

CIRCLES OF SORROW,  
LINES OF STRUGGLE

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*The Novels of Toni Morrison*

GURLEEN GREWAL

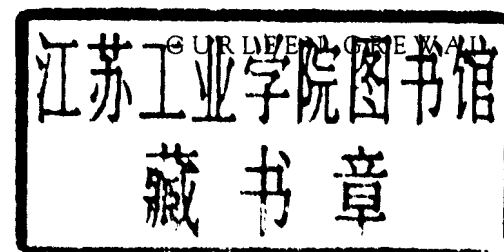
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*For my parents, Jasmer Kaur and Sangat Singh Grewal*

and

*In memory of Satpreet Grewal,  
brother, healer, anam cara,  
who blessed my life with his radiance*

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## PREFACE

I agree with Dana Polan when she denies that literary criticism is “in any way a metaphor for larger struggles” and asserts “rather, it is a place of such struggles.” I have chosen to struggle with and alongside the works of Toni Morrison because she, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have said of Kafka, “knew how to offer, how to invent this amorous political life.”<sup>1</sup>

Toni Morrison speaks to me—and perhaps to many postcolonial scholars who have thought hard about their own colonial inculcation in English literature—when she admits, “Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly.” In choosing to study Toni Morrison’s work, I was responding to a specific challenge—“the quest for relevance”—put to me by my own history: a postcolonial education in India culminating with an American Ph.D. in English, an education à la Matthew Arnold, in “the best that has been thought and said.” Not surprisingly, I too felt like the young people in Toni Morrison’s Nobel acceptance speech who admit, to the griot, “We have no bird in our hands, living or dead.” Let me recall their complaint to the old, blind woman, the repository of narrative wisdom: “Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?”<sup>2</sup>

In the modern literature of every nation, the novel appears to satisfy the middle-class demand for self-appraisals of identities, both individual and collective. In postcolonial societies this demand is a kind of hunger, one Toni Morrison understood all too well when she said, “Narrative is radical, creating

1. Dana Polan, Introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, trans. Polan (Minneapolis, Minn. 1986), xxiv, xxv.

2. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 12; Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (New York, 1994), 27. The phrase “quest for relevance” is from N’gugi Thiongo’s *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1986), 87.



us at the very moment it is being created."<sup>3</sup> Novels such as *The Bluest Eye* show me something I had always suspected but never fully realized, either in the literature I had read or in the ways of reading I had been taught: the saving power of narrative, its capacity to open a door, to point out the fire and the fire escape—in short, the profound work that narrative can do for the social collective, and the work that such a narrative in turn demands from us.

(Toni Morrison's work, generated in a post-civil rights milieu, anticipates and coincides with the critique of masculinist Eurocentrism in the U.S. academy—a critique launched from several directions: feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist. *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan's postmortem report on the old humanist canon of literature, summarizes the old school's troubled awareness that a certain understanding and dissemination of literature has increasingly become impossible. He rues that literature is "killed" by the unholy trinity, deconstructionists, marxists, feminists, and that other trio of 'women, blacks, and Third World writers.'" Quite so, but the crux of the matter was better stated by Timothy Brennan when he noted that English literary criticism "has refused to place the fact of domination in a comprehensive approach to its literary material, and that becomes impossible when facing the work of those who have not merely visited but lived it."<sup>4</sup>

I have found it useful to pick up the theme of internal colonialism first developed by black historians in the 1970s in order to articulate the postcolonial concerns of Morrison's literary production. The term *postcolonial* is misleading in its temporal implications. It should be more properly understood (to imply the legacy of colonialism that is carried and continued into the present.) While the structures of that institution appear to be dismantled, the global power differentials upheld by colonialism are still in place. Its discourse continues to mark the bell curves of knowledge produced in academic institutions both within the United States and elsewhere. The collective trauma of colonialism has neither been "worked through" in social identities nor redressed in political economies. It is in this context that the work of decolonization demands an individual and collective response, a social and political engagement. To such work Toni Morrison has committed her entire literary career. "Writing is a certain way of wanting freedom," notes Jean-Paul Sartre. "The 'engaged' writer

knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change, and that one can reveal only by planning to change."<sup>5</sup> This impulse to reveal/educate/change is consistently present in Toni Morrison's work and accounts for much of its emotive force.

(Literary critic Harold Bloom confesses that he "reread[s] Morrison because her imagination, whatever her social purposes, transcends ideology and polemics, and enters again into the literary space occupied only by fantasy and romance of authentic aesthetic dignity.") I would posit, however, that Morrison's work does not transcend ideology; indeed, the following essays attempt to close the tiresome gap between the "aesthetic" and the "ideological" in interpreting her novels. (If Morrison's writing makes aesthetic sense to the reader, it is not in spite of but because of the ideological vision propelling that art. Good writing, as Terry Eagleton explains, "also means having at one's disposal an ideological perspective which can penetrate to the realities of [human] experience in a certain situation."<sup>6</sup>) I am indebted to the historical materialist feminist tradition (that goes back to Raymond Williams and beyond), from which we learn that the literary text is not isolated but embedded in and constituted by the material and historical processes to which it belongs, processes upon which the literary text may exert its own radical longings and determinations.

What we make of these literary determinations is another story. "Make me, remake me," says the unseen narrator in *Jazz*. And in that making and remaking of meaning comes a different kind of emergency, for it is also we who are being remade by the text—reading becomes a profoundly pedagogic process of leading and being led. At the end of the Nobel speech, itself a virtuoso pedagogic performance (*pedagogue*: one who leads a child), the griot says: "I trust you now. I trust you now with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together."<sup>7</sup> The narrative of lack and plenitude, of love and outrage, is registered in the collaborative social space of teller and listener, writer and reader. In that space, we are entrusted with nothing less than the trust of the word/world urging us to make it, remake it.

Alas, this book must go to press without including *Paradise*, Toni Morrison's

3. Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture*, 27.

4. Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven, 1990), 3; Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (New York, 1989), 6.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* (New York, 1966), 42, 14.

6. Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Toni Morrison*, ed. Bloom (New York, 1990), 2, italics mine; Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley, 1976), 8.

7. Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York, 1992), 229; Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture*, 30.

latest novel completing her Dante-like trilogy, begun with the inferno of *Beloved* and sequeled by the purgatorial realm of *Jazz*. I am grateful that her work goes on. During the long journey of writing the essays that follow, I found Morrison a profound teacher, a healer whose medium is the word, and whose terrain is nothing less than the collective *karma* of generations and its reverberations and transformations in time. Musicians, healers and wise storytellers know that words have resonances that go beyond the outer ear. Although I did not consciously recognize this when I began a decade ago, my inner listening responded to the ensouled nature of Morrison's voice, and it has been a pleasure to grow and understand life's complexities alongside her books.

At this juncture, W. S. Merwin speaks well for me:

it has taken me till now  
to be able to say  
even this  
it has taken me this long  
to know what I cannot say.

.....  
Beginning  
I am here  
please  
be ready to teach me  
I am almost ready to learn.<sup>8</sup>

This book is dedicated to my beloved parents, Sangat Singh and Jasmer Kaur, who gave me what they themselves did without, and for always doing the best they could. Sadly, this book must now commemorate my brother Satpreet Grewal, who understood the circles of sorrow and cut through them on January 1, 1998. This book, and so much else in my life, would not have been possible without his healing presence and compassionate wisdom buoying me through the years. I thank Satpreet for giving me that most rare gift, unconditional love. Friends and family join me in thanking him for his exceptional work as a homeopath and teacher, listener, counselor. His blessings continue to blossom in his absence.

Over the years of working on this book, I have become indebted to many

8. W. S. Merwin, "The Piper," in his *The Second Four Books of Poems* (Port Townsend, Wash., 1993), 151-52.

friends, colleagues, and teachers. Among them I would like to thank Barbara Christian for the stimulating discussions of black women's literature and for her encouragement at a time I most needed it; Abdul JanMohamed for challenging me to think further; Linda Morris and Michael Hoffman for their firm support of this project in its early stages at the University of California, Davis; and Lata Mani for spurring my own rethinking of feminist history. I also thank my genial and supportive colleagues in the women's studies department at the University of South Florida.

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Finally, I offer heartfelt thanks to Herleen Kailey for her wonderful spirit and for all the years of sisterhood. And the same to Srinu Narayanan, whose caring friendship, encouragement, and understanding over the years supported the work of this book.

## INTRODUCTION

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of  
that freed self was another.

—Toni Morrison

Social relations are not only received; they are also  
made and can be transformed.

—Raymond Williams

Toni Morrison is part of a long black—and American—literary tradition that finds its full and complicated bloom in her art. (Her novels are multivoiced, multilayered, writerly and speakerly, both popular and literary highbrow.) In her writing the confluence of two streams of narrative tradition is made visible and audible: one the oral tradition of storytelling passed down over generations in her own family and community, custodians of a history far removed from the world of the bourgeois novel, whose narrative tradition is the other Morrison appropriates. At Cornell Morrison studied the stylists of modernist memory, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, both of whom had cracked open the novel to observe more intimately the secular processes of fragmentation and madness. (After them, Morrison takes the novel home to the intimate address of the rural and urban African American tradition from which she came, back to the blues with its longstanding tradition of voicing pain, registering complaint and comfort.) The unrelenting lyrical pressure of her prose aims to unsettle as well as to heal. It charges us with nothing less than the charge of history; (her characters, though seldom in powerful social positions, command their desires in an outlawed agency that puts into crisis the law of the land and the judgment of the witnessing jury of readers.)



[A powerful catalyst for Morrison's work—one so ubiquitous it can escape notice—is what Howard Winant calls the "pervasive crisis of race" facing the contemporary United States: "a crisis no less severe than those of the past. The origins of the crisis are not particularly obscure: the cultural and political meaning of race, its significance in shaping the social structure, and its experiential or existential dimensions all remain profoundly unresolved as the United States approaches the end of the twentieth century. As a result, the society as a whole and the population as individuals suffer from confusion and anxiety about the issue (or complex of issues) we call race." Morrison has increasingly committed herself to addressing issues of race outside her own fiction. Her unpublished drama *Dreaming Emmett*, produced in 1985 to "commemorate the first celebration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a national holiday," was written in response to the 1955 racist killing in Mississippi of a fourteen-year-old black boy named Emmett Till; the play was "intended to symbolize the plight of contemporary black urban youth—their disproportionately high rate of death by violence." In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, a work of literary criticism, Toni Morrison undertakes the task of showing that "Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness—from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrated twentieth-century self." In the national canonical literature, Morrison discovers "a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence." *Playing in the Dark* thus brings to light the various roles played by "the thunderous, theatrical presence of black surrogacy" in the construction of whiteness in the nation's literary imagination.<sup>1</sup>

In assessing the phenomenon of Toni Morrison, we need to keep in mind "the pressures and limits of the social relationships on which as a producer, the author depends"—what Raymond Williams calls "the political economy of writing." We need to take into account the demand for and the reception of writings by black women following the civil rights movement. The contemporary literary renaissance started in 1965 with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and took off in 1970

1. Howard Winant, "Postmodern Racial Politics in the United States: Difference and Inequality," *Socialist Review* (January–March, 1990), 121; Margaret Croyden, "Toni Morrison Tries Her Hand at Playwriting," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, Miss., 1994), 218, 220; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 65, 117, 13.

with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Cade's edition of *The Black Woman*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a remarkable efflorescence. Toni Morrison herself has played an active role in promoting black voices. As editor at Random House, she ensured that black writers would find a receptive space in publishing, that the integrity of their voices would not be compromised by the imposition of alien standards. A host of important black publications (by authors such as Mohammed Ali, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones) have received Morrison's encouragement. It is important to note that this profusion of creative expression has been aided by a "community of cultural workers" that includes black feminist critics and teachers of literature whose receptive work shows, in Hortense Spillers' words, that "traditions are not born. They are made." A tradition "arises not only because there are writers there to make it, but also because there is a strategic audience of heightened consciousness prepared to read and interpret the work as such." Unlike their literary foremothers, writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker had sturdy black bridges already made for them. Their works paralleled the energy generated by the black cultural and political mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s and the black feminist resurgence of the 1980s. In what is now a landmark essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith writes, "A viable, autonomous black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of black women's lives and the creation of consciously black woman-identified art."<sup>2</sup>

Toni Morrison's feminism partakes of the black cultural resistance to liberal white feminism. In "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," she notes that the different histories, and therefore agendas, of white and black women are made apparent in bathroom signs designating "White Ladies" and "Colored Women." Morrison refers to the conflictual power relationship between the white lady and the colored woman in several of her works: in the relationship between Pauline Breedlove and Mrs. Fisher in *The Bluest Eye*; First Corinthians and her poet-mistress Michael Mary Graham in *Song of Solomon*;

2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 193; Hortense J. Spillers, "Afterword: Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction," *Conjuring: Black Women's Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Hortense Spillers and Marjorie Pryse (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 250; Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York, 1985), 4.

Ondine and her young mistress Margaret in *Tar Baby*; Sethe and her owner, Mrs. Garner, in *Beloved*; Vera Louise and True Belle in *Jazz*. Alice Walker joins Morrison in disclaiming bourgeois white feminism by claiming under the name womanist a feminism appropriate to the historical experience and needs of black women.<sup>3</sup> While a black feminist point of view is clearly evident in Toni Morrison's work, it is always contextual and relational, articulated with respect to issues of class and community.<sup>4</sup> While the white-identified individualism of her male and female bourgeois characters is historicized and located within social relations of power and desire, narrative affect is usually on the side of those who are subordinated to bourgeois power.

Historically, the novel is an art form pertaining to the interests and values of the middle class. Morrison says her writing "bears witness" for a middle-class black audience: "I agree with John Berger that peasants don't write novels because they don't need them. They have a portrait of themselves from gossip, tales, music, and some celebrations. That is enough. . . . Now my people, we 'peasants,' have come to the city, that is to say, we live with its values. There is a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values. It's confusing." In another interview Morrison returns to this theme: "when the peasant class, or lower class, or what have you, confronts the middle class, the city, or the upper classes, they are thrown a little bit into disarray." Toni Morrison's novels tend the gap between emergent middle-class black America and its subaltern origins: she has called her work "peasant literature for my people."<sup>5</sup> (Susan Willis situates black women's writing, Morrison's included, in the historical transition from an agrarian to an urban society.) She makes the important point that "migration to the North signifies more than a confrontation with (and contamination by) the white world. It implies a transition in social class." Morrison is a writer with a firm grasp of the lived dynamics of class experience, a subject that has received less critical attention by feminist scholars than the issue of gender. Drawing on experiences as varied as those of her grandparents' southern rural life to her parents' small-town existence in the Midwest to her own life, which includes the cosmopolitan ethos of New York City, Morrison is able to command in her fiction a century's experience

3. Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1971, p. 15; Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York, 1983), xi.

of change affecting African Americans. Wilfred Sheed's observation of Morrison's range of understanding is apt: "Most black writers are privy, like the rest of us, to bits and pieces of the secret, the dark side of their group experience, but Toni Morrison uniquely seems to have all the keys on her chain, like a house detective. . . . She [has] the run of the whole place, from ghetto to small town to ramshackle farmhouse, to bring back a panorama of black myth and reality that [dazzles] the senses."<sup>4</sup>

Morrison's novels may be read as anti-Bildung projects that subvert dominant middle-class ideology. *The Bluest Eye*, an indictment of racism, is also a stinging critique of an educated class of blacks who, in order to avail themselves of the bourgeois privileges of a capitalist economy, have made "individuals" of themselves. The three uneducated whores shunned by the town's respectable folk are presented more favorably than the educated Geraldine and Soaphead Church, whose complicity earns authorial contempt even as it requires our understanding. In *Sula*, the middle-class, color-conscious Helene Wright is treated with much less affection than the lesser-privileged Eva and Hannah Peace. *Song of Solomon's* Milkman Dead, an individualist raised and trapped in the self-centered, bourgeois world of the middle-class nuclear family, has to be rescued from under the myopic vision of his genteel mother and petit-bourgeois father. The rescue is effected by his Aunt Pilate, a peasant woman who even in her isolation and marginality is endowed with formidable strength arising from her nonbourgeois identity. *Tar Baby* inscribes a greater sympathy for the vagabond son of the soil, Son Green, than for the upper-middle-class individualist, Jadine Childs. In an interview in 1981, Morrison shed light on the authorial resentment of Jadine: "There is a new, capitalistic, modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. To produce Jadine, that's what it was for. I think there is some danger in the result of that production." In *Jazz*, Joe Trace is not the New Negro of Alain Locke and the talented tenth of the Harlem Renaissance. The New Negro is the migrant peasant who died so many times he could not help being made new.

4. Toni Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat," Interview with Thomas LeClair in *Conversations*, 120, 121; Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers at Work, 1950-1980*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, N.Y., 1984), 340; Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison, Wis., 1987), 83-109; Wilfred Sheed, "Improbable Assignment: *Tar Baby*," *Atlantic* (April, 1981), 119.

5. Morrison, interview with Charles Ruas, in *Conversations*, 105.

Thus an identity claimed by the privileged few—the educated cosmopolitan elite—is problematized and revised from the perspective of those who had no access to the bourgeois modes of self-making.

In an interview Morrison said that “black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations”:

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other's throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*—it's nothing less but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, “I am not *that*.” So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me. . . . It wasn't negative to them—it was unifying. When they got off the boat, the second word they learned was “nigger.” . . . Every immigrant knew he would not come at the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was us.

However, the idea that others have constructed their unity through being nonblack does not imply that being black, in turn, promotes unity. In fact, the colonial policy of racialization (in which color lines organized class hierarchy) did not facilitate the formation of a collectivity. The very idea of collectivity is something that must be imagined or created, the divisions historicized and understood; it must be narrated or performed. As Benedict Anderson observed, this collective self-composition is the creative project of nationalism. In the case of Afro-America, where nationalism has literally no *ground* of its own, the project of nationalism or counternationalism becomes of necessity a cultural one. As Wahneema Lubiano notes, the question of black nationhood implies “the activation of a narrative of identity and interest” against the history of the U.S. state; it is a discourse that “functions as a defense against cultural imperialism.”<sup>6</sup>

Internationally, Toni Morrison is part of a growing body of contemporary writers who are responding to imperatives of cultural critique, reclamation, and redefinition—imperatives broadly termed *postcolonial*. Helen Tiffin defines the

6. Toni Morrison, qtd. in Bonnie Angelo, “The Pain of Being Black,” *Time*, May 22, 1989, p. 120; Wahneema Lubiano, in a paper on black cultural nationalism delivered at the Modern Language Association Convention (New York, 1992).

“dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority” along with the endeavour to “define a denied or outlawed self” as one of the main decolonizing endeavors of postcolonial literatures. N’gugi defines decolonization as a “quest for relevance” wherein the emphasis is interior, directed toward postcolonial society rather than outwardly toward the colonizer. Morrison’s creative project has an affinity with the work of decolonization undertaken by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. Although they are very different writers, note what Achebe considers “an adequate revolution for [him] to espouse” in his writing: “to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word. Here, I think my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul.”<sup>7</sup>

In her essay “Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame,” Eva Cherniavsky notes that “a postcolonial approach to U.S. history and culture would speak to the contradictions of a naturalized/nationalized colonial domination,” one that “systematically displaces both indigenous peoples and nonwhite labor from the social and symbolic territory of the consensual Euro-American state.”<sup>8</sup> Just as the wealth and labor of the colonies consolidated the identity of Western Europe, so the colonized land of Native Americans and the colonized labor of African Americans provided the early cohesion of the nation of immigrants, a term that is itself part of an obfuscating nationalist vocabulary.

The term *domestic* (or *internal*) *colonialism* was developed by black historians in the 1960s and early 1970s to refer to the experience of black people in America. The theory of internal colonialism situates the African slave trade within the expansionist demands of Euro-American capitalism. According to Robert Allen, “the most profound conclusion to be drawn from a survey of the black experience in America [is] to consider Black America as a semi-colony.” Social critic Harold Cruse explains it thus: “The only factor which differentiates the Negro’s status from that of a pure colonial status is that his position is maintained in the ‘home’ country in close proximity to the dominant racial group.” Black feminist scholars such as Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, and

7. Helen Tiffin, “Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXIII (1988), 171; Thiongo, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 87; Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York, 1988), 44.

8. Eva Cherniavsky, “Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame,” *Boundary 2*, XXIII (1996), 85–110.

Angela Davis have documented the various ways in which black women served the model of white womanhood by filling the role of the "self-consolidating Other" (Gayatri Spivak's succinct phrase). In a similar vein, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* examines the national shadow play wherein an unacknowledged blackness inheres in and constitutes white identity and unity, and spurs the anxiety that underlies the accomplished national persona of a "new white man" in the writings of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Poe, and others.<sup>9</sup> In the tradition of postcolonial writing and criticism, Morrison rewrites the nation from a perspective committed to what has been excised. Her novels mean to revise dominant historiography, reconsidering the scene of colonial violation from the inside, from subaltern perspectives hitherto ignored.

Morrison's literary project involves confronting the national chasms of race, class, and gender as they are lived by individuals. A cursory glance at some of the epigraphs of her novels clarifies the nature of the problems Morrison tackles in her work. The epigraph of *Song of Solomon* pursues the subject of liberating a suppressed identity: "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names," and that of *Tar Baby* acknowledges the difficulty of a postcolonial solidarity: "For it hath been declared / unto me of you, my brethren . . . that there are contentions among you." Solidarity can best be established on the collective ground of past oppression, as evident in both the dedication of *Beloved*, for "Sixty Million / and more," and its epigraph, "I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved." As the epigraph to *Jazz* indicates, Morrison's novels may be read as a designation of divisions and a prodigious attempt to historicize them. Satya Mohanty's comment about *Beloved* illuminates what is at stake in a postcolonial return to the archives: "[*Beloved*] is one of the most challenging of postcolonial texts because it indicates the extent to which the search for a genuinely noncolonial moral and cultural identity depends on a revisionary historiography. We cannot really claim ourselves morally or politically until we have reconstructed our collective identity, reexamined our dead and our disremembered. The project is not simply one of adding to one's ancestral line, for . . . it involves fundamental

9. Robert Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Garden City, N.Y., 1970), 2; Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution?* (New York, 1968), 76-77; Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, "Rani of Sirmur," in *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, July, 1984, ed. Francis Barker, et al. (2 vols.; Colchester, Eng., 1985), I, 130; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, *passim*.

discoveries about what ancestry is, what continuity consists in, how cultural meanings do not just sustain themselves through history but are in fact materially embodied and fought for." *Beloved* allows us to see that a revisionary postcolonial historiography must also be feminist. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have insisted, it must "acknowledg[e] that each aspect of reality is gendered," and that it "may be feminist without being, exclusively, women's history."<sup>10</sup>

For Morrison, language implies agency—"an act with consequences." The first sentence of Morrison's Nobel speech addressed to the members of the Swedish academy is, "Ladies and Gentlemen: Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me."<sup>11</sup> Given the context of cultural and political domination, we can appreciate why storytelling assumes such a critical function in both African American and Native American literature, why in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* we are told:

[Stories] aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.

.....  
You don't have anything  
if you don't have the stories.

As Raymond Williams argues, literature is part of "a whole social process, which, as it is lived, is not only process but is an active history, made up of the realities of formation and of struggle."<sup>12</sup> (Toni Morrison's contemporary fiction self-consciously takes its place in the continuum of sociopolitical struggle that has historically characterized African American experience.)

In their discussion of Kafka's writing, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari coin the term *minor literature* to denote "that which a minority constructs out of a major language." Far from denoting a diminutive function, it is "the glory" of minor literature "to be the revolutionary force for all literature." In its salient

10. Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," *Cultural Critique*, XXIV (Spring, 1993), 67; Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, qtd. in R. Radhakrishnan, "Nationalism, Gender, and the Narrative of Identity," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, et al. (New York, 1992), 79.

11. Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture*.

12. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 210.

features they see the conditions of all revolutionary literature: "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation."<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's assertions invite testing in relation to the works of Toni Morrison, who constructs her African American literary worlds out of the major language of English, just as Kafka, a Czech Jew, deterritorialized high German.

① Morrison certainly deterritorializes the English language (Entering the bourgeois aesthetic field of the Anglo-American novel, Morrison appropriates classical and biblical myths and the canonical writings of high modernism and places them in the matrix of black culture. In this she is supported by the long vernacular tradition of work songs, spirituals, and blues that had already appropriated the Bible and renamed the Israelites as the people chosen from Africa. Morrison's own practice of naming not only deterritorializes Anglo-European usage, it signifies on its history—consider the biblical names in *Song of Solomon*, or *Jazz* with its southern towns of Wordsworth, Troy, Vienna, and Rome. What makes this appropriation so impressive is the claim made on the unyielding land by African American desire—the force that breaks through the liminality of a history of suffering, enlarging the space of marginality until it opens out into the entire field of history on its own terms. *nam*)

② A second characteristic that marks minor literatures is that "everything in them is political. In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background. . . . Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, because a whole other story is vibrating within it."<sup>14</sup> Minor literature, in other words, constructs a different discourse, whose burden is to challenge dominant ideologies and representations by claiming an alternative epistemological and ethical space. The social milieu cannot serve as a mere background—and it never does in Morrison's work—because what is at stake in minor literature is precisely the reconstitution of an untenable social milieu; it aims to reorient the reader's relationship to an existing reality by foregrounding the environment.

A third feature Deleuze and Guattari observe in minor literatures is that

13. Deleuze and Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature*, 16, 19, 18.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

"everything takes on a collective value." Because collective consciousness is not operant "in external life," or "the conditions of a collective enunciation" are absent, "literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation": "it is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility."<sup>15</sup> In novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*, a localized individual concern—Pecola's problem, Sula's heresy, Sethe's haunting, Joe and Violet's violence—sets into motion a dialogic of memory in which the individual concern is decentered and becomes the enunciation of the collective. *② a collective value*

A fourth significant characteristic of minor literature is that it makes language "vibrate with a new intensity" partly deriving from "terms that connote pain." Deleuze and Guattari refer to "an intensive utilization [of language] that makes it take flight along creative lines of escape," "us[ing] syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry."<sup>16</sup> (One of the most remarkable elements of Morrison's prose is the sensational or visceral evocation of pain; its power stems from the author's ability to translate the experience of political inequities and wrongs with lyrical effect.) *④*

Toni Morrison's fiction makes us reevaluate individuals via the complex socio-political history that bespeaks them. Her novels aim to redistribute the pressure of accountability from the axis of the individual to that of the collective. Her art draws its imperatives from personal and collective histories: the maternal and paternal inheritance of a working-class consciousness with southern roots; the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s with its reclamation of oral traditions of storytelling and folk music as authentic modes of cultural expression; the liberation narrative of black history itself. As an African American novelist within the American literary tradition, Morrison interrogates national identity and reconstructs social memory. It is a truism of contemporary understanding that public identity is the product of nationalism, whose work it is to link a people dispersed by difference to a common past. As historians such as Benedict Anderson have pointed out, this common past is not simply there to *28 1. Me: 197*

15. *Ibid.*, 17.

16. *Ibid.*, 22, 26 (authors' emphasis).

access but is made available by imagined or constructed narratives of the nation. However—and this is a central question Morrison's work addresses—what happens to the identity of a group within a nation built upon its marginalization? Further, in what ways can a marginalized identity construct its own knowledge? What new modes of narration are required to voice its presence? It is not surprising that Toni Morrison's literary project has affinities with the tasks of historiography. Writing the past, in historian Michael Roth's words, "is one of the crucial vehicles for reconstructing or reimagining a community's connections to its traditions. This is especially true for groups who have been excluded from the mainstream national histories that have dominated Western historiography, and who have suffered a weakening of group memory as part of their experience of modernity."<sup>17</sup>

Morrison's project of remembering must be appreciated in the context of the privatization of individual memory. As Michael Roth notes, "memory in modernity is seen less as a public, collective function than as a private, psychological faculty: it is imagined by philosophers and doctors from the eighteenth century on as being internal to each of us, at the core of the psychological self. We are what we remember. . . . But the psychologization of memory makes it extremely difficult for people to share the past, for them to have confidence that they have a collective connection to what has gone before." In Morrison's novels memory "becomes a locus of struggle over the boundary between the individual and the collective." The novels exploit the idiosyncratic compositions of individual memory, the unique particularities of personal reminiscence, only to re-collect them in the frame of a larger, unfolding history. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze observed that "the rise of popular therapeutic discourse in North America has gone hand in hand with widespread political disengagement." As they succinctly put it, "historical trauma is displaced by individual drama," resulting in "a shift in moral focus from collective obligations to narratives of individual suffering."<sup>18</sup> Morrison means to reverse this pattern. As her various characters attest, their lives do not make sense outside history: the meaning of personal suffering is available only within a collective temporality.

17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 1983); Michael Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York, 1995), 10.

18. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage*, 9; Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds. *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York, 1996), xx, xxiv.

[The post-Faulknerian American novel is of a genre that allows for the detailed exploration of interiority—a hallmark of Morrison's fiction, with its array of characters the reader comes to know with astonishing intimacy. In fact, Morrison's appeal and achievement lies in her ability to create individuals, with all their idiosyncracies, while anchoring subjectivity in a collective history without which it would have little meaning. This achievement stems from an ideological position not readily available from the position of bourgeois individualism. As Kumkum Sangari notes, "Individuality is a truly connective definition—that which connects the subject to a collectivity—so that it is the richness of contextualization that sets off the notion of personal particularity and differentiates the individual, rather than the social collectivity itself as being subject to the unique perception of the bourgeois individual." Morrison pays a great deal of attention to individual consciousness; we are made to see what constitutes a particular character's subjectivity and what diminishes or augments the humanity of that character. But in that appraisal Morrison compels us to evaluate not just the individual but the entire complex sociopolitical history that constitutes the individual.] What Toni Morrison said in 1976 of Gayl Jones's first novel, *Corregidora*, is most applicable to her own work: what "accounts for the success" is "the weight of history working itself out in the life of one, two, three people: I mean a large idea, brought down small, and at home, which gives it a universality and a particularity which makes it extraordinary."<sup>19</sup>

Morrison's novels allow us to examine the quality of human relationships under the constraints of historical processes and social relations, in the context of a collective. The emphasis on the interiority of her characters, the acknowledgment and enactment of desire in all its unruly forms, becomes a way of countering the diminishing of the subordinated, alienated self. Morrison remarked in a television interview that people often say her characters appear larger than life; she countered that they are "as large as life, not larger. Life is large."<sup>20</sup> That individuals' large desires remain unfulfilled or thwarted creates the ambience of loss—a loss that adds powerful affect to the critique of history.

Through the evocation of specific, historicized landscapes of loss and erosion, the reader is made to see in individual loss—usually incurred by exceeding

19. Kumkum Sangari, "Politics of the Possible," *Cultural Critique*, VII (Fall, 1987); Morrison, "Intimate Things in Place," interview with Robert Stepto, in *Conversations*, 29.

20. Toni Morrison, *Toni Morrison*, an RM Arts Production, 1987.



social limits—the limitations of the socius. It is thus that emotions of loss become charged with the intelligence of a critique. By endowing pain—itsself mute and inchoate and all too personal—with a narrative that is as intelligible as it is social, Morrison makes room for recovery that is at once cognitive and emotional, therapeutic and political. Loss is both historicized and mourned so that it acquires a collective force and a political understanding. [Morrison's fictive circles of sorrow invite readers to become conscious of the terrain of their lives, to re-cognize the terrain as not simply individual or personal but as thoroughly social, traversed by the claims of the past, occupied by conflicting ideologies of identity (class, gender, race, nationhood) that give rise to the boundaries of the self.] In the novels, the place of the individual is de-isolated, the boundaries of the self shown to be permeated by the collective struggle of historical agents who live the long sentence of history by succumbing to (repeating), contesting, and remaking it.

Each novel charts a destruction recalled through the mnemonic prisms of multiple characters; the story of destruction and loss becomes a historical and political testimony that we as readers participate in as belated witnesses. As the story of loss is transferred to us, we become its interpreters, collaborating in the work of understanding. Each novel draws us into its circles of sorrow with the imperative to make sense; we do so by yielding our own knowledge of destruction and loss, by struggling alongside the characters. Unlike the healing transference between client and analyst in the consulting room—where the healing is private and concealed—the literary therapeutic narrative is social and collective, opening out into the politics of the world. The strategy of Morrison's novels is always to make sense of the individual psyche and memory in wider social and political terms. As a chronicler of African American experience, Morrison's contribution has been to create, in the face of public dissociation of a painful past, a space where the traumatic material may find a coherent articulation and a collective dimension. Her novels create a "public space of trauma," a space Laurence Kirmayer defined as "provid[ing] a consensual reality and collective memory through which the fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed, and displayed with a tacit assumption of validity." The construction of such a space is all the more urgent given "the failure of the world to bear witness." "The social world fails to bear witness for many reasons. Even reparative accounts of the terrible things that happen to people (violations, traumas, losses) are warded off because of their capacity to

sorrow  
social  
terrain

key words

to create vicarious fear and pain and because they constitute a threat to social and political arrangements."<sup>21</sup>

The work of recovery in Morrison's fiction entails not only the representation of a knowledge excised from dominant understanding, but also the healing from a history that has visited trauma upon its subjects. The function of collective memory in Toni Morrison's work is political as well as therapeutic. (As Roth notes, "In addition to establishing a we-group, claiming a legacy of oppression can enable individuals to work through the traumas of their collective and personal histories. The avoidance of a painful past or the failure to recognize its lasting effects often creates disabling patterns of behavior that only cause further pain.") As recent studies of trauma relating to the experience of Holocaust survivors have shown, healing depends on the validation of traumatic events. The traumatized do not heal under suppression (amnesia), although forgetting is a characteristic response to trauma. Trauma's unconscious (pathological) mode of expression is to repeat itself, to reenact in a different guise what has never been redressed or represented. The survivor, in the words of Dori Laub, "is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both." What frees the survivor from this entrapment entails the "therapeutic process . . . of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event." This is precisely what Toni Morrison does. Shoshana Felman's remarks on literature as testimony clarify the relationships between narrative, history/trauma, and healing that are central to Morrison's writing: "the task of the literary testimony is . . . to open up in that belated witness [the reader] . . . the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one's own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement."<sup>22</sup> Toni Morrison's highly visceral and sensuous prose effects this immediacy of experience.

21. Laurence Kirmayer, "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation," in *Tense Past*, 190, 192.

22. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage*, 10–11; Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Laub (New York, 1991), 69; Felman, "Camus' The Plague, or a Monument to Witnessing," in *Testimony*, 108.

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Addressing the social changes taking place in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin observed that the useful "art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out." Contrasting the oral tradition of storytelling with the written one of the novel, Benjamin remarked that what is eminently present in the former and missing in the latter is the tale's offering of counsel. For him, this move from oral to written is an organic process in which something is both lost and gained: "nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a 'symptom of decay,' let alone a 'modern' symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing." Similarly, Morrison notes the demise of a grounding world view within urban African American communities dislocated from ancestral wisdom and communal forms of expression. A sense of responsibility and urgency characterizes Morrison's comments: "for larger and larger numbers of black people, this sense of loss has grown, and the deeper the conviction that something valuable is slipping away from us, the more necessary it has become to find some way to hold on to the useful past without blocking off the possibilities of the future." Present in Morrison's expressed need to hold on to certain cultural forms of the past is a framework of cultural domination within which these cultural forms have played an oppositional role. Thus Morrison hopes to have her fiction accomplish/replace "what the music did for blacks": "the music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore. My people are being devoured."<sup>23</sup>

Morrison's invocation of black music is significant, for it is related to a nonbourgeois consciousness not co-opted by the dominant culture. LeRoi Jones wrote that in the face of "the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society," music "was the one vector out of African culture impossible to eradicate. It signified the existence of an Afro-American, and the existence of an Afro-American culture." The musical consciousness was displaced as integration into white America compelled the marginalization of such cultural forms. Hence, for the middle class to have "gotten 'free' of all the blues tradition"

23. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), 87; Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1974, p. 14; Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat," 121.

was to have been deprived of a vital sense of connection to the resistant traditions of the past. Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* is an eloquent and moving account of a black couple, the Johnsons, who had done just that—"gotten 'free'"—and found they had lost an integral part of themselves. The widowed Avey Johnson recalls the significance of the music that had been abandoned in their haste to leave behind a life of poverty and limitations: "Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives. . . . Something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible." And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs, "had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power." They spent their lives in pursuit of a different kind of power, one promised by assimilation, a house in the white suburbs; "running with the blinders on they had allowed that richness, protection and power to slip out." Avey bitterly mourns the loss: "What kind of bargain had they struck?"<sup>24</sup>

Marshall's Jay Johnson has much in common with Morrison's Macon Dead, the patriarch in *Song of Solomon* who is driven to amass worldly goods with a compulsion born of the insecurity of dispossession. In a scene of nostalgic hearkening, Macon Dead stands hidden outside his sister Pilate's home, his head pressed to the window, watching and listening as Pilate sings the blues with her daughter and granddaughter, Reba and Hagar. His distance from that setting becomes the measure of his own cultural and spiritual alienation. Hagar demonstrates what Morrison means when she claims, "the music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore." Hagar is easy prey to an urban consumer culture, a world in which Pilate's song is muted and her wisdom marginalized. Hence Morrison's emphatic statement: "There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks." Historically, these expressive cultural forms have been means of forging a collective black consciousness, of keeping alive an awareness of oppression and resistance, of soul force. In wanting her novels to perform the function of black music, Morrison intends her art to forge a historical consciousness, to embody and create a communal intersubjectivity.

In the following passage from *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison reveals something about her own craft: "The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only

24. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York, 1963), 131, 176; Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York, 1983) 137, 139.

in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black and white rectangles and taut skins . . . would know how to connect the heart of a red water melon to the asafetida bag . . . to the fists of money to the lemonade in a mason jar . . . and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom." Words seek to accomplish the emotive-cognitive resonance belonging to music; what we audition in Morrison's novels is the "pervading ache of freedom." This ache accounts for what in Morrison's prose might appear as linguistic extravagance. This pervading ache is "the insistent pressure of *freedom* as the *absent horizon*"—the point Kumkum Sangari made regarding Gabriel García Márquez's narratives, in which absent freedom is "precisely that which is made present and possible by its absence—the lives that people have never lived *because* of the lives they are forced to live or have chosen to live. That which is desired and that which exists, the sense of abundance and the sense of waste, are dialectically related."<sup>25</sup>

In Toni Morrison's art we witness the lyric gesture and force of a minor literature doing the difficult work of decolonization, demystification, and social redress within the dominant language. In attempting to account for the compelling power of this particular literature, I want to add the word *soul*, the dimension least theorized in literary criticism and more acknowledged in music. Toni Morrison is one of the most soulful literary soloists of our time. Explaining the "emotional substance" of jazz, Paul Berliner makes the following comment: "Part and parcel of originality and taste is a performance's 'soul,' its 'spirituality,' its 'integrity of expression.' . . . Soulful performances embody such affective qualities as pathos, intensity, urgency, fire, and energy. . . . Musicians use the term *energy* both literally and figuratively. Just as it requires energy to produce and project sounds on musical instruments, it requires energy for performers to draw upon feelings as they infuse sounds with emotion. Moreover, the sound waves themselves comprise a form of energy that touches listeners physically, potentially also touching them emotionally." Morrison inscribes her own awareness of the energetic properties of sound; consider these lines from *Be-loved*: the singing "voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe

25. Sangari, "Politics of the Possible," 176.

and she trembled like the baptized in its wash." The dimension of sound in language is potentially a musical or harmonic dimension, an ethereal register in which even the written voice can sing. Here, I can do no more than acknowledge that harmonic dimension in Toni Morrison's prose; its source is the spiritual principle of liberation that animates her writing, a principle I have attempted to elucidate here in its historic, social, and political terms.<sup>26</sup>

26. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, 1994) 255–56; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), 261.