

Agnieszka Łobodziec /
Blossom N. Fondo (eds.)

The Timeless Toni Morrison

The Past and The Present
in Toni Morrison's Fiction

A Tribute to Toni Morrison
on Occasion of Her
85th Birthday



The book presents a cultural study of Toni Morrison's fiction, focused on her representations of the past and present, along with the relationship between the two. The authors analyze Morrison's texts not solely as aesthetic, autonomous objects but as manifestations of a cultural and creative practice closely related to actuality. They examine various incorporations of history in Morrison's writings. The contributions search out thematic continuities as well as discernable ruptures in the texts while noting futuristic tendencies in Morrison's novels and the texts' envisagement of the human race.

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Agnieszka Łobodzic / Blossom N. Fondu · The Timeless Toni Morrison ∞

The Timeless Toni Morrison

NEW AMERICANISTS IN POLAND

Edited by Tomasz Basiuk

BAND 8



PETER LANG
EDITION

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Introduction

This volume entitled *The Timeless Toni Morrison* has emerged in celebration of Toni Morrison's 85th birthday in 2016.

Toni Morrison frequently underscores the role of history as a significant referent in the process of her fictional writing. In that vein, literary historical representations may evoke debate. Questions pertaining to the objectiveness or subjectiveness of the fictional portrayals, their correspondence between historical fact and fiction, the level of traditional realist artistry, and being overly literary representational might arise. Critics have applied the concepts neorealism, historical criticism, social realism, magical realism, and poetic realism in their analyses of Morrison's fiction. Over against such theoretical polemics, Morrison accentuates historical accuracy. She seeks to fuse her artistic imagination with historical knowledge obtained by in-depth research. For instance, in response to the ubiquitous classification of her fiction as magic or incredible Toni Morrison contends, "I consider that my single gravest responsibility (in spite of that magic) is not to lie." The novelist even ascribes more truth to fiction as opposed to documented history and other history-laden texts. She aspires to discover and reconstruct the truth by imagining the interior lives of her characters. For instance, with regard to slave narratives, she asserts, "I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left – to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard – then the approach that's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image." As far as the representation of "major things that have been erased from our history [...] the other things that were going on in the 1950s" in Morrison's novel *Home*, the writer maintains, "In the United States, we think of the 50s as a kind of golden age. Right after the war, everybody was making money, the GI Bill was sending soldiers into college campuses, and the television was full of [...] happy stories [...] And I didn't think so. I thought that there was a crust or veil that was being pulled over the 50s" (Interview. CBC).

With thought given to Toni Morrison's perspective towards history, her literature invites considerations of issues such as intersections between historiography and historical fiction; differences between historiography and creative writing, objectivity, subjectivity, and truth; the historical context of the author, the reader and text; new historicism; slave narratives and neo-slave narratives; various forms of realism and literary representations of history; history and myth; language and

discourse; image and imagination; meaning, interpretation, and ideology; the past and memory; the past and identity.

The questions that Morrison's novels inspire include: What thematic continuities as well as ruptures can be discerned in Morrison's texts? How and in what ways has Morrison's world shaped her works? What other literary influences and interactions can be deciphered that bear on her art? What futuristic tendencies can be found in her literature and what do they envisage for the human race? What critical referents do her texts provide? What aesthetic peculiarities can be observed in Morrison's works?

The aforementioned aspects have been thoroughly covered by individual contributors to this volume.

Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch carries out a comparative study of Morrison's *Beloved* and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storm*, which offer complex postmodern literary reconstructions of African American and Native American experiences of bondage respectively, which the novelists achieve through employment of creative imagination in envisioning the depths and circumstances of the historically documented acts of infanticide and in utilization of culturally unique narrative modes. **Irina Popescu** deconstructs Morrison's employment of iron bit in *Beloved* as a signifier of silenced traumatic past that is confronted by individual characters in order to unveil the unspeakable truth.

Tammie Jenkins traces the development of Black American self-defined identity portrayed in *Song of Solomon*, as a spiritual and cultural journey from the sense of *twoness* towards self-integrity, exemplified by the character Milkman's discovery of ancestral heritage and revaluation of his present experience. **Agnieszka Łobodziec** ferrets out the construction of identity as a playful, perpetual process that brings about the sense of uncertainty. **Barbara Compagnucci** undertakes a theoretical approach to Morrison's explorations of the lives of African Americans, especially the subjugation of women in misogynistic and racially oppressed times. This she does by focusing on the importance of language using a postmodernist framework.

Stephanie Li analyzes Morrison's novel *Home*, demonstrating how, since every story reflects its teller, narrative is inevitably composed of the biases and limitations produced by individual experiences. She shows in her essay how Morrison's novel seeks to question, undermine and expose the master narratives produced by literary texts and national histories. **Misty Standage** contends that *Tar Baby* is comprised of several narrative layers, each layer providing context for and criticism of another. This, she maintains, keeps *Tar Baby* from being a narrative that universalizes black experience. **Ji Hyun Lee** examines Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

and upholds that the Disallowing – the traumatic rebuff that leads to the founding of Haven – informs the rest of the narrative. The author closely examines the formation, transmission and reception of the Disallowing myth, highlighting some of the unintended consequences of trying to control history. **Blossom N. Fondo** reads *The Bluest Eye* as a construction of the cultural desert which existed for the blacks in America prior to the publication of a novel such as hers, which dramatizes the dangers of an exclusivist narrative.

History Imagination and Truth

Agnieszka Gondor-Wiercioch
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How to Speak about the Unspeakable – Historical Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

Abstract: In my paper I would like to focus on the problem of incorporating the historical experience of marginalized groups into fiction. Toni Morrison and Linda Hogan have decided to refer to two historical processes that have been long silenced in the official American history, i.e. Black slavery and ethnic holocaust of Native Americans. In the novels of Morrison and Hogan these collective experiences emerge as counter-histories told from the perspective of the survivors. The perspective is respectively African-American and Native-American and both writers additionally include the voices of the victims that were particularly neglected because their deaths were not precisely recorded; Morrison dedicated her novel to the Blacks who did not survive the Middle Passage and Hogan concentrated on the Indian inhabitants of the islands on the lakes between contemporary U.S. and Canada who died anonymously in great numbers and belonged to the less known Native American cultures. What is more, both Morrison and Hogan were inspired by true stories; Morrison used the story of Margaret Garner and Hogan that of her adopted daughter Mary. It is also worth mentioning that in both cases tragedy stemmed from the fact that desperate mothers decided to kill their daughters and Morrison as well as Hogan used these individual dramas to speak about collective traumas of African-Americans and Native-Americans. Toni Morrison focuses on the character of Sethe who killed her daughter because she wanted to free her from slavery. The ghost of *Beloved* haunts Sethe and she would have died if the black community had not decided to intervene and save her. Finally Sethe manages not only to survive her past trauma but also to regain her second daughter Denver whom she had neglected because of the ghost. As in the majority of magical realist texts, the status of the ghost is unclear; the reader never learns if the ghost was just a part of the imagination of the mother who was not able to finish mourning or if the apparition really invaded the world of the living. Linda Hogan concentrates on the character of Angel, a Native American girl who got nearly killed by her mother, a mad Indian woman. The madness of Angel's mother was a result of haunting; her head was full of ghosts of Indians who died violently during colonization of America. Similarly to Sethe, Angel is rescued by a group of women, this time Native American, who take her on a trip during which Angel rediscovers her Indian identity. I would like to argue that both authors are successful at handling the historical material because they have managed to create convincing literary accounts in which innovative poetic imaginary is far more important than ideology. They communicate with the readers through polyphonic narration, in which the present time is often disrupted by

retrospection and ellipsis. Both writers do not hesitate to include magical realist perspective when they present outlooks that go beyond rational Euro-American paradigms of thought. These strategies not only help Morrison and Hogan to address the issues of intercultural violence that taints past and contemporary America, but reveal a lot about the nature of cultural memory and expose the difficulties in recording trauma.

Keywords: Native American, African American, trauma, religious syncretism, history.

Both Toni Morrison and Linda Hogan are interested in ethno-history and the role it plays in identity formation of contemporary African Americans and Native Americans. What they also share is the emphasis on a well balanced feminist perspective and their respective ethnic traditions. While analyzing Morrison, Missy Dehn Kubitschek (1998) noticed that the novelist joins in the majority of postmodernists' quests such as presenting exposing pluralism understood as the ongoing presence of conflicting points of view, perceiving reality as a political construction, and abandoning the distinction between popular culture and high art because ethnic minorities most often express themselves through cultural products that had been regarded in the past as primitive and degrading, e.g. blues and jazz. The only pivotal feature of postmodernism from Kubitschek's list that is absent in Morrison's fiction is parody. The same is true about Hogan's fiction. Similarly to Morrison, Hogan acknowledges the legitimacy of differing and conflicting perspective in her revision of history, she is deeply interested in showing the political consequences of neocolonial practices and refuses to recognize a boundary between high art and popular culture because this division does not pertain to Native American perspectives, and "low brow" activities of Indians had been repeatedly depreciated in the paternalistic tradition of the past. Last, but not least, Hogan's prose is almost devoid of parody, contrary to the works of many contemporary Native American authors such as Sherman Alexie, Gerald Vizenor or even Louise Erdrich.

Morrison's *Beloved* and Hogan's *Solar Storms* perfectly illustrate the postmodern pursuits mentioned above, but before I go into a more detailed comparative analysis I would like to emphasize that both Morrison and Hogan were inspired by true stories. Toni Morrison's incentive for writing *Beloved* was Margaret Garner who in 1856 escaped from a slave plantation in Kentucky with her four children. When the family reached Cincinnati, their former master caught them and Garner decided to kill herself and the children. She managed to kill her two year old daughter with a knife but was then apprehended; after a long trial the judge returned her and her family to their previous owner (<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/margaret-garner-incident-1856>).