

BLACK WOMEN'S WRITING AND ARTS TODAY: A TRIBUTE TO TONI MORRISON¹. INTRODUCTION

ESCRITURA Y ARTE FEMENINO NEGRO CONTEMPORÁNEO: UN TRIBUTO A TONI MORRISON. INTRODUCCIÓN

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This volume intends to pay tribute to the multifaceted and exceedingly rich legacy of Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison, who sadly passed away in August 2019, by looking at how her work has influenced /opened untrodden paths

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for contemporary black women writers and artists. One of the most acute and lucid minds of her time, she is undoubtedly one of the most influential voices in contemporary American and world literature, indeed a global or transnational phenomenon. Morrison's work spans over six decades and comprises eleven novels, short stories, children's books, critical essays, a play, song cycles, the script for a musical and even an opera libretto. Additionally, she was also a pioneering professor and a prolific editor at Random House, helping to promote talented black writers such as Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara or Gayl Jones, and also introducing American audiences to African writers Wole Soyinka or Chinua Achebe. Her commitment, her passion and her exquisite language are, and will always be, a source of inspiration for generations of writers, intellectuals, musicians and visual artists.

The depth and breadth of her writing attests to the unprecedented impact her work has had on very diverse disciplines such as feminist criticism and gender studies, critical race theory and race studies, but also postcolonial, cultural or diaspora studies, among others. Her work appeals to a great variety of audiences, in and out of the United States, who feel that «we are in her language too» (Morrison, 2019a).

Concretely, this volume attempts to showcase Morrison's legacy and how actively she has engaged in articulating an alternative canon which brings to the forefront issues of identity, race, gender, sexuality, voice, or the rewriting of history that pertain to African American and African diasporic subjects. Placing the experience of black women at the core of her reflections, Morrison redefined writing by coining key concepts as rememory, or rethinking crucial notions such as ancestor, love, community or home, deeply influencing many black women writers and artists who have continued and expanded her work, also with new interpretations and new themes.

1. CONTEXTUALIZING MORRISON'S LEGACY: «A FRIEND OF YOUR MIND» (MORRISON, 1987, P. 273)

In the difficult and pressing times we are currently experiencing in the United States and the rest of the world, we constantly witness the absolute lack of social justice, the increasing rate of hate crimes due to racial and gender violence, together with an alarming growing number of conflicts

because of class, sexuality, religion or nationality differences. In these dire times, Morrison's voice resounds even more necessary and urgent than ever. We do need her guide and her vision, her example and her wisdom to be able to survive and thrive in this conflictive period. From her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, to her last one *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison's enduring commitment to justice and love is no less than breathtaking. As Julia Gutiérrez Muñoz accurately contends, her project was ambitious and complex: «to give back dignity to her people» (2021, p. 200). No simple enterprise, no doubt, but only she could have undertaken it. In the last six decades Morrison achieved that aim by putting «her people», that is, African Americans and blacks in general, at the center of the inquiry, of the social and political debate. And in order to do so, the initial step was to erase the so-called «white gaze», to neutralize the hegemonic gaze that invisibilized blacks by making them the «Other(s)» with respect to the normative dominant subject.

As she herself states in *The Origin of Others*, «race has been a constant arbiter of difference, as have wealth, class, and gender—each of which is about power and the necessity of control» (2017, p. 3), which she further specifies in «the need for control of the Other» (2017, p. 4). Thus, the invention of the category of the «Other» is concomitant from the hegemonic standpoint with the definition of a dominant subject: in relationship with a demonized and dehumanized Other, this dominant subject feels superior. Like no other writer before, Morrison discusses the centrality of race, but also skillfully undermines that centrality at the same time. The beginning of *Paradise* is a perfect illustration of this: «They shoot the white girl first» (1998, p. 3). As she also affirms, in *Paradise* «I was eager to simultaneously de-fang and theatricalize race, signaling, I hope, how moveable and hopelessly meaningless the construct was» (2017, p. 66). By exposing the social and cultural construction race actually is, Morrison also reveals the allure of that construction for the dominant powers that be.

This proves how Morrison conceptualizes writing as a political and cultural intervention, emphatically subscribing to the statement that the personal is political. As Justine Tally, one of the most renowned experts on Toni Morrison's work, argues:

What we do as writers and critics is just not important, it is crucial; it is not just informative, it is formative; it is just not interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others, come to «know» it. It is a responsibility that we as critics must take extremely seriously because what we do makes a difference... The choices we make are not gratuitous; they are most often political. (2007, p. 1)

Hence, her political and social activism is one of the reasons why Morrison has played such a fundamental role as «the spokesperson for the black community», as critic Nancy Peterson correctly wrote in her assessment of Morrison in 1993:

«Toni Morrison» has become the name around which debates of considerable significance to American literature, culture, and ideology have amassed—multicultural curricula; about the relation of slavery to freedom; about the degree of determinism and/or free will African Americans might experience; about the possibility of creating a literature that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically engaged; about the interlocking relation of racism, sexism, and classism; about the possibility to construct meaningful dialogues across entrenched differences; about the possibility of laying claim to our lives and imaginations from within a postmodern, capitalist society. (1993, p. 465)

Almost two decades later, her stature seems to have become larger than life, as it were. Her political and social commitment has definitively marked the main guidelines and the choice of tropes, themes and words of this gifted author.

According to Elisabeth Ann Beaulieu, «Morrison's work overflows with the stuff of life—the examined and the unexamined life, the triumphant and the tragic life, the small, undervalued life and the flamboyant, celebrated life» (2003, p. 3). While this statement remains absolutely true about Morrison's boundless heritage, from my point of view there are certain tropes and themes that are pervasive in Morrison's fiction. Due to the limitations of this introduction, I am going to tackle only some of them, namely the expansion of the canon, the rewriting of history and the workings of memory, the ancestors' role and the need for a community, and the multiple definitions of love and home.

The first one is related to the reflection on what defines Black literature and the need to incorporate it to the American canon. With great lucidity,

Morrison has effectively contributed to problematize and expand that canon. Especially in her role as an editor at Random House, Morrison helped to grant visibility to the importance of African American literary contributions through the edition of crucial works and the encouragement of many younger writers, as I mentioned before. One of the most applauded initiatives was the compilation of *The Black Book* in 1974 in co-edition with Middleton Harris, Ernest Smith, Roger Furman, Morris Lewitt and Ernest Smith, a scrapbook or a collection of collage-like memorabilia, both verbal and visual, that Morrison herself describes as «a true labor of love» (2008a, p. 38).² And indeed, that was the main objective behind that volume: to chronicle African American history and experience emphasizing the beauty and diversity of black culture. It won instant commercial success and critical acclaim, even nominated for The National Book Award in 1975.

But her contributions to the debate over the canon and canon formation are not only limited to her editorial engagement, as important as it is. Morrison the cultural commentator and literary critic has also helped to subvert and reconstruct the American canon by acknowledging the presence of African American themes, language and characters in American literature. She has designed her own critical theory redefining African American literary criticism on the basis of what she calls the «Africanist presence». As Hanna Wallinger aptly notes, there are two seminal pieces of Morrison's literary criticism: «Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature» (1989) and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Wallinger summarizes the main argument in those crucial texts: «American identity could only be defined as white and free because of, and not despite, the visibility of the non-white and non-free», which prompted her «to devise a new hermeneutics for the evaluation of

2. As Cheryl Wall explains in detail: «*The Black Book* documents the history of African Americans through an array of verbal and visual texts: posters, newspaper articles, letters, speeches, bills of sale, spirituals and blues, work songs and folk tales, children's rhymes, drawings, advertisements, photographs (both family pictures and documentary photographs of quilts, tools, furniture, and other artifacts), recipes, patent applications, sheet music, playbills and movie stills, formulas for conjure, and dream interpretations» (2012, n.p.).

literary texts» (2007, p. 22). Thus, Morrison's literary criticism is a touchstone in African American and black diaspora studies.

Together with canon expansion, Morrison is also a groundbreaking figure in the rewriting of US history to incorporate the voices and contributions of African Americans throughout the centuries. Indeed, Morrison traces the history of African American experiences from the enslavement period to present-day US, revisiting for instance the decade of the 20s or the 50s, the legacy of the 60s or the problematic contemporary times. As she observes in «Rememory» referring to the characters in *Beloved*:

There is no reliable literary or journalistic scholarly history available to them, to help them, because they are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives. They are spoken of and written about—objects of history, not subjects within it. (2019b, p. 324)

Therefore, she decides to claim their rightful place as historical subjects contesting their objectification as «Others». Morrison makes black characters the protagonists of their own lives and, consequently, gives primacy to their own voices and realities.

Moreover, she takes up another key notion in Morrison's universe, memory, and enriches its meaning. In another seminal essay, «The Site of Memory», she details how she makes use of memory by pinpointing her responsibility as a writer to textualize what our cherished author Zora Neale Hurston called «the memories within»: «These 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me» (2019c, p. 238). More pointedly, she coins the term «rememory» as a crucial tool «in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past» (2019b, p. 324). This coinage is one of the most cited strategies she employs to face the legacy of slavery and its unfathomable aftereffects of racism and violence that continue to persist even nowadays.

Claudine Raynaud insightfully insists on the centrality of memory and rememory: «remembering shapes the narratives that espouse the ceaseless returns to the not so distant past, the comings and the goings between now and then, and ultimately the circular production of memories» (2014, p. 66). In her exploration of the persistence of the past into the present,

Morrison also provides another illuminating clue by highlighting the crucial importance of ancestor figures. In most of her work the presence of an ancestor, both male and female, is deemed essential to ensure the intergenerational transmission of core communal values, mostly based on an African-rooted outlook. In her path-breaking essay «Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation» (1984), she elaborates on ancestors as prominent in black literature: «There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom» (2008b, p. 62). She further delves into these ancestors' functions as they affect the development and well-being of the black community. Morrison repeatedly addresses the survival of the black community, albeit its many differences, and asserts the need for communal values. She exposes nurturing cultural traditions and self-affirming principles that become protective and healing factors for African Americans. She further suggests that the assertion of this African and African American worldview needs to run parallel to the relentless challenge of the racist, patriarchal and classist system imposed in American society.

Hence, Morrison actively engages in a reformulation of an alternative racial, gender and class politics. As Kusha Tiwari correctly claims, «Morrison's fiction engages with and transcends the questions of race, gender and class and simultaneously challenges, defamiliarizes and reconsiders ideological power implicit in the symbolic systems of political and social domination» (2018, p. 11). In Morrison's work issues of identity and sexuality are investigated in order to chronicle the process of identity formation, both individual and collective. From an intersectional perspective, Morrison foregrounds a wide array of black femininities and masculinities, which obviously captures the heterogeneity and multiplicity embedded in the African American community. Besides, she invests in portraying diverse sexualities that purposely defy heteronormative definitions, calling for a more nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of black identities.

Last but not least, Morrison also scrutinizes the manifold meanings of love and home. According to leading Morrison scholars Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally, «perhaps the most dominant link among all the novels... is Morrison's abiding concern with the nature of love» (2014, p.

xviii). In «*Love and the Survival of the Black Community*», I contended that in this novel «Morrison's explicitly investigates the elusive nature of love in relation to heterosexual love and pedophilia, but also to female friendship, mother-daughter and, especially, father-daughter relationships, and communal ties» (2007, p. 92). But I really believe that this investigation does not only take place in this novel, but is rather a definitory trait of her whole *oeuvre*. Morrison intentionally articulates all these kinds of relationships, together with female bonding or sibling relationships, in order to critique unequal gender relations based on the assumption of traditional normative stereotypes that are really harming for black families and communities, therefore urging for the end of black patriarchy.

On the other hand, home and its plethora of related terms such as homelessness, belonging or unbelonging, are also recurrent themes in Morrison's corpus of writings. Morrison imagines counter-narratives that question the politics of home and homeland, exemplified in her novel *Home* (2012). In her examination of the conflictive notion of home, Morrison recreates the difficulties for African Americans to actually feel «at home», either in their actual homes or in their home country. These difficulties are embodied by the character of Frank Money, a Korean war veteran deeply traumatized by both his horrific experiences in the war, and his equally horrifying return «home». Sathyarat Venkatesan and Gurumurthy Neelakantan write, «the final line in *Home*, 'Let's go home' is a poignant reminder of the dream that was deferred for the African Americans of the fifties era» (2018, p. 233). However, I argue that, despite the very trying circumstances depicted in this novel, there seems to be the promise of redemption and restoration by the end of the novel when Frank and his sister Cee properly bury the black man whose brutal murder they witnessed, and so give him back his dignity and humanity. Healing and interdependence are postulated in these two characters' reconciliation with their childhood memories which, by extension, can be applied to an alternative interpretation of Morrison's production.

2. STRUCTURE OF THE TRIBUTE: «AND THE LEGACY GOES ON»

As I said at the beginning, this monographic volume intends to pay tribute to the extraordinarily complex and boundless imagination of our beloved author Toni Morrison. As such, any tribute will always fall short of its aim, as it is impossible to encompass or summarize Morrison's myriad nuances and readings. So, this is one of the many obituaries and tributes that Morrison's passing prompted. Our particular Morrison community of scholars hopes to humbly contribute to highlight Morrison's outstanding work which, in turn, will stimulate further academic dialogue and research, and will foster the necessary conversations about race, gender and class interlocking oppressions.

In the first place, the volume opens with «Beyond Literature: Toni Morrison's Musical and Visual Legacy for Black Women Artists» by Rocío Cobo Piñero, which delves into Toni Morrison's understudied influence on music and visual art to showcase Morrison's interdisciplinary work and collaborations with other artists. The article is divided into two parts: musical responses and visual art responses. Regarding Morrison's influence on contemporary music, the article centers on black women musicians, specifically on rapper Akua Naru, neo-soul vocalist India Arie, and singer and songwriter Janelle Monáe. Inspired by Morrison's engagement in placing black women at the center, these musicians discuss the dominance of racism and sexism in black women's lives, but also the strategies to face and counteract their insidious effects. By making use of Morrisonian literary motifs and themes, these musicians create an archive of sounds as a source of inspiration for other African and African American women.

Similarly, the second section of the article focuses on visual artists' interactions with Morrison's rewriting of American history and her articulations of blackness and gender, concretely on the work of U.S. black women artists Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson and Amy Sberald, and Afro-British Lubaina Himid. Cobo Piñero offers a perceptive analysis of Walker's striking paper-cut silhouettes revisiting slavery, Simpson's collage series over the fragmented female body and racialized beauty, Sberald's correcting the absence of blacks in iconic photographs and scenarios, and Himid's visual art against the ongoing violence against black bodies. Therefore, Cobo Piñero effectively

demonstrates the wide-ranging legacy of Morrison's work on very diverse musical and visual art representations of contemporary black women artists, not only in the US but also abroad.

Entitled «African Diasporic Connections in the Americas: Toni Morrison in Brazil» by Stelamaris Coser, reputed author of the influential *Bridging the Americas* (1994), the second article also explores the influence of Morrison's manifold articulations of blackness and womanhood focusing on Brasil. Morrison's works have become iconic in this country thanks to translations, a wide readership and increasing academic attention. This visibility has also prompted greater recognition for Afro-Brazilian women writers, literary critics, historians, and cultural workers in recent times. And it has also encouraged a more profound debate about racial and gender bias in the country, together with a significant and timely process of racial awareness and empowerment, Coser brilliantly argues. Brasil was also quite remarkable for Morrison personally, since there she conducted part of her research for *Beloved*—a novel about the legacy of slavery in countries like Brazil and the US.

Drawing from Black feminist, diasporic and decolonial theories, the author also tackles the connection with another crucial writer, Conceição Evaristo. Both Morrison and Evaristo share common preoccupations and strategies, and thus become inspiring reference figures for younger writers like Jarid Arraes. Ultimately, Morrison and Evaristo consolidate a new canon of Black literature based on black references, characters, forms and themes, which can serve as a model for the younger generation of female writers who can continue to enrich the cultural life of the African diaspora in Brasil and elsewhere.

In «Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*», Vincent Cucarella analyzes the impact of Morrison's *Beloved* on Jesmyn Ward's two National Book Award-winning novels informed by Harold Bloom's concept of facility or the influence of texts in the African diaspora. Ward herself has repeatedly acknowledged her indebtedness to Morrison's novel and specifically to the notion of black motherhood in relation to issues of self-definition, the sense of black community and diasporic memory, all of them key Morrisonian themes. By means of the central figures of the ancestor and the familial ghost(s), Ward deftly

creates an intertextual relationship with *Beloved* precisely to unearth new racist practices that plague African Americans nowadays.

In the first novel *Salvage the Bones*, Ward takes on the Morrisonian version of the myth of Medea to meditate upon the need to reconceptualize the marginalized role of motherhood for African American women. The author offers alternative forms of motherhood and black masculinity and fatherhood. With the Hurricane Katrina and its terrible corollaries for black communities as backdrop, Ward promotes healing and communal bonds to overcome mourning and grief. In the second novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, both the familial ghost(s) and diasporic memory are pivotal tropes to examine the difficulties of a black family, victim of institutionalized racism. Ward pointedly investigates the effects of imprisonment on the lives of two male characters—Pop and Richie—as the reenactment of slavery. The ghost will facilitate Pop's and Jojo's process of healing and the reconciliation with the legacy of the past.

The last two articles propose a more focused interpretation of Morrison's legacy probing into two specific literary motifs: the first one related to the past which is that of the old crone, and the second one which advances knowledge on a yet emerging notion: ancillary trauma.

In «The Primal Archetypal and Mythical Crone in Toni Morrison's Portrayals of the Elder Woman», Manuela López-Ramírez invites readers to revisit and reclaim the figure of the wise mythical Crone archetype, which personified both life and death in pre-patriarchal societies. Within the context of a matrifocal world Morrison's portrayals of aging women effectively counteract the patriarchal perception of these women as either devilish or invisible and useless for society. To the contrary, with their ancestral spiritual/supernatural/healing properties, Morrison's crones are strong life forces and ancestor figures, who play a crucial role in nurturing their families and communities, both physically and psychologically.

Additionally, Lopez-Ramírez artly reassesses the maternal and domestic roles of Morrison's crones, emphasizing the importance of «matrilineage». They also embrace the ancestral African and African American values and alternative knowledge, which are essential for blacks' survival and empowerment. These women create non-patriarchal homes as sites of resistance and power, where alternative forms of masculinity and femininity can develop.

Moreover, they are instrumental in transmitting the African heritage to the new generations, teaching them about the black worldview. In so doing, López-Ramírez contends that Morrison upholds the mythic pre-patriarchal crone in order to honor old black women and their significant contributions to the black community.

The last article by well-known critic Shirley (Holly) A. Stave also proves the importance of the legacy of Toni Morrison in fostering the coinage of new terms and definitions. As I explained above, through her critical writing and her novels, Morrison herself coined key terms such as «rememory» or «ancestor» that have been and are widely used by critics. In this case, Stave is inspired by Morrison's novels to explore the concept of «ancillary trauma», the trauma experienced by female characters not directly subjected to racial violence, but who nonetheless are traumatized by a male character who is traumatized due to racist actions, either psychically or emotionally.

Stave argues that these traumatized male characters feel oppressed by white men, and simultaneously desire to adapt to the normative vision of white masculinity, so they project their feelings of humiliation, shame and frustration on the women and children of their lives. In trying to assert their male dominance, these men damage these women and children, making them victims of ancillary trauma in a continuous cycle of racial violence. In her impressive revision of Morrison's novels, Stave only finds a case in which a female character is able to overcome ancillary trauma, thanks to her parents' investment in self-worth and wholeness because they conceive their child as a complete human being. Stave rightly suggests that, only by breaking with the cycle of racial violence and suffering in African American families, can ancillary trauma be solved. However, racial violence is a terrible reality that black men and black women continue to face on a daily basis.

On the whole, Toni Morrison is undeniably a beacon, a shining star in African American and world literatures. Her incisive and compelling depiction of the configuration and development of the US as a nation has no possible comparison with any previous or present writer. Her powerful and firm voice will always resonate to denounce the endemic racism, sexism and classism that have plagued and continue to impact the lives and experiences of black people in the US and abroad. Her interdisciplinary work is revolutionary and richly complex, so it has rightly deserved an outstanding

reception in the United States and elsewhere. Her immense legacy continues to grow and expand in the African diaspora and worldwide, as more readers, students, teachers, critics, culture historians, visual artists, etc. discover her novels and other writings and update Morrisonian themes and tropes. Her stories, her characters, her beautiful and enchanting language continue to haunt and inspire generation after generation. By banking on African and African American heritage, her texts ultimately tell a story that needs to be «passed on» (Morrison, 1987, p. 275). Our beloved ancestor.

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