

# Windowish Practices, Unreadable Backgrounds and Raw Semiotics. Tracing Minor Architectures and Ecologies of Signs in Women's Writing

Prácticas ventaneras, fondos ilegibles y semióticas en bruto. Arquitecturas menores y ecologías de signos en la literatura escrita por mujeres

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## Abstract

Minor architectures can be defined as an open set of spatial practices and know-hows based on the agency of bodies. While these practices escape representation, codification or measurement, they have a fertile relation with literature. After framing this relationship, we analyze the work of three women writers (Carmen Martín Gaité, Ali Smith and Toni Morrison) to unveil them as minor spatial and material practitioners. While they have not been trained as architects many women throughout history have practiced and organized space in meaningful and wise ways, and they have become aware of minor spatial knowledges resting at the core of what architecture can be (and do). By inventing forms of embodied writing and material inscription, they have expanded a minor repertoire of spatial practices.

## Keywords

Alternative Practitioners, Wome's Writing, Repertoire, Body, Affects

## Resumen

Las arquitecturas menores pueden definirse como un conjunto abierto de prácticas y conocimientos espaciales basados en la potencia de los cuerpos. Si bien estas prácticas escapan a la representación, la medida o la codificación, mantienen una fértil relación con la literatura. Tras enmarcar este vínculo, analizamos la obra de tres escritoras (Carmen Martín Gaité, Ali Smith y Toni Morrison) para presentarlas como agentes de unas prácticas materiales y espaciales menores. Sin recibir formación como arquitectas, muchas mujeres a lo largo de la historia han practicado y organizado el espacio de forma sabia y significativa, tomando conciencia de ciertos saberes menores sobre el espacio que están en el núcleo de lo que la arquitectura puede ser (y hacer). Al inventar formas de escritura e inscripción material y encarnada, han ampliado el repertorio menor de prácticas espaciales.

## Palabras Clave

Profesionales alternativos, Escritura de mujeres, Repertorio, Cuerpo, Afectos

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“I don’t read female writers.” Thus said a student colleague in architecture school.<sup>1</sup> A year later, another one saw me reading a novel: “Do you read fiction during the academic year?” For me, fiction was an inexhaustible source of embodied spatial knowledge missing in our courses. The works of Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité (who elicited the opening statement) and other women and BIPOC authors pointed towards an alternative spatial efficiency at the core of what a body could do, and consequently at the core of what architecture could be. They shone against the bombastic discourses and flashy visual discourses of the hegemonic magazines we were supposed to be reading instead. Through forms of embodied writing and material inscription these authors had developed alternative architectural tools expanding the available repertoire of spatial practices.

### Minor Architectures, Literature and Affective Images. Other-wise Repertoires, Speculative Tactics and Raw Semiotics

Minor architectures can be defined as an open set of spatial practices and know-hows based on the immanent differentiating agency of bodies (or their inexhaustible power of variation). As such, these practices feed on the circumstantial and experimental, operating in the narrow margins and blind spots of major languages, structures and knowledges; unsettling them. While minor architectures work with and within materially limited spaces, tools and conditions, they manage to bring forth *affective amplitude*: they enlarge the world through forms of plural material entanglement, contemplating how every actual is always surrounded by a fog of virtual images, interfering, changing and reacting on the former.

Minor architectures derive from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work on Kafka’s *minor literature*.<sup>2</sup> In architectural theory, the notion has been developed by Jennifer Bloomer and Jill Stoner. For Bloomer, transferring the minor to architecture meant foregrounding a material quality to the three key characteristics Deleuze and Guattari had described for the minor: it is always political, in the sense that life is always at stake; it expresses collective assemblages; and it is produced by a minority operating within a major language. Meanwhile, Jill Stoner built on those premises by unsettling four architectural myths: the myth of the interior, linked to deterritorialization; the myth of the object, linked to politicization; the myth of the subject, attached to the question of collective enunciation; and the myth of nature, which allowed her to bring back the movement of reterritorialization.

However, to grasp the potentialities of the minor we need to go beyond the explicit use of this term. These practices have reoccurred throughout history without being conceptualized as such. Resisting representation and codification, they have often been excluded from the discipline, surviving and operating through forms of embodied, tacit, and oral knowledges,<sup>3</sup> and retaining an extraordinarily rich relation with literature. Jill Stoner points out how “fiction offers nonvisual images of space that the camera cannot reach, and temporal/spatial enactments that lie outside the conventions of architectural representation”.<sup>4</sup> Bloomer herself writes that “one of the tasks of minor architecture is to operate critically upon the dominance of the visual—the image—as a mode of perceiving and understanding architecture”.<sup>5</sup> Literature operates with a form of *affective image* that goes beyond the retinal to touch the whole body. Following Baruch Spinoza, we can define these images as those affections of the human body representing to us external bodies as if they were present, without actually reproducing their external figures.<sup>6</sup> These affective images contemplate the real as both actual and virtual, meaning that localized and fixed entities always coexist with a surrounding fog of minor modes of existences—memories, ghosts, futurities, potentials...—, which David Lapoujade describes as beginnings or drafts, filled with “architectural promises”. These affective images

1 Something still happening often, men are “disproportionately unlikely even to open a book by a woman.” “Why do so few men read books by women?”, The Guardian, 9 July 2021, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/09/why-do-so-few-men-read-books-by-women>,

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986).

3 See Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, and Deborah van der Plaats, *Speaking of Buildings Oral History in Architectural Research* (New York, N.Y: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019); Lara Schrijver, *The Tacit Dimension: Architecture Knowledge and Scientific Research* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021); and Julien Lafontaine Carboni, “Undrawn Spatialities. The Architectural Archives in the Light of the History of the Sahrawi Refugee Camps”, *Architecture and Culture* 9, n° 3 (3 July 2021): 505–22.

4 Jill Stoner, *Toward a Minor Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 11–12.

5 Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (s)Crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995), 174.

6 Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2p17s.

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extend the affective (and thus spatial) reach of bodies within the margins where the minor operates.

George Eliot, herself a careful reader of Spinoza, expanded his definition of the image and imagination by linking it with fiction, which she defined as “a set of experiments in life”,<sup>7</sup> encouraging a sympathetic attention to the world capable of revealing signs and ecologies that escape casual or *uncaring* observation. Fiction can work then as testing ground for a speculative practice. Literature can offer sketches of different worlds, not through utopian visual representations that operate as idealist models imposed onto the world, but as affective images. María Puig de la Bellacasa calls these, *touching visions*, and analyses their inherent relation to care, reciprocity and an ethical attention to futurities.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this speculative dimension and the expansion of a body's affective agency and repertoire, there is a third quality to consider: fiction's *scriptive* character. Klaske Havik links the action of *scribere*, the writer's core activity, with architecture as a “scripting” practice,<sup>9</sup> demanding from us to expand our definition of architectural inscription and semiotics. Bloomer considered writing as “(s)cript”, to introduce a “writing that is other than transparent, a writing that is illegible in the conventional sense.”<sup>10</sup> With this, Bloomer signaled towards a (partial) detachment from existing architectural semiotics, avoiding disciplinary codes and the weight of pre-established meanings by conveying to inscriptions a material efficiency. Denise Ferreira da Silva has gone further reclaiming attention to materials “in the raw”, considering them for what they do and how they do it, rather than for what they mean within abstract codes and conventions defined by (imperialist) rationalizations.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, affective images create and work through the raw traces of bodies' encounters with the world, producing an *other-wise* raw semiotics, orienting the body and articulating its worldliness.<sup>12</sup> Minor architectures can thus be conceived as operating in the raw with ecologies of signs, material traces of the world understood as an entangled continuum.

Finally, Hélène Frichot's consideration of ‘the *scripting* woman/architect’ can help us frame these raw semiotics further. For her, writing is a material act, and even reading is conceived as a form of inscription, “since you read with your body, your body paragraphs”.<sup>13</sup> Caring and involved attention leaves its traces in the world it tends to, receiving in turn their effects: “the material responds to the touch of writing, (...) the material pushes back, resists, or meets you on your way forward, or else profoundly conjoins in this act of writing-creating”.<sup>14</sup>

For minor voices like those belonging to women or to BIPOC communities, this act of writing, inscribing, and participating in the commons is not a given, demanding a right to write and trace. Many women throughout history have practiced and organized space through these ecologies of signs, even if not trained as architects. They have become aware of minor spatial knowledges resting at the core of what architecture can be (and do). Departing from this unique relation between minor architectures and literature, with *affective images* at its core, we seek to analyze the work of three woman writers to frame the ways and means by which they have exercised their right to write and trace the world, bringing affective amplitude within limited spaces, extending a repertoire of minor material practices, performing speculative experiments in life and exploring semiotic practices in non-standard ways.

### Carmen Martín Gaité and the Windowish Woman. Stammering Drawings, Upside-down Worlds, and Assembling “Back Rooms”

In 1987, Carmen Martín Gaité published *Desde la ventana*, a collection of short texts on women's writing. She used the role of the window to understand women's right

7 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), Vol. 6, 216, quoted in Moira Gatens, “The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot”, *Philosophy and Literature* 33, no. 1 (2009), 80.

8 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of care. Speculative ethics in more than human worlds* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota, 2017), 95-122.

9 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: Nai010 Publishers, 2014), 20.

10 Bloomer, 11

11 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “In the raw”, *e-flux* #93, September 2018.

12 We follow Ezekiel Dixon-Román in his use of *other-wise* to acknowledge for the onto-epistemologies of the Other. See Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar, “Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance”, *e-flux* #123, December 2021.

13 Hélène Cixous quoted in Frichot, 313n12.

14 Frichot, 317.

to write *and* the material means towards that right: a *raw right to write*. Confronted to “restless women”, religious and domestic guardians throughout history “could only think of closing windows, never of opening them”,<sup>15</sup> and so came up with the Spanish adjective “ventanera”, something like *windowish*. Only ever applied to women, it sought to censor and condemn their behavior. The woman who came to the window came to chat (more than she should), to show herself (in an unacceptable way), and to get lost (in a moral damning way).

To survive, women needed to see otherwise, to acknowledge and work through the entanglement of self and world by other means. The window operated as both gravitating point within the ecology of the house—“my mother always had the habit of bringing the table where she read or sewed close to the window, and that spot in the living room was the anchor, the centre of the house”—, and as the optimal place to be part of an outside that was unreachable otherwise. As such, “the window is the point of reference for dreaming from within the world outside, it is the bridge between the shores of the known and the unknown, the only gap through which the eyes can fly, in search of other light and other profiles than those of the interior”. However, the window was not just a frame for speculating about other worlds and lives, it was also a device for bringing in and recognize the affective materiality of the world, opening spatial and material knowledges unavailable elsewhere. The *windowish woman* found(ed) a minor position to assure affective amplitude and the possibility to act and weave, as a form of inscription, inside and outside. While the *windowish* woman is aware of the precise and concrete limits, lines and localizations enclosing her, she learns nonetheless to practice those boundaries differently, reading and grasping the material operations they afforded, the ecologies of signs they created, and the (potential) scope of her body’s material agency within.

The desire of the *windowish* woman “to escape from reality and disobey its strict laws”,<sup>16</sup> that is, to *make room* for other material and affective modes of existence, is at the core of one of Martín Gaité’s masterpieces, 1978’s *El cuarto de atrás* (The back room). There, a writer (mirroring herself) receives the unexpected visit of a man dressed in black coming, apparently, for an interview. Throughout the night different spaces and temporalities of the writer’s life intertwine in memory and talk, virtuality and actuality brought together.

A painting on the wall presides the encounter, “The World Upside Down”. It is made of forty-eight rectangles depicting absurd scenes, “such as a man with a scythe in his hand threatening death, which flees in fear, (...) and the sun and the moon embedded in the earth under a sky full of buildings”.<sup>17</sup> This admiration for such a world is already present in the book dedication—“for Lewis Carroll, who still comforts us from so much sanity and welcomes us into his upside-down world”. This upside-down world holds both the actual and all the minor modes of existence that surround it: dreams, virtuals, fictional places and characters, memories, ghosts... And the material practices—literature, architecture or merely living—, demanded by this kind of world resist abstract logics and laws: “strange things are happening all the time. The mistake is that we insist on applying to them the law of universal gravitation, (...) or any other law which we usually obey without question; it is hard for us to admit that they have their own law, (...) what irritates us is that it escapes us, that we can’t codify it”.<sup>18</sup>

15 Carmen Martín Gaité, *Desde la ventana* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1987), 48.

16 Martín Gaité, 61.

17 Carmen Martín Gaité, *El cuarto de atrás* (Madrid: Siruela, 2020), 24.

18 Martín Gaité, *Cuarto de atrás*, 77.

Minor existences, and their behavior, cannot be easily described nor drawn, we must work with their traces and fleeting inscriptions, with and through the ever-changing ecologies of signs they produce. Not by chance, the role of the imperfect drawing, the trace in the sand, or the brief scribbling in loose papers appear repeatedly throughout the novel: “Not long ago, when I was talking to her about how houses nowadays have little mystery and all the living rooms look the same, the subject of

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old houses came up and I asked her to draw me a plan of the one in Cáceres; At first, it seemed like a silly whim and she began to indulge me without much pleasure, but then, as the drawing of each room gave rise to fitting errors, she became enchanted and went to look for graph paper to try to solve them, until in the end, we were both so interested that we forgot to set the table for lunch...".<sup>19</sup>

These stammering drawings produce new realities, intensifying the “architectural promises” the minor modes of existence bring forth. The inherent semiotics of such a world transform writing from the crafting of words into a world-making tracing and collective activity. In *La mujer ventanera*, Carmen Martín Gaité notices many women writers feel as “intruders in the craft of writing”,<sup>20</sup> leading to a certain indecision where writing “struggles in a stammering manner”, exploring “the paths as she treads it, without any theory or preconceived plan”. This experimental, intruding and careful writing probes the environment with attention, becoming like “the draft of a letter, with its crossings out, its backtracking and its casual connections”.<sup>21</sup> Aware of one’s own vulnerability, the writer follows the diverse and multi-layered pushing back of the material world to work through it, involving it into the emerging ecologies of signs the writing/tracing act produces. The fleeting traces in the sand or in the white page aren’t different, just material encounters demanding to be considered in the raw.

By working with these minor inscriptions, we can invent spatial devices and perform alternative spatial articulations of material assemblages (and the minor existences surrounding them). We see this in Martín Gaité’s relation to things (“enseres”), always lively essential actors of new material constellations. They are witnesses and ancestors. They help *thread* and organize the environment of our material experiences: “I would like to talk to the man in black about the narrative vehicle that furniture is, to give him all the images that, in this time, have appeared to me between the cabinet and the mirror.”<sup>22</sup> There’s always an element, either a thing or a place, able to assemble, even if momentarily, the affective and material reach of these constellations. The cabinet, the window, or in this novel, the *back room*—a space of freedom in her childhood home that keeps reappearing to join times and spaces—, work as intensifiers: threading devices able to grasp the fleeting but meaningful ecologies of signs and make them participate in the production of new material spatialities.

### Ali Smith and the Unreadable: Caring (In)Attentions, Entangled Continuums and Fuzzy Backgrounds

This minor threading of upside-down worlds demands care, a form of entangled attention and disposition towards our worldliness. As Spinoza wrote, we cannot think of ourselves as an *imperium in imperio*, that is, as isolated and detached from the world. We are inherently involved in the world and thus affected and touched (traced) by it while affecting it (tracing it) ourselves. With the work of Scottish writer Ali Smith, we see how caring (in)attention might qualify this entanglement and render it available to minor practices without compromising its complexity.

*How to be both*, Smith’s 2014 novel has two parts: part One and part One. One of them has at its starting page a two eyed plant, the other, a surveillance camera. (Figure 01) Depending on what book you happen to get you will read first one or the other, half of its print runs goes in one order, the other in the opposite. The reading experience varies accordingly, one side of the story will arrive first, the other, afterwards, “because if things really did happen simultaneously it’d be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it *unreadable*”.<sup>23</sup> Smith creates textual devices to navigate through the messiness of a world

19 Martín Gaité, *Cuarto de atrás*, 68.

20 Martín Gaité, *Cuarto de atrás*, 62.

21 Martín Gaité, *Cuarto de atrás*, 73.

22 Martín Gaité, *Cuarto de atrás*, 73.

23 Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 10, our emphasis.

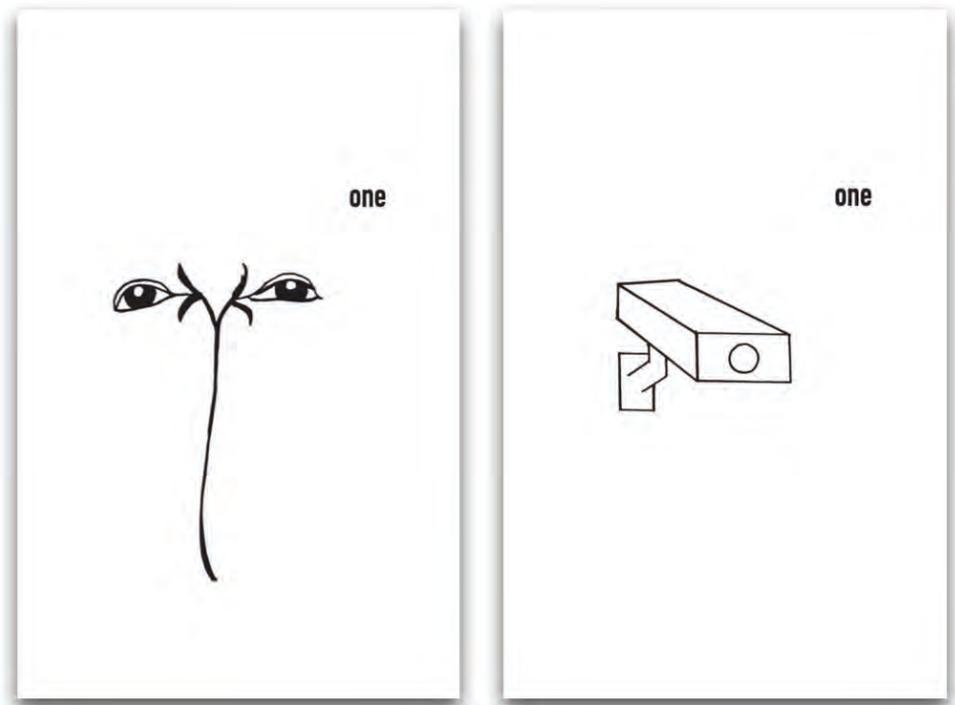


Figure 1. Front pages of the two Part Ones of Ali Smith's *How to be both* (2014). The one on the left is a sketched detail from Francesco del Cossa's *Saint Lucy* (c. 1473/1474).

made up of *both* actual and virtual modes of existence. These devices thread a *text/tissue*—sharing an etymological root with architecture's *-ecture*—, allowing for readable (thus, tracing and traceable) continuities. The challenges of simultaneity reappear often in Smith, a concern linked to the opening drawings, expression of two different practices of (in)attention: a caring attention versus a controlling attention, one that *reads and works with* and through ambiguities and simultaneities to understand them entangled, the other organized around accountability, measurement and identification, drawing positions, names, and limits while short-circuiting and fragmenting continuities.

The story of the novel is simple. On the one hand, there's a teenager called George whose mother has recently died. We are introduced to her life before and after this event as she works through her isolating sadness and back onto the world through the experience of caring attention and the creative acceptance of our inevitable entanglement with the world. On the other hand, there's a Renaissance fresco painter, Francesco del Cossa, and her care for the idiosyncratic movement of the *background* as expression of the liveliness of that entanglement.<sup>24</sup> At one point, George visits with her mother del Cossa's frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia at Ferrara. As she enters the room she notices how "it is impossible to see [the picture] all at once. Half the room is covered in it. The other half has faded picture, or no picture. What there is, though, is so full of life happening that it's actually like life, at least those bits are at the far end".<sup>25</sup> Because of that impossibility to capture everything at once, George takes an alternative path focusing on one small detail, and realizing that "this is only one [and] there are details like it everywhere".<sup>26</sup> A list of things being "here" and "there" ensues, followed by the description of this landscape: "It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, and behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. Then there are the separate details, like that man with the duck. They're all also happening on their own terms. The picture makes you look at both – the close-up happenings and the bigger picture".<sup>27</sup>

24 The story in the novel reveals this historical painter as a woman whose ability to draw made her father conceive that trick to help her gain independence. In George's side of the novel, we discover there's almost no information on him/her, just a few works and a letter. Thus, we become aware of this side of the novel being one of George Eliot's "experiments in life".

25 Smith, 49.

26 Smith, 50.

27 Smith, 53.

All elements are absorbed by an entangled background, expression of the material fuzziness of the world, an essential disquiet of matter that resists measurement and control. It doesn't result in a visual representation but in an affective image engulf-

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fining and touching the body in many and simultaneous ways. The image, seeking to work affectively, not just visually, touches your body, interferes in the body's disposition within and towards the world: *It makes you look at both.*

Continuity defines affective images, they aren't collections of fragments, but entangled continuums or woven ecologies: "all we are is eyes looking for the unbroken or the edges where the broken bits might fit each other", del Cossa says.<sup>28</sup> These edges tell us of an haptic mutuality (and reciprocity), where "beauty in its most completeness is never found in a single body but is something shared instead between more than one body".<sup>29</sup> We can echo here Denise Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics, where the goal is not just composition, but common acknowledgement of all the minor modes of existence and their emerging qualities to nurture their mutual (re)composition. Each bit leaves traces and is traced by the contact with others, so they are only defined through their involvement in that common encounter.<sup>30</sup> Therein, attention threads ecologies of signs both ethically and poetically, rendering them readable while sustaining their complexity, it holds and offers to new encounters the fuzzy, nonlocal, unbounded continuities of an entangled continuum that produces new spatialities.

While this attention is represented by Francesco del Cossa's two-eyed plant, the other part starts with the sketch of a surveillance camera. This black-boxed eye is the expression of another disposition towards the background. This form of attention is intent on fixing signs to meanings according to external causes and codes, and not to their raw signifying: an uncaring (in)attention characteristic of control and quantitative measurement. While her mother is alive, George is constantly correcting her mother's grammar, discouraged at the way the world around her talks and uses the English language: "At least they've used an apostrophe, the George from before her mother died says. I do not give a fuck about whether some site on the internet attends to grammatical correctness, the George from after says."<sup>31</sup> This form of attention is based on the modern scientific idea of separability and discretization, an ideological blindness promising to take apart the unreadable and build it anew, easily searchable. This illusion short-circuits the entangled continuum, effectively negating matter's haptic mutuality and reciprocity in favor of its formal measures.<sup>32</sup> As this discretization increasingly defines the major languages of spatial production through computation and every raw sign is transformed into data, the threading quality of caring attention becomes a key element for the minor repertoire.

### Toni Morrison and Raw Semiotics. Incomputable Indexes, Embodied Knowledge and Asserted Vulnerability

Updated versions of colonial and racial subjugation's racial grammars, one of the most violent effects of modern epistemology's work on difference through separability, are present in the forms of environmentality and control the aforementioned discretization processes enact today. Throughout her work, Ferreira da Silva has shown how the formalized semiotics of calculation, measurement and computation arrest within and short-circuit Blackness creative potential, just as the difference an African body carried along in the Modern era was enclosed and sold in the figure of the slave. Against this semiotics she advances the aforementioned Black Feminist Poethics, "a moment of radical praxis [acknowledging] the creative capacity Blackness *indexes*, [reclaiming] expropriated total value, and [demanding] for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives." These *indexes* don't name, determine or classify the material world within a major code, on the contrary, they are incomputable. They operate as "guides for the imagination", traces capable of reorganizing semiotic ecologies otherwise.

28 Smith, 245.

29 Smith, 276.

30 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The quest (ion) of Blackness toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 81-97.

31 Smith, 5.

32 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On difference without separability." *Catalogue of the 32a São Paulo Art Biennial, 'Incerteza viva' (Living Uncertainty)* (2016), pp 57-65.

In this final section, we will look at Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, where she reclaimed the power of embodied knowledge, oral transmission and raw signs to escape racial semiotics and produce other-wise worlds. The novel turns around Macon "Milkman" Dead and the constellation of ghosts, kinship and affects surrounding him (again, the acknowledgment of a plethora of minor modes of existence surrounding life). In this novel, Morrison framed the tensions between the written word, used by white power to reproduce and sustain racial subjugation's enclosures and extractivism, and a raw embodied semiotics, present in forms of oral and hieroglyphic expression filled with affective, ghostly and material interferences.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon described how a colonizing language shapes the experience and behavior of the racialized individual. Using a certain syntax and grasping the morphology of the colonizing language, "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization," and so, "the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come *closer to being a real human being*—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language".<sup>33</sup> Morrison captures the use of this (allegedly) shared logos to modulate lived experience in the story of the Not Doctor street, where Milkman lives with his family: "...town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue, but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896 his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street. (...) Then in 1918, when colored men were being drafted, a few gave their address at the recruitment office as Doctor Street. In that way, the name acquired a quasi-official status. But not for long. Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that "Doctor Street" was never used in any official capacity. (...) they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue (...) had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street..."<sup>34</sup>

This alternative naming becomes an act of resistance against the efforts to racially shape the affective images threading a lived landscape through language (only neutral to the ones able to impose it). It also creates an other-wise way of coming based on shared affective entanglements and the raw signifying of their signs (cf. the humour in the street's final baptizing). Zora Neale Hurston had already pointed out to these practiced, raw and embodied semiotics, when she wrote in 1934 that if "the white man thinks in written language, (...) the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics".<sup>35</sup> In the novel, Macon Dead I selects her daughter's name, Pilate, for how it looks and feels in the Bible he is offered. Through this sensory approach to signs, he negates the conventional meaning he has been excluded from, creating anew other semiotics where signs matter because of how they relate and affect his body and the minor modes of existence surrounding it. Among them, Hortense Spillers' "hieroglyphics of the flesh", the markings of slavery that keep resounding throughout time asking for decolonization.

At the core of the story, we find the *flying Africans*. This legend, and affective image, has taken many different forms throughout history, especially in oral narratives and songs. The flying Africans knew how to fly like birds, the story goes, and so when violently taken over the Atlantic and slaved, they were granted this ability to flee their captors. As an affective image, it extended a body's landscapes of possibility, allowing it to breath. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman will start a journey out of written and accepted norms and enclosures —those that from his childhood made him acknowledge with sadness that he would never be able to fly—, and into a thriving

33 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 8.

34 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 18-19, our emphasis.

35 Quoted in Joyce Irene Middleton, "Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", *College English* 55, n° 1 (1993), 66.

Mujeres, prácticas feministas  
y profesionales alternativos  
en la arquitectura  
Women, Feminist Practices and  
Alternative Practitioners in Architecture

#### LUCÍA JALÓN OYARZUN

Windowish Practices, Unreadable  
Backgrounds and Raw Semiotics.  
Tracing Minor Architectures and  
Ecologies of Signs in Women's Writing

Prácticas ventaneras, fondos ilegibles  
y semióticas en bruto. Arquitecturas  
menores y ecologías de signos  
en la literatura escrita por mujeres

shared earth where the story of his own name and community will lead him to realize he actually can.

On that long path, he arrives to the city of *Shalimar*, although he was looking for one called *Charlemagne*. There, he'll discover *Solomon*, the flying African whose name he heard first in a song as *Sugarman*. While the aural presents to a receptive body the echoes between the four different names, in writing this relation remains hidden. Milkman learns to listen otherwise, through a form of embodied awareness. As he listens to some kids singing and dancing, his "scalp begins to tingle", the words mean something he wants to retain. He looks for something to write them on, but ends up realizing he needs to commit them to his memory, to inscribe all those signs, the words, the sounds, the whirling and spinning of the children, into his own body to create the affective image that will open the hidden dimensions of it all: "He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang".<sup>36</sup>

By rendering his body available (and thus vulnerable) to the world, by "listen(ing) with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say",<sup>37</sup> and enacting a plural memory in his worlding flesh, he learns to listen, and, finally, to fly. Asserting his own vulnerability, he acknowledges the impossibility of detaching himself from the world, and thus builds on, and cares for, that affective entanglement: "some cord or pulse or information they shared".<sup>38</sup> New elements for a minor repertoire emerge: the ability to turn the flesh into an operative map, beholder of those signs and their raw meanings and possibilities.

### Spatial and Material Practitioners

This raw semiotics orient a minor spatial practice invested in material entanglement and the threading of continuities rather than the production of isolated objects and enclosures. A practice focused on the understanding, (re)composition and modulation of ecologies of signs as a form of navigating, articulating and practicing space from an affective perspective. This text has sought to establish the role that women's writing can play in our exploration and expansion of these practices' repertoires, offering new tools and frameworks for architecture. Minor architectures, as an open set of spatial practices and know-hows based on the agency of bodies and working with both the actual and virtual dimensions of reality, share a common ground with literature in *affective images*. Beyond representation, these contemplate how the actual and the virtual touch and trace the body, expanding its affective (and thus spatial) reach. Furthermore, they nurture a tacit repertoire, held and inscribed within individual and collective bodies. Consequently, fiction's affective images allow for a different kind of speculative practice, where spatial futurities operate beyond the modern (and retinal) forms of architectural projection. Additionally, architecture and literature's shared scriptive quality pave the way for the other-wise material semiotics we have articulated through the work of three women writers presented as minor spatial and material practitioners.

Lacking architectural training, many women have nonetheless practiced and organized space attending to these ecologies of signs and their affective qualities. The role a minor position can play to assure affective amplitude while practicing boundaries differently; the stammering drawings and scribbles, along with material devices like the *back room*, working as intensifiers to produce new spatialities; caring (in)attentions' ability to render the unreadable fog of virtual images surrounding the actual available without negating its complexity; the assertion of one's own vulnerability to unveil the radical openness of a raw world-making practice... These are

<sup>36</sup> Morrison, 464.

<sup>37</sup> Morrison, 428.

<sup>38</sup> Morrison, 449.

meaningful tools and non-disciplinary spatial practices crucial to consider women's role throughout history in architecture and other spatial practices, as well as for the nurturing of a silent, but always ongoing, practice of minor architectures.

## Figure Source

Figure 1. Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*. London: Penguin Books, 2014. Front pages.

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