

BEYOND LITERATURE: TONI MORRISON'S MUSICAL AND VISUAL LEGACY FOR BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS*

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA LITERATURA: EL LEGADO MUSICAL Y VISUAL DE TONI MORRISON PARA LAS ARTISTAS NEGRAS

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze Toni Morrison's understudied influence on music and visual art. In 1994 she established the Atelier Program in Princeton University as an interdisciplinary arts program that supported and nurtured multifaceted collaborations between artists and students from different disciplines. Moreover, her oeuvre shows her craft in a number of literary and artistic spheres that include writing novels, short stories, children's books, literary criticism, song cycles and the script for a musical and a play. Keeping in mind Morrison's multidimensional engagement with literature and the other arts, the first half of the article delves into the contemporary musical responses to the writer, placing special emphasis on black women musicians such as rapper Akua Naru, neo-soul vocalist India Arie, and singer and songwriter Janelle Monáe. Morrison's intersectional representations of gender and race relations across the

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history of the U.S. have similarly inspired visual artists. The second half of the article explores the visual creations by U.S. black women artists Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson and Amy Sherald. Morrison's manifold articulations of blackness and womanhood similarly resonate on the other side of the Atlantic through the work of Lubaina Himid, the first black British artist to win the prestigious Turner Prize in 2017.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; music; visual art; interdisciplinarity; black women; intersectionality.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la influencia de Toni Morrison en la música y las artes visuales, hasta ahora poco estudiada. En 1994, Morrison fundó el Atelier en la Universidad de Princeton, un programa interdisciplinar para apoyar las artes y fomentar colaboraciones entre artistas y estudiantes de distintas disciplinas. Asimismo, Morrison demostró su maestría en géneros literarios y artísticos muy diversos que incluyen la autoría de novelas, relatos, libros infantiles, crítica literaria, canciones, además de los guiones de un musical y una obra de teatro. Teniendo en cuenta esta relación interdisciplinar de la propia autora con su obra, la primera parte del artículo explora las respuestas musicales a la producción artística de Morrison, con especial énfasis en las mujeres negras; ejemplos de ello son la rapera Akua Naru, la cantante de neo-soul India Arie y la vocalista y compositora Janelle Monáe. La manera en que Morrison representa en su obra la complejidad de las relaciones interseccionales entre el género, la raza y la clase social a lo largo de la historia de Estados Unidos también ha inspirado a artistas visuales. En este sentido, la segunda parte del artículo analiza las creaciones de las artistas afroestadounidenses Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson y Amy Sherald. La forma en que Morrison ha sido capaz de articular la diversidad de identidades afrodescendientes también produce una respuesta creativa al otro lado del Atlántico a través de Lubaina Himid, artista africana afincada en Gran Bretaña y primera mujer negra en ganar el prestigioso Premio Turner en 2017.

Palabras clave: Toni Morrison; música; arte visual; interdisciplinaridad; mujeres negras; interseccionalidad.

1. FROM MUSIC TO VISUAL ART: THE IMPACT OF TONI MORRISON'S INTERDISCIPLINARY OUVRE

Toni Morrison's diverse creations showcase her craft in a number of literary and artistic genres that include novels, short stories, children's books, literary criticism, song cycles, the script for the Broadway musical *New Orleans*

(1982), the theatrical piece *Dreaming Emmet* (1986) and the libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner* (2005). Her writing reflects the influence of other art forms such as blues and jazz, dance, photography and the visual arts, as well as the frequent collaboration with other artists. In this sense, poet Nikki Giovanni claims that you can see the impact of the novelist especially on younger generations, «who have read and re-read» Morrison's works and «hold it [the input], they can handle it back in sculpture, they can handle it in paintings» (Gabbin, 2014, 1:04). The poet stated this in the tribute documentary *Sheer Good Fortune: Celebrating Toni Morrison* (Gabbin, 2014), which also contains musical performances inspired by the Nobel Laureate that I will analyze in the next section. Another recent documentary that delves into Morrison's oeuvre from an interdisciplinary perspective is *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). The artistic film opens with the hands of Mickalene Thomas, a mixed-media artist who literally gathers pieces of Toni Morrison that include emblematic pictures by Greenfield-Sanders and other famous photographers. Thomas arranges them into a shifting video collage that lasts for almost two minutes. Her final portrait of Toni Morrison, completed with pieces of colorful fabric, illustrates the promotional poster of the film and the cover of the DVD.

Regarding the musicality of Morrison's writing, it is important to remember that she has underscored elsewhere her interest in music and how music has unquestionably influenced her work, not only her rhythmic language but also the use of musical themes. Morrison opens her cutting-edge book of essays *Playing in the Dark* (1992) with an ironic reference to the autobiographical novel *The Words to Say It* (1976), by Marie Cardinal, in which the French writer documents her mental instability. Cardinal attributes her first anxiety attack to a Louis Armstrong's live concert she attended, triggered by the sounds of the trumpet. For Morrison, this visceral rejection is symbolic of what jazz and black people stand for in the white imagination, encouraging her to explore «the symbolic figuration of blackness» in literature written by non-black writers (1992a, p. ix). In conversation with Paul Gilroy, Morrison highlights the central meanings of music and art for black people in the United States:

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art, above all in the music. That was functional... My parallel is always the music, because all of the strategies of the art are there [...] All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you've never touched it. Music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and it embraces. The literature ought to do the same thing. I've been very deliberate about that [...] I don't imitate it [music], but I'm informed by it. Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing—certain kinds of repetition—its profound simplicity. (1993, p. 182)

This quote provides the key elements that I highlight in my analysis of the place of music in Toni Morrison's novels through the use of repetition, improvisation and the musical quality of her language. In my book, *Sonidos de la diáspora. Blues y jazz en Toni Morrison, Alice Walker y Gayl Jones* (2015), I focused specifically on *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* but, with Morrison, the musicality of her language is everywhere, even in her groundbreaking lectures and essays. She restores the oral quality of language to create what she calls an «aural literature» (Davis, 1988, p. 148). The influence of music in her writing has been the focus of a number of studies; see for example Rice (2012), Eckstein (2006), and Scheiber (2006).

One noteworthy project in her career was editing *The Black Book* (1974), a collection of 18th and 19th century black memorabilia woven into a complex documentation of the African American experience in the United States¹. This visual and archival treasure includes sheet music for work songs and freedom chants; antebellum reward posters for capturing runaway slaves; photographs of quilts woven by slaves and pictures of the «colored troops» liberating slaves during the civil war, among other historical and cultural materials that comprise a rich collage of images and testimonies. Morrison wrote a lyrical preface that encapsulates the relevance of this interdisciplinary project, which begins with the following lines:

1. Then a Random House editor, Toni Morrison spent months studying with prominent collectors Morris Levitt, Robert Furman and Ernest Smith. While researching for this project, she discovered a newspaper item that documented the actual incident that inspired her novel *Beloved* (1987).

I am *The Black Book*.

Between my top and my bottom, my right and my left, I hold what I have seen, what I have done, and what I have thought. I am everything I have hated: labor without harvest; death without honor; life without land or law. I am a black woman holding a white child in her arms singing to her own baby lying unattended in the grass. (2019, p. 1)

The preface ends praising the music she has always cherished: «I am the sound of my voice singing ‘Sangaree’. I am ring-shouts, and blues, ragtime and gospels» (Morrison, 2019, p.1).

Toni Morrison's musical collaborations began in 1992, when The Carnegie Hall Corporation commissioned her and composer André Previn to create *Honey and Rue* specifically for the soprano Kathleen Battle (Previn and Morrison, 1995). The score contained six songs and was later recorded in 1995. This would be the first of many other interdisciplinary collaborations with musicians that include the theatre production *Degga* (1995) with composer and jazz drummer Max Roach and dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones, also the artistic director of the piece; the libretto for *Sweet Talk* (1997) with composer Richard Danielpour; the song cycle for soprano Jessye Norman *woman.life.song* (Weir, 2000), and writing the libretto with Danielpour for the opera *Margaret Garner* (2005), based on her novel *Beloved* (1987). In 2007, when the opera was presented at Lincoln Center in New York City, 42 cut-paper silhouette prints from African American artist Kara Walker's series *Emancipation Approximation and Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* were on display. Since its founding in 1943, it was the first time the New York City Opera organized an exhibition to accompany a production.

In an interview with Pam Houston (2009), Morrison remembers that *Honey and Rue* forged a new creative path beyond novel writing that motivated her to inaugurate the Princeton Atelier in 1994. Under the auspices of this program, she would invite to campus world-class artists of all genres for intensive, collaborative one-semester residencies to work with each other, students, and faculty. Atelier artists have included choreographer Jacques d'Amboise, early music vocal ensemble Anonymous 4, percussionist Evelyn Glenie, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, composer Richard Danielpour, visual artist Irina Nakhova, singer/songwriter Bernice Johnson and opera director Peter Sellars.

The latter describes the Atelier as «an interdisciplinary, intercultural, non-hierarchical and radically open space» (Lewis Center Princeton Arts, 2014, 2:59).

Morrison's personal engagement with the visual arts is also notable. In 2006, she guest-curated at the Louvre a month-long multidisciplinary program entitled «The Foreigner's Home», which focused on «the pain—and rewards—of displacement, immigration and exile» (Smith, 2012, p. 12). In her special exhibition and lecture, Morrison featured Théodore Géricault's 1819 oil painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, which shows desperate sailors struggling to survive after a shipwreck. Morrison finds this image to be the perfect metaphor for those millions who are wandering in search of new homes. As part of the series of events, Morrison also participated in readings, lectures and panels, and invited artists and curators from around the world to explore the themes of migration and displacement. Highlights include an exhibit that paired drawings by Géricault, Charles Le Brun, Georges Seurat and Edgar Degas with films and videos that focused on the body, such as the installation entitled «Foreign Bodies». In the latter, the German artist Peter Welz produced an installation in which U.S. choreographer William Forsythe, with graphite attached to his hands and feet, performed on a large sheet of white paper and drew while dancing at the same time. In order to more fully explore the aforementioned interdisciplinary engagement of Toni Morrison with literature and the other arts, I propose to examine the musical responses to her oeuvre by contemporary women singers and composers. Secondly, I analyze some of the most noteworthy visual creations that Morrison's work has inspired.

2. TONI MORRISON'S INFLUENCE ON BLACK WOMEN MUSICIANS

One remarkable example of the productive cross-cultural collaborations at the Princeton Atelier that Toni Morrison founded belongs to the Igbo Nigerian artists Mendi and Keith Obadike, in residence in 2005. Inspired by Amos Tutuola's 1954 novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and Toru Iwatani's influential 1980s video game Pac Man, they developed the «opera-masquerade»

*Four Electric Ghosts*². The multimedia performance followed the afterlives of four ghosts who separately encounter the same mortal in their journey through the Land of the Dead. The story is told through dance, narration, and original music. In 2010, these artists created «The Good Hand (for Toni Morrison)», a song written and performed in the style of a folk ballad inspired by Morrison's magisterial 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature. The lyrics were included in Carmen Gillespie's edited book *Toni Morrison: Forty Years in The Clearing* (2012)³.

Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance was eloquently delivered in the form of a fable about the power and vitality of language: «We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* [emphasis added] language. That may be the measure of our lives» (1995, p. 321). In the allegory, a group of children, who claim they are holding a bird in their hands, visit a blind African American woman, the daughter of a slave. The wise griot engages the curious kids in the act of storytelling, using language creatively. The bird is the symbol of language, which flies free to build knowledge, but is also subject to human's agency and whims: «Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas» (1995, p. 320). In Obadike's «The Good Hand», «what's held is not just a bird / It could be the charged and necessary word / Calling us to fly» (2012, p. 266). The song identifies «the blind sage» with Toni Morrison's «good hand» and «brilliant soul» (Obadike and Obadike, 2012, pp. 266-267). In the Nobel Laureate's fable, the old blind woman lives outside of town, where the black community has been historically relegated, at the margins. The inquiring children, like attentive readers, ask the old sage the following questions:

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man.
What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be
set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that
cannot bear your company. (1995, p. 323)

2. Since 1996, the poet Mendi Obadike and musician Keith Obadike produce what they call «opera-masquerades», which are works that deal with myth, music and theatrical performance. See their productions at <http://blacksoundart.com/#/opera/>

3. The song was released in 2012 on Mendi and Keith Obadike's YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyvp4Gu_WA&ab_channel=ObadikeStudio

This active participation of readers in the act of creation, which is intimate but also collective, is precisely what Morrison ultimately seeks with her writing and her suggestive imagery.

The work of Akua Naru—U.S. hip-hop artist and activist of Ghanaian descent based in Germany—frequently invokes black women's lived experiences and creative history. She accurately refers to how Morrison taught African Americans that «we are going to do this work at the margins, and you are all going to come and gather at the margins like it's the center» (Naru, 2018). Naru also paid direct tribute to Morrison in her third studio album, *The Miner's Canary* (2015), a stylish blend of hip-hop, soul, jazz and blues. The title of the album symbolically connects the traditional use of canaries in coal mines with the historical position of African Americans. Miners would take caged canaries down into the pit because they are more sensitive to toxic gases than humans. If the canary died, the miners knew there were dangerous gases present and would leave the mine, which points to how birds were sacrificed, much in the same manner the lives of black people have been disposable in the United States.

The song entitled «Toni Morrison» begins with the singer trying to decide which of Morrison's novel is her favorite: *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* or *A Mercy*. Naru also engages with the symbology of the bird; this time the central metaphor of the album is a canary, whose beauty permeates through its entrapment⁴. The cover, a painting by artist Tamara Natalia Madden, represents Naru holding a classic cardioid ribbon microphone as if it were a walking stick. In her left hand, she holds an African ancestral spear. On her right shoulder, beside the microphone, perches a yellow canary. She is wearing a colorful shirt, in the form of a quilt. These elements have all a direct reference to African American legacy, whose history and voice have often been silenced. The singer defiantly declares in this sense her intention to «provide a body of knowledge» through her music and «honor her mothers' mothers' voices» by centralizing black women's

4. For an insightful study about the bird imagery in Toni Morrison's novels, see Susana Vega González (2000). She argues that Morrison's powerful use of birds in all her novels is often disruptive and unconventional. Insanity, hatred, terror, slavery, selfishness, and evil are all conveyed through images of birds like the hawk, the dove, the cardinal, the peacock, the rooster, the hummingbird, and the robin (p. 76).

experiences in her work, an approach she credits to the example of Toni Morrison (Mhako, 2016).

In the musical piece «Toni Morrison», Naru acknowledges Pecola's vulnerability, the girl who had painfully interiorized racism in *The Bluest Eye*. The singer lyrically refers to Pecola's entrapment and how she «brought that bird in the mine» (Naru, 2015). Her own black beauty and that of the bird are obscured by the darkness of the mine and of the girl's self-hatred. Naru's lyrics provide a name and a cause for Pecola's mental instability, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's influential concept of double consciousness: «In that double conscious outlined by Du Bois in his prime / Who heard us cry when the dawn told us black was a crime?» (Naru, 2015)⁵. The perspective is female this time, because Du Bois always illustrated the singularity of double consciousness and its devastating consequences through black male bodies. In the song, *The Souls of Black Folk* becomes the archetypal «prime» for the black community, whereas in *The Bluest Eye*, the «Dick and Jane» school primer embodies the harmful repetition of white middle-class values as the sole representation of exemplary beauty and happiness in 1940s USA: «Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy» (Morrison, 1993, p. 1). In opposition to those harmful standards, Naru claims that in Morrison's novels «Female protagonists, centralized blackness / That *Tar Baby*, that *Jazz* riff that came after» (2015). She further refers in her song to Morrison's most musical narrative, *Jazz* (1992), as a «literary photograph» of the time when the First World War «left us shattered» (2015). Set in 1920s Harlem, the novel depicts the city that hosted floods of working-class African Americans, who migrated from the segregated South and brought a new jazz rhythm: «Up there, in that part

5. In 1903, the African American intellectual and political figure W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the concept of double consciousness in his groundbreaking book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois defines double consciousness as the struggle African Americans face to remain true to black culture, while at the same time conforming to the dominant white society. Du Bois writes: «It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder» (Du Bois, 2007, p. 8).

of the City—which is the part they came for—the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record» (Morrison, 1992b, p. 51).

Naru argues that a bird is often kept caged and finds its self-expression «through melody rather than soaring. This analogy is apt for most black bodies, voices and minds that feel marginalized and exploited» (Naru, 2016). In the song under analysis, she frequently employs the imagery of birds and juxtaposes Morrison's multifaceted uses of bird symbolism in her literature: «Mother and daughter bonds, braided and torn /All the chaos, Sula watched the bird from the front yard» (Naru, 2015). These lines refer to Morrison's novel *Sula* in which the protagonist, Sula Pearce, comes back to visit her mother after ten years of wanderings, and «a plague of robins» welcomes her to Medallion, her hometown (1998a, p. 89). From her mother's front porch, she sees that robins are flying and dying all around, which metaphorically represents «an aborted flight» (Vega González, 2000, p. 77). Like the dying and dead robins, Sula tries to find freedom from the strictures of her traditional community, but finally returns to stay. This time, birds do not symbolize freedom but death instead.

Naru closes the musical piece with a meaningful spoken interlude that underscores Morrison's crucial role in making black experiences visible. Her many uses of cultural mythology and rich metaphors craft a kaleidoscopic imagery that reveals, in Naru's musical words:

the uniqueness and the universality of African American life. Toni Morrison is so important because her writing is a visualization into the depth of meaning of the black experience. She uses the rich mythology and metaphors of the African American experience to anchor and enrich her personal imagery in the book. (2015)

Morrison's work, the interlude continues, «heals the disrupted ancestral energies, heals the torn ancestral soul, and reveals the beauty, vigor, pathos, and durability of African American life and culture» (2015). These words bring to mind former Poet Laureate Tracy Smith's designation for Morrison's oeuvre, which she tellingly describes in the obituary she wrote for *The New York Times* as «The Song of America» (2019). Morrison was certainly influenced by black musicians and in her writing she sought to emulate «all of the intricacy, all of the discipline» that she heard in black musical performance

(Gilroy, 1993, p. 181). On certain occasions, she even read from her novels accompanied by live music, such as her thrilling reading from *Jazz* during a performance in Paris with the U.S. jazz drummer Max Roach in 1994 (Lordi, 2019).

The nurturing influence between the writer and musicians was mutual. The neo-soul singer, songwriter and Grammy award-winning India Arie composed the song «Not Afraid of the Dark» after reading *The Bluest Eye* as a college student. In 2012, she played it for Toni Morrison as part of a tribute held at Virginia Tech, hosted by poets Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou and professor Joanne Gabinn⁶. Before the live performance, India Arie explained to the audience that the song instantly emerged after she read the novel which, to her, sounded like a long and rhythmical poem. The original musical piece addresses Pecola's fears, which represent those of black children as a whole. Pecola's desire for blue eyes epitomizes racial self-loathing after having internalized an imposed white canon of beauty. The personal dark place where this vulnerable girl stands dramatizes the devastation of racial contempt.

India Arie begins the song by asking the writer to show her (and Pecola) «the way and I'll follow, no matter how far, deep, dark or hollow, 'cause when I'm with you, I'm not afraid of the dark'» (2014, 17:36). The singer shared the stage with poet Maya Angelou who acknowledged that, after the gripping experience of reading *The Bluest Eye*, she sent a letter to Toni Morrison, whom she had not yet met, to thank her for «seeing me as an African American woman and loving me» (Gabbin, 2014, 3:28). During that same tribute celebration, Mari Evans read an excerpt from the closing lines of *The Bluest Eye* that reveal the fact that Pecola's black community had refused to understand her: «We tried to see her, without looking at her, and never, never went near.

6. The event was recorded and released in the documentary *Sheer Good Fortune: Celebrating Toni Morrison* (Gabbin, 2014), which includes footage from the tribute, as well as supplemental interviews with Morrison's peers and literary heirs. Writers, artists and scholars read passages from Morrison's works: poet Rita Dove from *Song of Solomon*; poet Toi Derricotte from *Sula*; novelist Edwidge Danticat from *Tar Baby*; musician and poet Mari Evans from *The Bluest Eye*; poet Sonia Sanchez from *Paradise*; activist and philosopher Angela Davis from *Desdemona*; and editor Tony Medina from *Home*.

Not because she was absurd or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her» (Gabbin, 2014, 8:09). However, Morrison's dramatic story not only breaks the silence around racial self-contempt, but inspires and guides India Arie, who seems to symbolically offer Pecola her supportive hand: «just take my hand and I'll guide you around the obstacles, nothing is gonna hurt you» (Arie, 2014, 19:05).

India Arie's performance is followed by a rare choral piece that honors the roots of Morrison's declamatory style in African American churches. The Wintergreen Women Writers' Collective sing the opening of the traditional spiritual «I'm a Poor Pilgrim of Sorrow», followed by a collective reading from *Song of Solomon* by each of the thirteen women. This moving performance combines two elements of vital importance: the first is the far-reaching connection between literature and music; the second is the historical significance of the Wintergreen Women Writers' Collective and their celebration of sisterhood among black women. Each year since 1987, twelve to fourteen African American women poets, scholars, fiction writers, essayists, and general readers from the surrounding areas of Virginia and North Carolina have gathered together in the secluded Blue Ridge Mountain haven of Wintergreen, Virginia, for an annual retreat. UNC Charlotte emeritus professor Sandra Govan recalls that the original group of ten women who participated in that first collective retreat, including herself, were Joanne Gabbin, Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Trudier Harris, Daryl Cumber Dance, Opal Moore, Mary T. Harper, Carmen Gillespie, and Catherine Rogers. Govan describes the support system that the retreats meant for them: «We pray and eat together, play and work together, read together, tell stories, and relax together. In a constantly malleable (one or two new women are invited every year) yet essentially consistent community, we annually reaffirm a connection to the spirit within us and to the cords of sisterhood that bind us into a community» (Govan, 2009, p. 219).

The recorded tribute ends with Toni Morrison's eloquent response to the multifaceted live performance played out for her:

I sit here, listening to different voices read words that I wrote many years ago or even recently, giving them the meaning, even a new meaning and a *new sound* [emphasis added]. I cannot tell you how delightful that is to have one's words move like that, through another intelligence, through another

creator's spirit, through another tongue and hear it come back to you in different colors. (2014, 36:00-37:00)

Morrison's rich imagery, complex themes, and lyrical use of language acquire new meanings and new sound through the voices of others. In fact, the idea of a new sound comes to mind when thinking of «Cybersoul» singer, songwriter and actress Janelle Monáe, who acknowledged Morrison's inspiration in the creation of her third concept-based album *Dirty Computer* (2018a), released simultaneously with a forty-eight-minute visual narrative, «emotion picture» (using Monáe's designation, 2018b)⁷. In her official website, Monáe offers a list of books that inspired this album. The title track, «Dirty Computer», was once again inspired by Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* character Pecola Breedlove, whose internalized racial suffering leads her to insanity.

Monáe's LP and the accompanying music video film take place in a world where those who refuse to conform to society's standards are labelled «Dirty Computers», who are not androids like in her previous albums, but human beings. The story follows Jane 57821, one such Dirty Computer who, in opposition to Pecola, decides to live as freely as possible before she is captured and taken to a memory-clearing facility run by a totalitarian government. The act of erasing one's memory acquires wide-ranging implications if we think of the historical place that the preservation of black memory occupies in Toni Morrison's work. The album's opening title track features a collaboration with Beach Boys singer Brian Wilson providing back-up vocals. Monáe explains that Wilson and other collaborators wanted to work on her album as a way of hitting back against the tide of racism and xenophobia that followed former President Trump's election in 2016 (Leigh, 2018). The opening song offers Jane's painful testimony, made after she was forced to adopt the regulating social and racial standards of a dystopian future:

7. Meina Yates-Richard (2021) uses the term «Cybersoul» (p. 36) to define Janelle Monáe's musical blend of neo-soul and synthesized elements with hardcore funk, rock, and pop. Her concept-based albums have garnered both critical acclaim and scholarly attention, especially her use of Afrofuturist aesthetic, sci-fi tropes, and black feminist stances (see Valnes, 2017; Jones, 2018 and Yates-Richard, 2021).

Dirty computer, walk in line.
 If you look closer, you'll recognize
 I'm not that special, I'm broke inside
 Crashing slowly, the bugs are in me. (Monáe, 2018a)

The soon-to-be erased memories create a musical and visual collage of non-conforming experiences that celebrate sexual diversity and black womanhood. The rap «Django Jane» and the evocative song «Pynk» are black feminist anthems; the first commemorates black women's accomplishments and the second places the vagina as a locus of female pleasure and power.

Monaé's 2018 visual album pairs a narrative arc with musical content meant to be watched as a single entity. Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016) is considered by many the most notable example of the genre, largely due to its visual cues and referents that work in conjunction with the project's lyrical storytelling to present a kaleidoscopic vision of black womanhood and self-assertion. Her visual album generates a space in which the singer articulates her Southern Creole identity together with its diasporic elements, specifically its spirituality and folklore; the ancestor figure plays a crucial role bridging the past, present and future (Coloma Peñate, 2019, p. 112). Beyoncé has also acknowledged Toni Morrison's influence in her music and starts her Netflix documentary *Homecoming* (Knowles-Carter and Burke, 2019), which she wrote, directed, and produced, with a quote from the closing line of *Song of Solomon*: «If you surrender to the air, you could ride it» (Morrison, 1998b, p. 337). In the novel, these evocative words point to the spiritual life after death. The overarching theme of the film is education and the importance of preserving the legacy of historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)⁸, such as Howard University, where Toni Morrison majored in English and minored in the classics. There she was inspired by her participation in the university theatre company, a student-faculty repertory troupe that took plays on tour throughout the South during the summers (Smith, 2012, p. 10). Throughout Beyoncé's documentary, musicians,

8. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are the only institutions in the United States that were created for the express purpose of educating African American students. These institutions were established during the decades after the Civil War. Until the mid-1960s, HBCUs were, with very few exceptions, the only higher education option for most African Americans.

dancers and steppers that resemble students in an HBCU marching band accompany the popular singer in a celebratory mode, expressing pride in their black heritage.

3. TONI MORRISON'S VISUAL LEGACY

In the aforementioned obituary to Toni Morrison, Tracy Smith contends that «black life is the canvas for Ms. Morrison's body of work» (2019). Likewise, the vivid imagery she uses in her writings has served as a source of inspiration for a number of visual creators. This is the case of black U.S. artist Kara Walker, who has acknowledged elsewhere Morrison's influence on her disturbing racially and sexually coded black paper silhouettes. In the 1990s she revived the traditionally proper, white Victorian art of the silhouetted figure, transforming it to suit her more transgressive aims. Representing life-size human figures, they are physically placed within occasional clusters of landscape and psychologically located within the fragmented narratives of the antebellum South. Walker's controversial work is often read as «an excavation of America's racist past» (Peabody, 2016, p. 1). Dinah Holtzman, among others, has pointed to the many ways in which Walker's art exists in dialogue with Morrison's novel *Beloved*: «Both women are essentially writing neo-slave narratives» (Holtzman, 2007, p. 392). I would add that they both put women at the center of their narrative art⁹. I previously referred to a series of Walker's paper silhouettes that were displayed at the Lincoln Center during the presentation of Danielpour and Morrison's opera *Margaret Garner*, based on *Beloved*. One silhouette, entitled *Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats* (2005) illustrates the documentary *The Pieces I Am* that showcases Morrison's artistic accomplishments (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019, 1:23:57).

This and other large-scale prints comprise her *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* series, which appropriate and enlarge select illustrations from Harper's commemorative, pro-Union history of the U.S. civil war published in two volumes in 1866 and 1868. Walker's signature silhouettes interrupt and reimagine what she calls «the plantation family romance»

9. See also K. Miyamoto (2012) for an insightful study of Morrison's influence on Kara Walker's art, focused especially on Morrison's love trilogy: *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*.

of antebellum South (Miyamoto, 2012, p. 231). In *Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats* the black paper-cut silhouette of a woman wearing a hair wrap and a willowy dress floats over the enlarged book illustration like a ghostly figure or a shadow. This superimposed haunting image literally places the history of slavery at the forefront of the print and forces the viewer to confront the enduring presence of racism in contemporary U.S. culture. Walker's bold visual incursions, like Morrison's *Beloved*, make African American women central participants in her account of antebellum South and provides a perspective long omitted from the historical record. An additional comparison that can be established between the two is that Morrison's *Beloved* also discusses slavery in terms of spectrality.

Another of Walker's paper-cut silhouettes shown in Greenfield Sander's documentary to illustrate Morrison's life is *African/American* (1998). In this linoleum-cut print, the historical realism of slavery and the iconographic space of the sentimental Southern plantation romance fuse together¹⁰. This time, the white space of the Southern stereotyped romance and the bare whiteness of the installation wall «speak with a black voice», to use Henry Louis Gates's designation (1988, p. 131). In his pathbreaking study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), he convincingly argues that «double voice» is a fundamental feature of 18th and 19th century slave narratives, because the literary antecedents were white. The disturbing content of Walker's piece is represented by a black woman in chains falling into the void of a white space. Walker sarcastically describes the semi-nude woman as «your essentialist-token slave maiden in midair» (qtd. in Wye and Starr, 2004, p. 234). The only clothing she is wearing is what seems to be a traditional African garment that covers her waist. This takes the viewer to Africa, where men and women were captured and transported out of the continent into the transatlantic slave trade. This inhumane and profitable slave system was an enduring practice in the United States until its abolishment in 1865, and constitutes a shameful pillar in the historical foundation of the country. Walker's linoleum-cut piece also renders visible

10. Representative of the stereotyped Southern romance is Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Kara Walker critically problematizes this novel in her 1992 silhouette *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eve in Heaven*.

how the enslaved Africans' lives were literally turned upside down once transported to the United States. The title of the piece and the slash that separates the African from the American denotes the dramatic split of their identities.

Shortly after news of Toni Morrison's death in August 2019, the *New Yorker's* art editor, Françoise Mouly, contacted Kara Walker to create a cover in tribute to the writer. After attempts in watercolor, pastel, and clay, Walker settled on her signature medium, the black cut-paper silhouette, to depict Morrison's profile. The resulting piece uses the first line of *The Bluest Eye* for its title, *Quiet as It's Kept*. Morrison's shadowy profile is partially obscured by layers of white dreadlocks that swing like waves around her face, their ends pointing at the mouth that gave voice to so many African American women. In the tribute issue, Kara Walker acknowledges Morrison's everlasting influence: «Through her work and words, she became something like a muse, teacher, mother, clairvoyant, and judge» (Mouly, 2019). Walker adds that she is no portraitist, but «a shadow maker». The cut-out pays homage to «the shadow» that Morrison «leaves behind» (Mouly, 2019).

Greenfield-Sander's documentary also uses two of African American artist Lorna Simpson's twelve *Ebony* collages, entitled *Befitting* and *Black Pink* (2013). The visual artist, like Morrison, has played a significant part in bringing black women and black beauty to the fore since she began showing her art in the 1980s. For the mesmerizing 2013 collage series, Simpson lifted the faces of different women from 1960s and 1970s advertisements in *Ebony* magazine and creatively arranged their hair with colorful ink on paper, a glowing element that stands out in each collage. The cultural and political monthly magazine she grew up with informed her «sense of thinking about being black in America» (Wagoner, 2016). Simpson argues that the collage technique allows her to use pieces of images, which symbolize the fragmentation so prevalent in U.S. culture, especially of the body: «We're fragmented not only in terms of how society regulates our bodies but in the way we think about ourselves» (Akel, 2015). These ideas carry traces of Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), which delves into racialized beauty in our contemporary society and how it fragments black women's bodies.

In 2019, Jenna Wortham organized an informal round-table about «what it means to be a black American» for *The New York Times Magazine* with

Lorna Simpson and fellow African American visual artists Simone Leigh and Amy Sherald. Sherald remembers the many times she has been asked why she never includes white people in her work. Simpson observes that it might well be «a Toni Morrison question», and recalls the television interview in which Charlie Rose asked Morrison in the late 1990s about her narratives and why she did not include white characters:

Watching that broadcast, I can see she positions herself brilliantly in terms of understanding that you do not have to compromise your subject because it pertains to African-Americans. There need not be an apology or an explanation. I can't do it as brilliantly as Toni Morrison, but she said you would never ask a male white writer that question about his work. (Wortham, 2019)

Sherald, who in 2016 became the first woman to win the U.S. National Portrait Gallery's competition, has also used Toni Morrison as a source of inspiration. Her most recent large-scale portraits draw on aspects of American Realism, while focusing on black subjects who have been excluded from depictions of U.S. society. Her work represents what she calls «everyday blackness» (Wortham, 2019). *If You Surrendered to the Air, You Could Ride It* portrays a lone black man suspended on a green construction beam high above the viewer. The scene recalls Charles C. Ebbet's black and white photographs of iron workers building New York's Rockefeller Plaza in the 1930s, the symbol of American productivity and industry. The title of the portrait quotes once again Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, implying this time that by letting go, one can experience new forms of freedom.

The colorful portrait is part of a recent project in which the artist searched for iconic U.S. photographs that «compel us to look at the country's biggest moments from a historical perspective that felt incomplete to me» (Wortham, 2019). Wearing a red woolen hat and dressed in fancy pinstriped pants and a turtleneck, the black man in Sherald's portrait appears almost weightless against a blue backdrop. She has explained that her models are often dressed in clothes she purchased from second-hand stores that blur the distinction between past and present. Wearing used clothes is also a statement against the capital consumerism that the Rockefeller Center embodies in the original photograph. The portrait subtly comments as well on the overlooked triumphs of black laborers in the U.S. However, the blue glow of her canvas,

stripped of most context except for the green industrial beam, forces the viewer to engage with the subject's captivating, unavoidable gaze.

Toni Morrison's manifold articulations of blackness also resonate in the works of the Zanzibar born, British resident Lubaina Himid. The 2017 Turner Prize artist and curator, famous for her vibrant life-size installations and paintings is, according to Alan Rice, part of an important group of 1980s black British artists whose work «constructed a space for a radical, questioning agenda across issues of race, class and gender» (2013, p. 309). Her most recent collage, *You Say the Magic Words* (2020), uses snippets from *The Bluest Eye*. The piece was created for *The Guardian* newspaper as the cover of a special issue on racism in the United Kingdom. The artist explains,

The piece is a weaving together of found images of West African cloth, plus actual weaving of pieces of found colour photos from magazines. The text is from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and is meant, in this instance, to give us the idea that we can change things if we understand what we are changing, and why. (Himid, 2020)

The chosen line is used in the final Summer section of *The Bluest Eye* in the form of a hopeful spell that conjures a brighter future for Pecola and her baby, the result of her rape by her abusive father and a source of shame for the community. Claudia explains that she will sing after her sister Frieda says the «magic words» (Morrison, 1993, p. 151), which points to the healing effects of art.

Himid places each of the words in black and white capital letters at the center of her collage, each on a separate piece of paper. The five «magic» words are positioned over images of West African cotton fabric and fragments of closed zippers. The latter possibly signals the historic muzzling of slaves taken from West Africa to Britain and the United States¹¹. Immediately beneath the last piece of written paper, Himid places fragments of images in blue tonalities that seem to represent the Atlantic sea, traversed by the slaves in the horrendous Middle Passage. The juxtaposition of the zippers

11. Lubaina Himid's interest in «the memory of cotton» is recurrent in her art, because she sees cotton «as a material whose history frames the social relations of our present» (Arabindan-Kesson, 2021, p. 3). Her pieces often connect the history of Manchester factory workers with the lives of the enslaved cotton pickers in the U.S. South.

with the written words «YOU SAY THE MAGIC WORDS», acquires symbolic meanings. At the bottom of the collage, in bold black letters, the politically activist motto BLACKLIVESMATTER takes center stage. An open zipper placed next to the 21st century political slogan offers a visual element that represents the need to include black lives in the discourse. The collage combines emblematic elements from the past, present and future of black lives, and connects contemporary racism with the silenced history of slavery.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Toni Morrison's interdisciplinary work and multifaceted collaborations with other artists echo the rich complexity of the artistic responses she has inspired in the United States and abroad. In this article, I have delved into the musical and visual legacy by other women creators that pay her homage. In the musical realm, the singers and musicians under discussion place black women at the center and use Morrison's literary tropes and themes to convey the importance of being heard in a society that has systematically stifled black voices. Thus, Akua Naru's «Toni Morrison» draws on the bird imagery and its different metaphoric representations in Morrison's novels. India Arie's «Not Afraid of the Dark» imagines a protective shield for Pecola and other vulnerable black girls. Janelle Monáe's concept-based album *Dirty Computer* takes Morrison's cue in *The Bluest Eye* to create a dystopian society where racism and sexism are the norm, and where memories from dissenting citizens are erased. These musicians create an archive of sounds inspired by Morrison's body of work and her production of knowledge, sustained in the legacy of other African and African American women.

In terms of visual art, Kara Walker's paper-cut silhouettes reimagine the memory of slavery, which stands at the forefront of her pieces like a black shadow of enormous proportions. Many of those figures are enslaved women, whose phantasmagorical appearances resemble those of Morrison's *Beloved*. Lorna Simpson's collage series pick up on the idea of fragmentation of the female body and racialized beauty, which are key themes in Morrison's oeuvre. This time, the visual artist claims black beauty through photographs of women taken from *Ebony* magazine, who look like modern Nefertiti with their visually enhanced hair in the shape of glowing crowns.

Amy Sberald uses iconic photographs and scenarios, where the black presence is absent, and occupies the new space of her canvas with black bodies. *If You Surrendered to the Air, You Could Ride It* takes Toni Morrison's emblematic line from *Song of Solomon* to actively claim the relevance of black workers in the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century. Mickalene Thomas employs the video collage technique to assemble images of Morrison, using fragments of her photographs, in a constantly shape-shifting collage that opens the documentary *The Pieces I Am*. This filmic work of art uses a line from *Beloved* that underlines the historical significance of black women during slavery: «She gathers me, man. The pieces I am, she gathers them and gives them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind» (Morrison, 1987, pp. 272-73). British black artist Lubaina Himid also finds inspiration in the Nobel Laureate to reclaim justice in the face of the historical violence against black bodies. Hence, each musical and visual piece effectively expands the legacy of a wide-ranging writer, wise griot and inimitable storyteller, Toni Morrison.

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