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“We Looked like Salt and Pepper”

Children’s Perception of Race in Short Stories by Southern Women Writers

The aim of this essay is to explore one of the most controversial issues of American literature, a problem that has been haunting especially the authors of the American South since the days of slavery. The chosen perspective, namely the attitude of children, is doubly rewarding due to the opportunity to investigate different forms of prejudice and their internalisation with an eye to the psychological background, while the keen eye of women writers to victimisation and the children’s need to conform to the expectations of the community is foregrounded. The short stories by various African American and white authors highlight diverse aspects of and sometimes the surprising lack of prejudice in a racist environment, and their main interest lies in the realistic representation of the personal dimension of these phenomena, which are incomprehensible for children in their abstract form. Nevertheless, by addressing the consequences of children’s sensitivity to social hierarchy and their reaction to its inherent values and practices which come under the term of Foucauldian disciplinary discourses, these stories are part of a larger social reality.

The child is father of the man – is that so when it comes to the most pressing and debated issue of the American South? Race relations, overtly or covertly, have been part of the literature of the region since the earliest times and the 20th century saw changes that brought a significant number of African Americans in a much closer contact with whites than ever before. Prejudice and racism have been a constant focus for sociological research but quantitative data, on the one hand, was found to vary depending on the formulation of the question or the interviewer’s race¹ and on the other hand, does not highlight or convey the subtle nuances of everyday encounters. The difficulty of conducting research on children’s racial attitudes and the prob-

1. G. D. Jaynes & R. M. Williams, Jr. eds., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, D. C.: National Academy Press, 1989).

lematic interpretation of the results just add to the complications when trying to explore the scientific background to an ever-present concern of Southern life, documented by a number of Southern women writers, both white and black.

As historians have established, prior to the civil rights movement (under Jim Crow in the South and de facto segregation in the North), there existed an elaborate code of conduct for relations between whites and blacks. Eye contact, pedestrian behavior, and forms of address were all strictly regulated in order to reinforce white supremacy and black submission.²

Consequently, growing up in the segregated South meant learning a double set of standards of behaviour for children of both races and the need to conform to expectations shaped by decades of prejudice and the doctrine of the inherent superiority of the white people. Sadly enough, the discourse of race is still a powerful disciplinary discourse, and as “discipline produces subjects by categorizing and naming them in a hierarchical order, through a rationality of efficiency, productivity and ‘normalization,’”³ identity-formation at that time inevitably entailed a coming-to-terms with these restrictions. In Southern society the Foucauldian ‘dividing practices’ that in any society separate, for example, the insane from the sane, acquired a very prominent position among the disciplinary discourses, as they used to form the basis for interracial conduct and covertly influenced many other social practices of both parties.

Where the relations between groups are the subject of strong feelings, or where they are regulated by widely-held values and norms, or where they are institutionalized in compulsory segregation, there would we expect the relevant attribute (like ‘race’ or ‘religion’) to enter most strongly into people’s identities.⁴

By substituting the ‘ors’ with ‘ands’ in Milner’s observation, we get an adequate description of the attitudes of the region, which is corroborated by Morland’s findings in 1966 that “Southern white children had a significantly greater ability to make

2. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, “How to Behave Sensitively: Prescriptions for Interracial Conduct from the 1960s to the 1990s,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter, 1999). Retrieved on May 18, 2005. <http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2005/is_2_33/ai_58675452>.

3. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 230.

4. David Milner, *Children and Race* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 49.

racial distinctions [based on appearance] than did Northern whites or Negroes."⁵ However, this is not to say that they were more prejudiced as well, it was rather the result of exposure to situations when the identification of race was expected from them.

But how does such an attribute as race enter "into people's identities?" Nash claims that "when you look at the so-called races, the categories crumble. . . . Race is a myth . . . it has been socially constructed and historically shaped rather than biologically determined."⁶ This aspect could not be more clearly illustrated than by Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay in which she describes

the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. . . . During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. . . . But changes came . . . and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville . . . as *Zora*. When I disembarked from the river-boat in Jacksonville, she was no more. . . . I was not *Zora* of the Orange County any more, I was now *a little colored girl*. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a [color]fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.⁷

The fact that trend studies embracing the period between the 1940s and 1980s still report that "whites living in the North have been and remain more pro equal treatment than those living in the South"⁸ also justifies the social construction of race. Prejudice and racist attitudes in the South are the legacy of complex historical and socio-economic factors, which naturalised white supremacy long ago, and therefore, the children's adoption of such views and the process of incorporating them can be regarded as similar to the way they relate to gender and associated roles. Aboud's detailed description of the types of questions and more sophisticated tests used for measuring ethnic awareness and prejudice points out that they focus on the same aspect of child psychology: correct or incorrect identification with own group, identi-

5. Milner, p. 49.

6. George Nash, *Forbidden Love* (New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1999), p. viii, as quoted in J. Sexton, "The Consequence of Race Mixture: Racialised Barriers and the Politics of Desire," *Social Identities* 9:2 (2003) 241–275.

7. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co. 1994), vol. 2, 1008–11, pp. 1008–9 (my italics).

8. *A Common Destiny*, p. 117.

fication of groups different from one's own and the perception of group constancy,⁹ the only difference being the definition of the groups: male/female or black/white/Chinese/Native American. Evidence shows that in both cases children perceive the groups in terms of power relations as well, which means that gender- and race-related behaviour and concepts are learned in similar ways: by socialisation to a hierarchical organisation. Due to the fact that girls brought up in the conservative segregated South, regardless of being white or African American, were expected, even forced to identify with 'the losers' in the male-female power relations, I believe that the women writers of the region are capable of giving a more sensitive account of children's perception of race.

The subordinate position occupied by women in relation to men is a constant reminder of childhood dependency and it was race and not gender that secured white women a position superior to that of African Americans. The South's leading social theorist, George Fitzhugh made it clear in 1854 that "women, like children, have but one right, and that is the right to protection" which "involved the obligation to obey. . . . If she be obedient, she stands little danger of maltreatment."¹⁰ With little variation, we can find the consequences of the profound division between the genders as late as 1930 in the manifesto of the Nashville Agrarians, in John Crowe Ransom's essay, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate": "the feminine form is likewise hallowed among us under the name of Service. The term has many meanings, but we come finally to the one which is critical for the moderns; service means the function of Eve."¹¹ Consequently, white women experienced race and gender relations in a more problematic way than white males in the South, whose position was uncontested: even as late as 1965 the Southern writer, Lillian Smith claimed that "there's a male and female South, which are two different entities. Then there's a black South and a white South, which are two more cleavages. [...] The South has usually meant the male, white South."¹² I suppose the involvement and sensitivity of African American women in questions regarding race need not be detailed.

Eugene D. Genovese's meticulous research covering almost all aspects of slave life deals with race relations among children, as well. This topic has a long history,

9. Frances Aboud, *Children and Prejudice* (Oxford & New York: Blackwell, 1988).

10. Cited in Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 145.

11. Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 10.

12. Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellman, Porter and Hurston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 14.

documented by anxious planters' diaries, who usually tried to protect their children from the "corrupting influence" of the slave children, "but such rules usually proved unenforceable, for the white children eagerly sought the companionship of the black children their own age." What is more, "some ex-slaves tell of white children who, in a variety of ways, protected their black friends from punishment by white adults or slipped food to hungry playmates" and some also taught them to read and write.¹³ In one of the most famous slave narratives, Frederick Douglass describes a similar relationship from a purely practical point of view, which emphasises the everyday concerns of an orphan, who suffered from hunger and cold: "My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me. He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me."¹⁴ Later, when he moves to Baltimore, he adopts the strategy of making friends with as many little white boys as possible and learns to read with their help. This could work only with children who were too small to have fully comprehended and internalised the restrictions imposed by slavery.

Another deprivation that made Douglass suffer all his life was the fact that he had no information concerning his age. "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. . . . The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege."¹⁵ This was beyond Miss Sophia Jane Gay as well, who at the age of ten chose a date at random, and "made an entry of Nannie's birth-date in the family Bible, inserting it just below her own. 'Nannie Gay' she wrote, in stiff careful letters, '(black),'"¹⁶ unconsciously presenting her with a bit of the personal history slaves lacked and made considerable efforts to reconstruct after the Civil War, for example, in their choice of family names.

The first meeting of the spoilt five-year-old little miss and the younger "scrawny, half-naked black child with . . . a potbelly" and arms "like sticks from wrist to shoulder" was typical of their station: "I want the little monkey," said Sophia Jane to her

13. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1975), pp. 515–6.

14. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave. The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. H. L. Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 270.

15. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 255.

16. Katherine Anne Porter, "The Old Order," in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (San Diego & New York & London: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1979), 321–68, pp. 328–9.

father . . . ‘I want that one to play with.’”¹⁷ There was no hint that a relationship similar to symbiosis would develop between the two children and would last all their lives. Sophia Jane’s unusually strong childhood attachment to Nannie continued in adulthood: when the latter, who had previously acted as a wet-nurse for her mistress, almost died of puerperal fever, to the consternation of all the family, the white lady decided to nurse not only her own baby but her slave’s as well. However, Katherine Anne Porter makes it clear that Nannie’s blind devotion extends as far as the person of Sophia Jane, after whose death she stops working in the big house and moves into a hut by herself. She is not the stereotypical, loyal servant of sentimental plantation novels, who would sacrifice her life for her white family. She is a person in her own right and it is the special bond with the white lady that makes her stay after the emancipation and, bearing in mind the written and unwritten laws of slave-holding, such a bond cannot have been formed but in early childhood.

This is not to say that young children are not prejudiced, as their cruelty and ability to ostracise are well-known. “Social-cognitive developmental theories claim that prejudice is inevitable in young children because of their cognitive limitations”¹⁸ but it is necessary to distinguish between the reasons that dominate certain age-groups’ attitudes. The prejudice of four to seven-year-olds is determined on the one hand, by their emotions and by need satisfactions, and on the other hand, by their perception of dissimilarity, whereas their self-centred understanding of the world prevents them from clearly grasping the basis of ethnicity or focusing on other individuals.¹⁹ Therefore, white children’s assertion of their superiority was mostly based on the hierarchical structure of the family and servants and its manifestations learned from their elders, as shown by Porter’s autobiographical heroine, Miranda’s way of talking back to her black nurse: “Oh, hush up, Dicey. . . . I don’t have to mind *you*,” or “you don’t know what you’re talking about.”²⁰

The closeness of the antebellum ‘black and white family’ was a prerequisite for such a relationship as Sophia Jane’s and Nannie’s, and the disappearance of this way of life brought about significant changes. Fear and suspicion dominated the period of Reconstruction, then segregation tried to minimise the contact between the two groups, the legacy of which is still clearly detectable in the results of trend studies (1940s through 80s): “whites are more accepting of equal treatment with regard to

17. Porter, p. 330.

18. Aboud, p. 27.

19. Aboud, pp. 22–24.

20. Porter, p. 347.

the public domains of life than private domains of life, and they are especially accepting of relations involving transitory forms of contact."²¹ Such arrangements did not facilitate interracial contact, especially in conservative rural white communities, among the descendants of people who could never afford slaves and later considered the African American workforce as competition for the few jobs available. Olsen's article on the extent of slave ownership draws our attention to the far-reaching economic effects in the post-bellum period: "white racism was, of course, essential to the existence and preservation of this economic opportunity for whites, and it is important to recognize just how many southern whites had an economic interest in the development, propagation, and acceptance of racism within the South."²² Consequently, it was not only in the slave-owners' interest to keep down the wages of ex-slaves, but discrimination also helped the poor whites to gain influence. This socio-economic factor, which percolated through all the white social layers, is another proof of the social construction of race.

In "The Artificial Nigger" Flannery O'Connor describes Nelson's first encounter with black people on his trip to the city, where he is taken by his grandfather so that he stops wishing for a life different from their simple countryside existence. The main issue for both of them is the presence of African Americans who, naturally, evoke the curiosity of the ten-year-old, as "there hasn't been a nigger in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born."²³ The reader finds out immediately the attitude of the community and Nelson's reaction is strongly influenced by the grandfather's way of asserting his authority concerning this topic. When derided because unable to identify light-skinned African Americans, he does not turn against his grandfather, instead "he felt that the Negro had deliberately walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them."²⁴

O'Connor's short story presents a scenario that was confirmed by psychological research, namely the effect of authoritarian child-rearing practices combined with ethnocentrism. Due to the former, children above seven suffer from a certain amount of hostility towards parents that they cannot express, while the parents' prejudice

21. *A Common Destiny*, p. 117.

22. Otto H. Olsen, "Historians and the Extent of Slave Ownership in the Southern United States," *Civil War History* 50:4 (2004) 401-17.

23. Flannery O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger," in *The Complete Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 249-7, p. 252.

24. O'Connor, pp. 255-6.

singles out 'bad' people who are appropriate targets of anger,²⁵ making a scapegoat of African Americans in this case. Nelson is old enough to interpret the moods and understand the way of thinking of the grandfather who brought him up on his own, thereby demonstrating that his views are based on thinking as well, rather than emotions only. His reaction comes under the concept of prejudice proper, as the hateful negative evaluation "is elicited by the person's ethnicity and not only by the unique, personal qualities of the individual" whom he saw only for a moment. The later developments also show the boy's "consistent tendency to respond in a negative way,"²⁶ which is the third criterion: when wandering lost in a district inhabited by black people they both begin to sweat and Nelson is "afraid of the colored men and he didn't want to be laughed at by the colored children."²⁷ The only exception is the huge black woman who makes an ambiguous impression on the boy, who "stood drinking in every detail of her" and "would have collapsed at her feet if Mr. Head had not pulled him roughly away." His reaction is partly that of the child and partly that of the man:

He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on her face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel.²⁸

Is this archetypal female figure the Mammy or the black lover, or possibly both? Nelson's feelings and the accompanying shame are those of the Southern white male, attraction and guilt haunting him since the days of slavery. As the boy had had no previous contact whatsoever on which such intimate feelings could be based, his reaction might be O'Connor's ironic stab at white men's well-known but shunned traditional preference for African American women, which went against their racism and their justification of segregation.

This aspect of Southern life was political dynamite as well, but children were more likely to grasp the personal side of miscegenation. As late as 1988, in *Sex and Racism in America* Hernton states that "there is no doubt that the sexual aspect is as much a 'thorn in the side' to blacks as it is to whites. Both groups, for their own spe-

25. Aboud, pp. 90–91.

26. Aboud, pp. 5–6.

27. O'Connor, p. 261.

28. O'Connor, p. 262.

cial reasons, are hideously concerned about it."²⁹ The majority of the records inform us about many mulatto slave children who suffered at the hand of the mistress for the sin committed by the master or were sold not to offend her. However, some slave-owners were decent enough to free their own children, which meant a huge improvement in their fortunes. As the ban on interracial marriages was invalidated by the Supreme Court only in 1968, previously all such relationships were considered illicit affairs in the South, which usually entailed that the African American party was at the mercy of the white. Alice Walker's tragic story, "The Child Who Favored Daughter" describes the anguish of the younger brother, still a child, whose favourite lovely sister "had chosen to give her love to the very man in whose cruel, hot, and lonely fields he, her brother, worked. Not treated as a man, scarcely as well as a poor man treats his beast."³⁰ She comes home ill, humiliated and not in her right mind, stamping the hatred on her brother's mind so much so that he later cripples his wife to prevent her from taking the imaginary white lover and cruelly mutilates his beautiful daughter, who has a love affair with a married white man.

In this story, as well as in "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy," the difference between the races is mostly illustrated by the huge gap in the financial situation and the disapproval of the family is directed against the disloyal daughter who does not consider all the insults their people had to put up with. The fourteen-year-old protagonist is raped by a married lawyer, who bribes her into continuing the relationship with presents, money and the promise of sending her to college. Her hatred and distaste succumb to their appeal, as she has no other chance to leave the slums, and even if not in love, the girl appreciates this.

I thought he *loved* me. That *meant* something to me. What did I know about 'equal rights'? What did I care about 'integration'? . . . I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty, and he was telling me that all the time. . . . History? What did I know about History?³¹

29. Charles Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 2, as quoted in Sexton.

30. Alice Walker, "The Child Who Favored Daughter," *In Love and Trouble* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 35-46, p. 38.

31. Walker, "How Did I Get Away with Killing One of the Biggest Lawyers in the State? It Was Easy," in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), 21-26, pp. 24-5.

Both stories describe a way of resisting male white power and remaining loyal to one's race. The former leads to tragedy due to the brother's self-destructive attitude, while the latter ends on a less sordid note, at least from the African American girl's point of view. After her mother's death, when she becomes old enough to realise she has been cheated and humiliated, on a sudden impulse she kills the lawyer and takes the money from the safe, empowering herself, if not politically, at least financially. Given the problematic nature of such relationships and the following pain and resentment, it is not so surprising that in the 1979–80 National Survey of Black Americans 39 percent of the respondents still agreed that "black women should not date white men" and the figure for black men and white women was 31 percent,³² that is roughly every third person disapproved of interracial dating.

Luckily, there were many exceptions to the rule, when the relationship of black or white children and an adult of the other race was characterised by real affection on both sides. In Caroline Gordon's short stories "The Burning Eyes" and "The Long Day" the little white boys are great friends with the African American tenants, who take them hunting and fishing. These stories are not at all nostalgic recollections of the past and 'happy Negroes,' as in both cases their relationship is not idealised. The children are aware of the differences but are not offhand; in fact they consider these trips real treats and treasure the unusual experiences. The explanation Gordon covertly furnishes has to do with the children's inability to grasp the ideology that influences the attitude of their elders. While O'Connor's Nelson, lacking any positive experience, has no difficulty lining up with his grandfather's prejudiced views, in "The Long Day" Henry shows much more sympathy for the black woman, their field hand's wife, than his mother, the perfect lady in the big house. Her harsh "I hope he beat her within an inch of her life"³³ is in strong contrast with her son's thoughts upon hearing Sarah cry, "not a loud crying like a grown person's, but a tiny, low moaning, almost like a little baby's. She must be feeling pretty bad to be crying like that."³⁴

In Carson McCullers's "Untitled Piece" the typical middle-class household arrangement is recreated, with the black domestic servant, who also acts as a surrogate mother for the three orphans. Vitalis is twelve years Andrew's senior and becomes his close friend in the lonely house; her kitchen is "warm and full of good smells and

32. *A Common Destiny*, pp. 199–200.

33. Caroline Gordon, "The Long Day," in *The Collected Stories of Caroline Gordon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 76–81, p. 76.

34. Gordon, p. 78.

life. . . . She knew about the lonesome feeling and was good to him."³⁵ Her nurturing role goes far beyond providing food for the always hungry adolescent, "it was for words like this that he was always going in to Vitalis . . . It wasn't only for warmed up food and coffee she would give him," as she "was good and there wasn't anybody else like her."³⁶ Throughout the story her African American physical characteristics, like her thick lips, her plaited hair shiny with oil or her way of walking, are present and once she is described as listening intently, "as a savage rapt in prayer." Nevertheless, she is 'domesticated' to a certain extent and everything connected with her and black people is the source of pleasant emotions for Andrew, who feels at 'home' in the colored section of the town, which is not at all true of the poor whites' district.

The only time he finds this part of town strange and disturbing is late at night, when sounds of lovemaking float in the air, which he cannot consciously interpret but show his subconscious attraction to Vitalis. Three years later, at the age of seventeen he finds her alone by chance and "it was then that the thing happened that he had expected without knowing in his mind." There is no temptress and there is no rape either, as one would expect based on the traditional scenario.

It wasn't him and it wasn't her. It was the thing in both of them. . . . It was the dim room and the quietness. And all the afternoons he had spent with her in the kitchen. And all his hunger and the times when he had been alone.³⁷

The drive is neither the white male's lust, nor the black woman's mercenary attitude but mutual desire for the other person, which is impossible without close contact and an accepting atmosphere. This is another instance of affection transcending Southern prejudice, as Vitalis's race is never foregrounded in a way that would single her out and represent her as a sub-human being.

In "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring" by Alice Walker, very similar physical characteristics make scholarship-winner Sarah the exotic beauty of the art school in the north, where the other girls admire the "proud gazelle" and tactlessly parade her for friends and relatives to see. "She was interesting, 'beautiful,' only because they had no idea what made her, charming only because they had no idea from where she came."³⁸ Their fascination stems from curiosity, as they do not know that in Georgia

35. Carson McCullers, "Untitled Piece," *Collected Stories of Carson McCullers* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 80–103, p. 90.

36. McCullers, pp. 98–99.

37. McCullers, pp. 100–1.

38. Walker, "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring," in *You Can't Keep*, 124–137, p. 130.

“she would be another ordinarily attractive *colored* girl”³⁹ and before meeting Sarah they had never talked to a black person. In spite of all the fuss they make around her she feels invisible, like the little girl in a poster, whose face is hidden. Even though this attitude to race is qualitatively different and the African American girl is an embodiment of a stereotype based on preconceptions not on prejudice, her schoolmates are unable to relate to her as if she were a real flesh-and-blood person. From this point of view, Sarah’s position is not much better than poor Uncle Albert’s, the ex-slave’s, who ended up literally as a *stuffed dummy* in the shop window of the plantation owner’s grandson in Walker’s other shocking story, entitled “Elethia.”

Before the integration of schools, few black children had the chance to meet white kids on equal terms in the South and Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” describes an unusual situation: Twyla and Roberta, aged eight, are both taken to a shelter, with an irresponsible and a sick mother in the background, respectively. Realising they are to stay in the same room, the white girl is overwhelmed by negative feelings instilled by her mother’s racist comments: “The minute I walked in and the Big Bozo introduced us, I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, she is touched by Roberta’s tactfulness and the girls become as thick as thieves, called salt and pepper by the other kids, and are also bound by their status in the community: they are the only ones who “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.”⁴¹

The formative experience of the few months spent together is contrasted with short encounters paced at several years’ distance, which enable the reader to follow how their attitudes change. As they grow older, the question of race is more and more intertwined with civil rights and politics, consequently, their meeting during the protests following the integration of schools takes on a hostile tint on Roberta’s part and Twyla takes up the challenge just to prove her friend is wrong. Interestingly, Morrison hit the nail on the head, as their attitude is in line with the findings of surveys conducted in the 1980s: whites tend to view discrimination “as a problem created and maintained by prejudiced individuals,” whereas for blacks it is “a result of

39. Walker, “A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring,” p. 127.

40. Toni Morrison, “Recitatif,” in *The Oxford Book of Women’s Writing in the United States*, eds. L. Wagner-Martin & C. N. Davidson (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 159–175, pp. 159–60.

41. Morrison, p. 160.

both prejudiced individuals and broader social processes."⁴² This short story is also a proof of the different way children think about race and emphasises the importance of personal contact that can modify the prejudiced views of their surroundings. However, the pressure exerted by the family, community and society at large cannot be ignored. The child is father of the man and mother of the woman up to a certain extent, since prejudice and racism are incorporated in a subtle way, sometimes unconsciously, in a process that is rarely under a child's or adolescent's control. Nevertheless, not all the white children and adolescents in the stories respect the 'dividing practices' as an omnipotent regulatory power in the discourse of race, thereby creating new, less rigidly defined subject positions both for themselves and their African-American friends. It is clear that the construction of African-American and white identities is intertwined, and the other Foucauldian disciplinary discourse, namely "the technologies of the self, whereby individuals turn themselves into subjects"⁴³ does not always take the easy way by accepting the ready-made subject positions of racist discourse on either side. Some of the children are able to modify these subject positions when they establish interracial contact on equal terms, while others fight violently for a new articulation of the self, even by eliminating the white male figure who confers the traditional subordinated identities on all the rest of the Southern society.

42. *A Common Destiny*, p. 151.

43. Barker, p. 229.