages in dialogue with her (urban) young visitors. And in this dialogue about language, the meaning of life, and the power of art, they do ‘word-work’, as she calls it, and they do this together, as her final words stress: ‘Look’, she says. ‘How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together’ (Morrison 1993, [1993] 2020, 109).

An allegory of Morrison’s intellectual and artistic praxis, the dialogue across generations and (generational and geographical) cultures and its resulting co-creation, the ‘thing done together’, form a leitmotif throughout Morrison’s life and work. Presented as ‘a parable that foreshadowed her exhibition at the Louvre and offered both a warning and a promise’, Morrison’s story about the wise old woman functions centrally in the documentary The Foreigner’s Home (Brown and Pingree 2017), on which it ends; as well as in her 2006 guest-curatorship at the Louvre that stands at its heart, both of which seem to engage with another simile Said (1994, 44) coined in his Representations of the Intellectual: ‘An intellectual is like a shipwrecked person who learns how to live in a certain sense with the land, not on it … and who is always a traveler, a provisional guest, not a freeloader, conqueror, or raider’.

**Toni Morrison at the Louvre**

‘Nous vivons sur cette terre, après tout. Et la terre est bien le « chez soi » de tous les étrangers’, Toni Morrison concludes her essay ‘Étrangers chez soi,’ in the translation of Anne Wicke, presented as part of her exhibition as guest-curator at the Louvre in 2006 (2006, 26). The phrase echoes Said’s and responds to it: ‘we live on this land, after all’, she says. ‘And the land is indeed the “home” of all foreigners’. As though answering Said’s image of the intellectual with her own, Morrison’s ‘Étranger chez soi’ reconfigures the figure of the intellectual according to her own image of what she does. For the Louvre, Morrison was the perfect personality from outside the museum world to invite to offer their visitors a novel, transversal view of their collections: ‘who better than this woman
could take a fresh and stimulating look at our museum?’, the Louvre’s president-director Henri Loyrette rhetorically asks – a quote that also graces the back cover of the book about the event published on its occasion (Terrasse 2006, 7).

For Morrison, the Louvre’s invitation enabled her to act on her vision of the intellectual as interlocutor and, by engaging in a dialogue at multiple levels, between different artworks, artforms, and artists, give it form. On the one hand, there is the recognition of Morrison as intellectual, which the Louvre and Morrison validate by inscribing her in a newly-inaugurated series of guest-curatorships in which she follows on Robert Badinter (in 2005), former minister of justice who enacted the abolition of the death penalty in France in 1981, and author of books on topics ranging from Oscar Wilde and Condorcet to antisemitism and his battle against the death penalty; and precedes the painter Anselm Kiefer (in 2007), the musician Pierre Boulez (in 2008), and the author Umberto Eco (in 2009). On the other hand, there is the boosting of her intellectual stature: The sole woman in this series of men, the sole African American in this series of Europeans, but also the sole Nobel Prize winner and the sole (single) mother, the Louvre invites Morrison in recognition of – and so further consolidating – her status as a leading intellectual, in the context of a distinctly French tradition of public intellectual engagement and of recognition of ‘the intellectual’. As one explicator puts it on Quora, ‘If one wishes to achieve a legacy in France, he [sic] does it intellectually’ (Johnson 2022). Without entering into details about this tradition and its representations abroad, it can here safely be stated that for Morrison to be recognized in France as an intellectual also adds to her stature as intellectual outside of France, in particular, the United States. The Louvre, indeed, holds transnational cultural power. Not only a very large museum that holds many world-famous artworks, such as the Mona Lisa and the Venus of Milo, it is also the world’s most-visited museum and one of the world’s most popular cultural sites. In the years 2007–2010, the Louvre attracted approx. 8.5 million visitors yearly, of which 20% Americans (see also Statista 2022).

For Morrison to be guest-curator in arguably the most famous museum in the world and ‘one of the No. 1 American museums in the world’, as Louvre director Henri Loyrette is reported to have said (Associated Press 2006), is to contribute her intellectual-artistic vision at local, national, and international levels: within the Louvre, in Paris, France, the United States, and in the international world of art. This, then, she does by inviting artists – musicians, writers, filmmakers, dancers, slam poets – to share their art, insights, and approaches to the theme of ‘the foreigner’s home’; staging debates with writers, scholars, and curators; and organizing an ‘Homage to Black Voices,’ a film retrospective of the works of Charles Burnett, ‘the outsider’ (Terrasse 2006, 143), and thematic tours of the museum.

Because of the specific affordances of film, the documentary The Foreigner’s Home adds to the multi-scalarity of her intervention at the Louvre, enabling its reach to extend yet further. For one thing, it enables (some of) the discussions that took place and issues that were raised in Paris in the fall of 2006 to carry on beyond that time and place. Following its premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam on 26 January 2018, the film has since been screened at many film festivals in Europe and the United States, as well as in many museums, art institutes, and colleges. These screenings then form springboards for further reflection on, and discussion about, art and its role, as well as that of the museum, in making people feel at home in the world; on how to practice
decoloniality; and of Toni Morrison, her work and vision. Because of its circulation, the film as medium enables Morrison and her exhibition to be represented at different times and places, and to different audiences. Literally amplifying Morrison’s voice and presence, it represents Morrison in the sense of making her appear on screens around the Global North; of presentifying her. Yet the documentary film is also a representational medium. It is to this second meaning of representation and of the representing of Toni Morrison in The Foreigner’s Home that I wish to turn now.

**Portrait of the intellectual as a wise old woman**

The film opens with the sound of the sea, of waves washing ashore, accompanying the title sequence, which seamlessly dissolves (fades out black) in an animation of a sea under a starry night. We then hear a voice-over – the voice of Toni Morrison – declaring her ‘faith in the world of art’. ‘Art’, she says, ‘invites us to take the journey from data to information, to knowledge, to wisdom. Artists make language, images, sounds to bear witness, to shape beauty, and to comprehend. My faith in their work exceeds my admiration for any other discourse’. As the sound of bowed strings intensifies in volume, the scene fades out to black again, then in, to show Toni Morrison, in close up, reading: ‘This conversation is vital to our understanding of what it means to be human’. The scene is captioned, in capital letters of which the central ones are underlined: TONI MORRISON AT THE LOUVRE, 2006 (Figure 1).

Following another animation sequence, this time of people packed on a boat and rocking to the movement of the sea accompanied by the melodious, incantatory music of Jay Ashby and Peter V. Swendsen, the film’s title appears above the boat people in the wake of a dove that flies across the screen, as a barbed wire materializes underneath, separating the boat people visually from ‘THE FOREIGNER’S HOME.’ It then cuts to

![Screenshot of The Foreigner’s Home (2017).](image)
Grand View, New York, the location of Morrison’s home, with the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat arriving at the door, a bunch of flowers in her arms, then greeting Morrison inside her home. It is followed by an establishing shot showing the interior and preparations for the interview that will establish Danticat as the interviewer and narrator, and Morrison and her exhibition as the subject of the film.

Through its opening sequences, its shots and montage, the film constructs Morrison as the subject of the film: it is about her vision, her exhibition, her understanding of the power of art and her articulation of, or way of figuring, the postcolonial intellectual. We first hear her (as voice-over), then see her speak as she lectures at the Louvre. Next, we are introduced to the person in the natural setting of her home through the interview with Danticat. Carefully selected and edited to mount this portrayal and achieve a public conversation, the montage sequence leading to the interview shows Morrison’s prise de parole in the film to be authorized – she is invited to speak by Danticat just as she was ‘invitée au Louvre’ – while establishing this speech to be dialogic and relational. On the one hand, as the film repeatedly returns to the scene of the Louvre lecture, its audience is given to listening to her words, to Morrison imparting her wisdom: It is a picture of an intellectual delivering an important lecture in an eminent cultural location. On the other hand, its returns to the interview scene, as well as its inclusion of several other interview sequences, for instance, in Paris with Radio France or the Belgian Mondiaal Nieuws, continually assert and visually emphasize the dialogical character of her speech as word-work and a ‘thing done together’ while re-establishing it as authoritative – one wants to hear what she has to say, there is an audience to whom and on behalf of whom she is asked to speak.

Functioning as justification of its amplification of Morrison’s voice and presence, The Foreigner’s Home at once builds on, confirms, and further consolidates Morrison’s status as leading intellectual voice and demonstrates Morrison’s dialogic intellectual praxis by establishing dialogue as its central trope. Theorized as ‘a particular process and quality of communication in which the participants “meet,” which allows for changing and being changed’, dialogue has recently emerged as ‘a fulcrum concept of the human sciences, one that bridges interpersonal, rhetorical, cultural, and mass media studies’ (Anderson, Baxter, and Cisna 2004, 1, 11). A ‘travelling concept’ (Bal 2002), then, dialogue not only stands at the heart of human existence, as early communication scholarship in dialogue had it (Anderson, Baxter, and Cisna 2004, 2). Because of ‘the profound differences in culture, cosmology, historical, and political situatedness, language, and religious practice’ (Waller and Marcos 2005, xix) that inhere in society, dialogue and the dialogic have become key to unlocking what Marguerite Waller and Sylvia Marcos, in their introduction to Dialogue and Difference, term ‘the generativity of difference’ (ibid.).

As a concept that foregrounds the mutual involvement of speakers and listeners and of meaning as relational and developed within specific contexts, the dialogic is a praxis that appears particular productive wherever people seek to develop practices of relational knowledge production that enable people and knowledge systems to interact with one another in noncolonizing, nonhierarchical ways (Waller and Marcos 2005, xxi). My use of the terms dialogue and the dialogic derives from this understanding of them as an orientation, stance, or turn toward openness, heterogeneity, and inclusiveness, particularly as it has been developed in the context of the museum, not least by Morrison in her Louvre guest-curatorship (cf. Tchen 1992; Bodo, Gibbs, and Sani 2009).
In *The Foreigner’s Home*, Morrison’s feminist and decolonial dialogic intellectual praxis is presented self-consciously, by lingering on the production process in a way that, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes in her article ‘Documentary Is/Not a Name,’ ‘reveals the artifice’ and so, ‘remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction’ (Trinh 1990, 89; cf. Olivieri 2017) (Figure 2). Indeed, showing the film’s constructedness, the introductory sequence’s centralizing of dialogue is made apparent through the setting of the set, which shows film crew members, the rearranging of furniture, lights, microphones and cameras and Morrison’s quip, ‘Is this a movie or something?’ – a humorous remark edited into the film to underscore its awareness of its own artifice.

In this dialogue, what is emphasized is the knowledge Morrison holds and imparts – the old woman’s wisdom; what she herself still learns is immediately shared and passed on in the dialogic situation. Thus, although she is the film’s diegetic narrator, Danticat’s visual and narrative position remains subordinate to that of Morrison. Firstly, she interviews Morrison in a way that enables Morrison to be, and remain, its prime subject; the person around whom the film revolves and on whom it centres (contrast the ‘bad interviewer’ who makes the interview revolve around themselves, not the other). Secondly, during the film, Danticat’s narration weaves different sequences of the film together, her voice-over doing verbally the work of collating different bits of footage and so smoothing over cuts and transitions to other scenes. Reporting on events next to engaging in direct dialogue with her, Danticat’s role in the film is to buttress its portrayal of Toni Morrison and enable her subjectivity to be brought dialogically and relationally into being.

**Figure 2.** Screenshot of *The Foreigner’s Home* (2017).
The Foreigner’s Home

If the film’s beginning sequence establishes dialogue as its central trope, it also immediately sets up the theme of the film. And this theme, I will argue, is not only established through a dialogue with art – in particular, Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*. It also implicitly and explicitly dialogues with other persons and other positions on the subject. From the first animated images of the sea and of boat people to Morrison’s answer to Danticat’s opening interview question about the Paris exhibition, ‘how did you choose the theme?’, it becomes clear that what this postcolonial intellectual wants to talk about is what she calls the question of the foreigner, a question that she captures in the linguistic ambiguity in the title of the film’s eponymous Louvre exhibition and that the film distributes across a variety of scenes. As she explains to her Louvre audience,

The title and subject of this project, the foreigner’s home, holds two meanings that are available in English. The dual meaning is deliberate. The Foreigner’s own Home, memory and ancestry; and the Foreigner is Home, citizenship and belonging. The theme therefore requires us to come to terms with being, fearing, or accommodating the stranger.

The site of a question, the linguistic ambiguity and dual meaning of ‘the foreigner’s home’ ‘evokes a series of potential contradictions and connections between foreignness and indigeneity, between self and other, between rootedness and mobility, between being at home, having a home, and being homeless’ (Peterson 2012, 288) that obviously resonated powerfully with the artists Morrison invited to the Louvre, as did her choice of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* as its central image and the exhibition’s centerpiece. Originally titled *Scène d’un naufrage*, this colossal painting – it is 4.91 by 7.16 meters in size – commemorates the historical event when the French navy ship Méduse hit a sandbank off the coast of northwest Africa in 1816. About 147 people were put off the ship on an open raft, only a few of which survived. Controversial already in its own day, Géricault’s *tableau* of ‘lower-class or enslaved laborers’ ‘cut off from the colonial ship’ and ‘left to die, survive or drown’ with, at the top, what ‘looks like a young black boy, pointing, maybe maybe [sic] he sees a rescue ship, maybe not’, as Morrison explains in her Louvre lecture in the documentary, struck her as ‘symbolic of what the whole foreigner’s home collection would be about’. It also powerfully symbolizes her perspective on the conundrum that ‘the foreigner’s home’ represents, a metaphor for and embodiment of it.

In *The Foreigner’s Home*, we first encounter Géricault’s painting as the backdrop of the performance of French rapper D’ de Kabal, main organizer of the slam poetry evening at the Louvre in collaboration with Morrison (Figure 3). Following immediately on Morrison’s words, quoted above, that the theme of the foreigner’s home ‘requires us to come to terms with being, fearing, or accommodating the stranger’, D’ de Kabal’s performance in front of *The Raft of the Medusa* to a rapt audience including Morrison herself gives form to them. As the camera pans around the room full of people to linger on Morrison amid the audience then cuts to the performer-performance she is watching, we hear D’ de Kabal declaim ‘we are here, dormant, in transit, our blank stares facing the distance’, words which echo the painting and address the theme of ‘The Foreigner’s Home,’ especially as he states ‘we are cramped for space, we are in our world – for real’.5 Underscoring the topicality of the exhibition’s theme, the curatorial gesture of inviting
slam poets from the banlieue into the Louvre and having them perform in front of Géricault’s painting shows colonial histories such as that of the Méduse to remain active forces shaping present lives and conditions while enabling them to address – indeed, to ‘talk back’ to, and so to change – them. As he prolongs the sound of his opening ‘nous’ – it lasts for more than 10 seconds – this ‘we’ becomes increasingly capacious. As it spreads across time and through the space of the Louvre’s Salle Mollien and extends to encompass the Medusa’s castaways, the camera showing the rapper as though part of their group, the rapper’s ‘we’ suggests a certain continuity between past and present, between the condition of the people on the raft and those standing in front of it. ‘We are here’ because this happened in the past, the present condition needs to be understood in light of its historical roots, which continue to inform it.

The film makes this continuity even more explicit as it proceeds to allow Morrison to explain the significance of the painting and narrate it for the audience, then juxtaposes its scene to contemporary images. In this sequence, first we hear Morrison explain that ‘the raft has been cut from the main ship, and they’re just left to die, survive or drown’ while the camera zooms in on details of the painting. Then, we hear Danticat reporting on their conversation, telling how they talked about the contemporary urgency of the question of the foreigner. Finally, the film cuts from the black figure atop Géricault’s pyramid of hope and despair to images of Hurricane Katrina, with footage of water flooding the streets of New Orleans, submerged houses and streets, and an aerial view of black people waving to the persons shooting the film (and through them, us: the audience), asking for help. Reminding the audience of that time when, in 2005, in the wake of the tropical cyclone the American government left thousands of mostly poor black people not only homeless but to die, the film visually underscores the parallels between the situation depicted in Géricault’s painting and the present, showing The Raft of the Medusa to portray not only a historical scene but also the contemporary
condition. ‘That was staggering’, Morrison says to Danticat, ‘people dying, trying to leave’. Criticizing the emergency response, Morrison – and with her, the film – points to the structural, institutional racism and classism that underlies its murderous lateness and inadequacy and that also finds expression in the language used to speak about the hurricane’s victims. As she recalls, ‘When they were spoken about in the media, they were foreigners, they were strangers, they didn’t somehow belong. So they were estranged, made into foreigners in their home’.

Presented as emblematic of the endurance of the colonial and slavery past in the present, of the way in which the past is present in the present and continues to animate contemporary life and politics, Hurricane Katrina brings a distinctly transnational dimension to the film. Linking a ‘gruesome incident’ in French colonial history to a contemporary one in the USA, the film establishes connections between so-called incidents (I derive the term and its epithet from the Encyclopedia Britannica’s (2022) entry on The Raft of the Medusa) that occurred in different times and places while raising questions arising from those connections – ‘the questions around which the threads of the Raft of the Medusa are wound’, as Morrison puts it in the text on ‘The Foreigner’s Home’ that was included in the book the Louvre published on the occasion of the exhibition (2006, 24; translation mine). Making explicit the contemporary relevance of Géricault’s painting, the film’s juxtaposition of a nineteenth-century French ‘masterpiece’ depicting a historical event with recent footage from American history highlights not only art’s political-aesthetic power but that of dialogue. In the exchange of views staged through the apposition of the two scenes, connections are made and points of view compared and contrasted, such as the different perspectives on, it is suggested, at some level comparable events – impoverished black people ‘left to die, survive or drown’, ‘cut off from the colonial ship’, ‘maybe maybe’ seeing help come to their rescue. That these connections should not obscure more local differences is made explicit by the scene in which we see another slam poet, mistakenly identified as Hocine Ben, speaking to the audience, then reading in front of Eugène Delacroix’s Massacre at Chios, which, compositionally inspired by Géricault’s Raft, and of similar impressive format, shows ruin, despair, and suffering characters in a desolate landscape visited by wartime destruction (Figure 4). Pointing to the politics of location implicit in the French title of the exhibition, ‘Étranger chez soi’ (literally ‘Foreigner at home’), which lacks the ambiguity of the English phrase, he first poses the question of the question: ‘What is it to be a “foreigner at home?”’ he asks. ‘Apparently the writer posed that question as a Black American. I can’t deal with this question in that way’. Reframing the question by diverting it from its North-American focus, he then goes on to enlarge the issue to the wider geopolitics by explaining that though born elsewhere, he is at home everywhere: ‘I am at home where I can live in peace’, he insists.

**Art dialogues**

While the resonances created between Géricault’s painting and the images of the events in the wake of Hurricane Katrina stress the similarities between then and now and the continuities of the past in the present, its ‘duress’ and ‘recursive histories’, to borrow Ann Laure Stoler’s vocabulary (2016), the dialogues with the artworks within the museum also exhibit differences. Without any guarantee of lasting change, the performances staged in
the context of the slam evening aptly titled ‘On Louvre, on Slam’ (punning on ‘on l’ouvre’, meaning ‘we open it’), by virtue of their location within the museum and in front of the great paintings of the Denon wing, embody change and so intimate the possibility of more change, continued change. Whereas the figures on Géricault’s Raft and in the footage from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina are characterized by their being not heard – and being seen only in a very limited way – here, on the contrary, they are invited to speak and are listened to. Given a platform, D’ de Kabal raps and is heard; his successful subsequent career as a writer and performer, addressing the themes of racism, sexism, and toxic masculinity through a wide range of productions, attests at once to his words finding an audience and to the need to continue addressing these important themes from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of contexts. Similarly, other slams poets are shown performing in front of, and in dialogue with, other paintings (though not all, unfortunately: this viewer would have loved to see Hocine Ben, for instance, whose interpretation of Eugène Delacroix’s painting The Women of Algiers reportedly was received with unanimous enthusiasm [Ferrière 2006]).

Importantly, the participative dimension of slam poetry, with its blurring of the distinction between audience and performer (Gore 2006, 97), further underscores the togetherness of the word-work that takes place in these art dialogues. For Morrison, it is indeed crucial to open the doors and listen to these other, young voices. In line with her denunciation, already in her Nobel Lecture, of ‘the policing languages of mastery’ which, she states, ‘do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas’ (Morrison 1993, [1993] 2020, 104), Morrison in her interview with Edwidge Danticat reiterates her interest in the newness of young people’s language(s), their ‘unpoliced language – language without the cops’. Whereas in the wake of the 2005 riots in the banlieues of Paris and other French cities, members of the French parliament blamed rap musicians for inciting violence, Morrison on the contrary invited them to speak and the
French and international intelligentsia to listen to them. Opening the museum and, through her exhibition and its media communications, society at large to the ‘recognition that the “foreigner is already home”’ (Morrison [2006] 2020, 80), as she puts it in her lecture “Harlem on My Mind” delivered in November 2006 at the Louvre, she also unbolted its doors to those who all too often are made to feel they do not belong and who, by virtue of their ‘chan[ing] the language’ and saying ‘what no-one else is saying’, create other ways of seeing, of speaking, and of being. To that end, moreover, Morrison did not only bring the ‘periphery’ – the suburbs beyond Paris’ périphérique – to the ‘centre’; she also brought the metropolitan centre and its cultural elites to the periphery. Indeed, after having invited slam poets associated with the Centre for Contemporary and Amplified Music Canal 93 in Bobigny into the Louvre, she was in turn the guest of Canal 93 for an evening of performances by children of local immigrant families.

Extending the dialogue through movement and displacements and by enabling new encounters and the lived experience of location, Morrison highlights the embodied dimensions the theme of ‘The Foreigner’s Home,’ of being or feeling strange or estranged also in one’s own ‘home’, including one’s body. Reminding her audience that one can also be a stranger to one’s own body and so end up being strangers to our deepest being, Morrison’s Louvre exhibition featured a collaboration between the American dancer-choreographer William Forsythe and the German video artist Peter Welz precisely because, as she explains, Géricault’s Raft ‘forces rapt attention on bodies’ so that ‘we may suddenly realize that the most obvious, and fundamental location of home, is the human body, the final frontier of identity’. Beyond close-ups of the dead and dying bodies on Géricault’s Raft, this final frontier of ‘the foreigner’s home’ is evoked in two ways in The Foreigner’s Home.

Firstly, there are Forsythe, clad in black and drawing on the floor with his body, ‘almost duplicating agony’, as Morrison puts it, and the inserted footage of Lil’ Buck’s street-dance performance with cellist Yo-Yo Ma of The Dying Swan by Camille Saint-Saëns, a classic of white ballet transformed into a metaphor of Black Death and Dying. These scenes of bodies in agony and dying return us to the question of ‘the foreigner’s home’ as a question not only of identity and belonging, displacement, and exile, but also of life and death, of bio- and necropolitics.

Secondly, as she evokes the current migration crisis at the borders of Europe and reminds her audience that ‘foreigners [a]re constructed’, Morrison asserts that it is incumbent upon all of us to ‘address the doom currently faced by millions of people reduced to animal, insect, or polluted status by nations with unmitigated, unrepentant power to decide who is a stranger and whether they live, or die, at or far from home’ (cf. ‘Home,’ 19–20). This message of shared responsibility is brought home, so to speak, in the final sequence prior to the end credits. As we watch stop-motion animated drawings of a bird in a pair of hands, we hear Morrison speaking the wise old women’s words accompanied by the sounds of arpeggios on the piano and some faint bird-chirping in the background: ‘I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands’ (cf., 1993; Morrison [1993] 2020, 103). In this way, and closing on the parable of the wise old woman, the film rejects the ‘dangerous comfort’ that art can also represent, instead inviting each and every one to assume their own responsibility in answering the question of the foreigner’s home.
Conclusion

Extending Morrison’s dialogic praxis as it could already be found in, for instance, the Princeton Atelier she founded as a professor at Princeton University in 1994, in which she brought together students and artists in interdisciplinary collaborations, The Foreigner’s Home amplifies Morrison’s intellectual labour to invite reflections and conversations about the urgent question of how art can contribute to cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. The documentary film, indeed, experiments with form to further public dialogue about the pressing social issues that stand at the heart of her work: citizenship, belonging, the legacies of slavery, and the power of art. This it does in particular by stressing the importance of dialogue to Morrison’s artistic-intellectual vision. The dialogic, or more precisely, ‘dialogic meeting’ (Anderson, Baxter, and Cisna 2004, 3), is central to this vision: the idea that meeting, relation, and the word-work we do together stand at the heart of what makes us human, and that art itself, as well as encounters with and through art, are vital to this process of becoming human.

As an artistic documentary film which, by portraying Morrison’s intellectual vision, opens it to further dialogic meetings, The Foreigner’s Home not only re-presents, but also participates in Morrison’s word-work. This it does in particular through its use and montage of footage, both historical and animated, reworking of documentary images as painted motion graphics, and of course of sound. Staging dialogues between media and artforms within the film, it demonstrates how they, too, participate in the process of ‘dialogic meeting’. As such, harnessing the possibilities and affordances of documentary film, it shows how transnational cinema can be a force in the face of what Morrison [2009] 2020, 17), in an essay titled ‘Home,’ termed ‘the possibility or the collapse of a shareable world’.

Notes

1. I have retained the hyphen in ‘word-work’ from the 1993 text on the Nobel Prize website.
2. In addition to its popularity today, the museum also owes its stature to the history of the institution, which opened as one of the first public museums in 1793 during the French Revolution. I owe this insight to Oscar Ekkeloom, whom I wish to thank for inspiring conversations about museums and decoloniality.
3. As I have argued elsewhere (Plate 2018, 2019), Morrison’s guest-curatorship at the Louvre set a precedent for the intervention performed in the Louvre by the Carters (Beyoncé and Jay-Z) in their music video Apeshit (2018), which can be regarded as a virtual tour of the museum that in some ways repeats the curatorial gestures of Morrison’s ‘The Foreigner’s Home.’ The museum subsequently capitalized on the music video’s success by creating a thematic trail ‘Jay-Z and Beyoncé at the Louvre’ (later renamed ‘Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s Louvre Highlights: Artworks featured in the “APES**T” music video’), which was added to its offerings of guided tours in the wake of the clip’s release on YouTube and is still part of Louvre’s offerings at the time of writing this article (Louvre 2022). Needless to say, the Louvre is also very popular among Asian visitors.
4. Much as Morrison could be said to be not only an author-curator, but also an ‘exhibition auteur’ (cf. Heinich and Pollak 1996, 235). Her guest-curatorship privileges the curator and her ideas above the contributions of other artists in the exhibition, whose works ultimately are subordinate to the grand narrative of the ‘star’ curator.
5. While the translation of the first part – ‘Nous sommes là, en jachère, en transit, les yeux dans le lointain’ – is the one offered by the film, the translation of the latter is mine. In the film, ‘Nous sommes à l’étroit. Nous sommes dans notre monde – réel’ is (mis)translated as ‘We are constricting. We are from another world – reality’. Importantly, in the film the words ‘notre monde’ (‘our world’) are gesturally emphasized by the slam poet patting his breast.

6. Besides Ferrière’s tantalizing review, my wish I could watch – or have seen – Hocine Ben’s performance is also based on knowledge of other interpretations of Delacroix’s work, for instance Picasso’s series of 15 paintings and Assia Djebar’s novel (1980). Their ‘dialogues’ would have been interesting to explore.

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