

Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert

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Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert

For my boys

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1 Situating Morrison in (African-) American Literary Criticism

The novels of Toni Morrison have inspired volumes of literary criticism over the last three decades. The critical approaches to her novels include feminist, Marxist, deconstructionist, Lacanian, New Historicist, and semiotic analyses, and everything in between. Despite this wide range of criticism, these approaches can be divided into two central branches, those which argue how Morrison is *apart from* the broad tradition of American literature and those which argue she is *a part of* this tradition. Not surprisingly, these two branches are related to the central debate that divides schools of thought on African-American literature in general: politics versus aesthetics. The “political” and “aesthetic” critics both identify a similar “problem” in Morrison’s work: the lack of resolution in her novels.

This monograph addresses the problem of resolution that both branches of Morrison critics find in her novels: the discontent on both sides of the debate on Morrison’s narrative strategies led me to investigate the relationship between genre and race in her novels. In this project, I analyze how Morrison’s narrative strategies in *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz*, and *Beloved* revise conventional genres to interrupt the dominant cultural logics about race and literature of which they are comprised.

Morrison’s novels enter the literary scene at the end of a long discourse on African-American literature that is still prevalent today. The “political” school of thought on the African-American novel can be traced back to W. E. B. Du Bois’ 1926 essay, “The Criteria of Negro Art,” in which he argues that aesthetics only have value if they further a political cause. That same year Langston Hughes, in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” makes a similar argument, insisting that racial authenticity should be privileged over aesthetics. In 1937, Richard Wright, in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” extends this argument to include the forms of African-American discourse (as is implied in the title of his essay). The Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s was a continuation of this argument, in which critics, like Addison Gayle in *The Black Aesthetic*, argue aesthetics should be subsumed beneath politics (Connor xvii).

The Black Aesthetic movement and its predecessors comprise an important contribution to literary studies. In *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison*

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Marc C. Connor points out that the Black Aesthetic movement “sought to call the hegemony of the western aesthetic tradition into question,” including its values and cultural logics (xvii). In these ways, the Black Aesthetic critics are the forerunners of contemporary Marxist, Cultural Studies, and Postcolonial critics.

The successors to the Black Aesthetic movement are those who question the appropriateness of contemporary western critical methodologies applied to African-American literature, of which Morrison's novels are an important part. Indeed, given the assumptions of these schools of thought, the question remains whether poststructuralist literary theories and critical methodologies are not themselves another form of oppression. One such critic of Morrison's work is Barbara Rigney, who prefers to use French feminist theory to ground her analysis because she understands these theories as “largely outside the myth of American homogeneity” and “freer than most American theorists of the thumbprint of patriarchal discourse” (3). Furthermore, Rigney defines blackness in Morrison's work as a dissidence that embraces a state of female consciousness as well as racial identity and that lies beyond the laws of patriarchy (3). In *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, Rigney argues how Morrison emphasizes “cultural otherness, for she guides her reader through metaphoric jungles, through representations of the conjure world, and through images of an Africa of the mind that is repressed but never totally lost or forgotten, a part of the unconscious which surfaces in racial memory, particularly for African American[s]” (3). Rigney's separation of her critical apparatus (as much as possible) from the traditional western mode of criticism shows how some scholarship is still informed by the values and assumptions of the Black Aesthetic movement.

As powerful as the Black Aesthetic was (and still is), it did not account for all African-American novels, novelists, or critics of the twentieth century. There were several artists who dared to privilege aesthetics over politics, or at least did not define aesthetics as subject to politics in their work. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in which she argues that race is neither a restraint nor a burden to the artist, and Ralph Ellison's response to Richard Wright's theories, in which he argues that the novel does not necessarily have to be political or a form of social protest, are both examples of how novelists defended their alternative literary theories and modes of representation. For both Hurston and Wright, the price of their dissent was extreme public backlash, which led to critical dialectics about the definition of African-American literature; Hurston vs. Hughes, Ellison vs. Wright. It was not until the 1980s, after Robert B. Stepto published *From Behind the Veil* and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. started to publish his prolific work on black writing, that studies of the aesthetics of African-American literature, as well as its political power, started to gain ground in criticism. For example, in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. questions the predominance of sociological approaches to black literature, arguing for the literary text as a “rhetorical

structure" with its own "complex set of rules" that demands wider critical paradigms (5). Though Stepto and Gates faced their share of criticism, their literary theories have become part of the critical canon of discourse on African-American literature and have helped recover those writers, like Hurston, who were once shunned by the Black Aesthetic critics.

In addition to these branches of criticism of the African-American novel that represent contemporary approaches to her work, Morrison herself has spoken a great deal about her own writing, especially in response to the "aesthetics vs. politics" debate. A simple summary of Morrison's response to this debate is that she resists taking sides, and insists rather on "both/and." For example, when asked about whether the primary role of the novel is to illuminate social reality or to stretch our imagination, Morrison responds, "It really is about stretching. But in a way that you have to bear witness to what *is*" (qtd. in Moyers 273). However, Morrison clearly seems to be against the kinds of constraints Hughes and Wright advocated: "No one should tell any writer what to write. [. . .] I thought one of the goals of the whole business of liberation was to make it possible for us not to be silenced, no matter what we said" (qtd. in Washington 237). Nevertheless, Morrison insists on the interrelatedness of aesthetics and politics in literature: "I don't believe any real artists have ever been non-political. They may have been insensitive to this particular plight or insensitive to that, but they were political because that's what an artist is—a politician" (qtd. in "Conversation" 4). In interview after interview throughout her career, Morrison is continually prodded about her stance in this "aesthetics vs. politics" debate, but she never privileges one side over the other.

Both political and aesthetic critics identify their respective causes as issues central to the study of Morrison's novels. Though their understanding of Morrison's work may differ, both sets of critics note "the lack of resolution" as a "problem" in Morrison's novels. For example, successors to the Black Aesthetic movement often fault Morrison with the omission of a clear political message; while it is clear to them her thematic content is always related to race, they do not understand why she is not more explicit about her political views on race, in other words, why she does not write more "representatively." For example, Sandra Pouchet Paquet, in "The Ancestor as Foundation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*," complains that Morrison does not offer a "formula for cultural stability" (204). Similarly, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, in "*Tar Baby*: A Reflection of Morrison's Developed Class Consciousness," first praises Morrison for representing the "schism that exists in the African community, the class conflict that African people must resolve in order to form an effective, unified force against their primary enemy, capitalism/imperialism," and then condemns her for not defining an "alternative existence for African people" (90, 91). These critics understand providing this "resolution" as a political and social responsibility of the author, and therefore find fault with Morrison for not providing it in her novels.

The “aesthetic” critics cite the same problem—the lack of resolution—with Morrison’s novels, but from a formalist point of view. They often have difficulties reconciling the way Morrison rewrites conventions in her novels. To these critics, the problem is not the lack of a political message, but the lack of a coherent narrator, conventional characters, or a resolution of the plot. For example, Barbara Williams Lewis, in “The Function of Jazz in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” cites this as “a flaw in Morrison’s writings” and is suspicious “that Toni Morrison, with all her great talent, simply does not know how to bring closure to her narratives” (272). Indeed, whether one considers when Milkman flies into the air at the end of *Song of Solomon*, when Son returns to the briar patch “lickety-split” at the end of *Tar Baby*, when Pecola is left talking and twitching on the garbage heap of her community in *The Bluest Eye*, or when the novel *Jazz* directly addresses its readers, Morrison’s conclusions to her novels seem to resist conventional types of “resolution.” Though aesthetic critics praise Morrison, they are constantly frustrated by how her novels break with the conventions of narration, characterization, and conclusion of novels.

This book-length study addresses the problem of “resolution,” whether defined as resolving political problems in narrative or meeting the conventional expectations of readers, which all of Morrison’s critics find in her novels. To answer these critics, I analyze the relationship between genre and race, and demonstrate how Morrison’s narrative strategies in *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz*, and *Beloved* revise conventional genres to interrupt the dominant cultural logics about race and the literature of which they are comprised.

Far from being faults with Morrison’s literary abilities, these narrative strategies are intentional. For example, in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison discusses how the beginnings of her novels, down to the very first line, are carefully crafted (202). Moreover, in interviews, she reveals that her writing process actually begins with her idea of a conclusion (Naylor 206–207). The reasons for these conscious revisions (or Morrison’s resistance to resolution), then, are significant. Though a few critics state Morrison uses and revises forms, none as yet show how or why. For example, Justine Tally, in *The Story of Jazz* writes:

Toni Morrison chooses a different popular genre on which to base each successive novel, only to subvert some of the specific genre’s major premises. [. . .] Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), takes its cue from the *memoire*; *Sula* (1973) from the fairy tale; *Song of Solomon* (1977) from the romance quest; *Tar Baby* (1981) from the fugitive story; *Beloved* (1987) from the ghost story; and *Paradise* (1998) from the western. (Tally 31)

Though I disagree with the genres Tally identifies with each novel, I also recognize Morrison’s complex texts are not reducible to a single genre. However, to analyze how Morrison revises conventional genres to interrupt

the dominant cultural logics about race and the literature of which they are comprised, the most logical choices are the ones suggested by the subject matter. For example, because *The Bluest Eye* is primarily about girls growing up, the most logical genre which to analyze in relationship to the novel is the bildungsroman, rather than the *memoire*.

In the tradition of the American novel, the relationship between genre and race has been largely determined by the dominant culture. By rejecting and revising conventions, especially to account for race, Morrison rewrites the genres in American literature. By resisting "resolution," Morrison also rewrites the role of "narrative truth"; rather than a political message inherent in the text or an interpretable message dependent on conventions, the "truth" of Morrison's novels is left in the reader's hands. Because language, as Morrison points out in her Nobel lecture, is "an act with consequences," it is important to define how "dominant culture," "race," "genre," and "narrative truth" are used in this project before reading the detailed analyses of Morrison's novels.

My understanding of culture is influenced by Marxist and postcolonial theory, hence my use of the term "dominant culture" throughout this project. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, identifies this trend in national cultures as "an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance" (15). It is this same function of culture that Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* defines as a result of hegemony in and of cultural ideologies. According to Williams, hegemony is the culture's "insistence on relating the 'whole social process' to specific distributions of power and influence," which he terms ideology (108). Ideology is not just a set of ideas and beliefs, but a "lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values" (109). This is the process out of which hegemony and its resulting dominant and subordinate cultures are developed. Williams explains:

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology', nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as 'manipulation' or 'indoctrination'. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture', but a culture which also has to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (110)

While the subordinate culture has "this ideology imposed on its otherwise different consciousness, which it must struggle to sustain or develop

against 'ruling-class ideology,' a dominant culture "has' this ideology in relatively pure and simple forms" (109). Therefore, when the term "dominant culture" is used throughout this project, it stands for the cultural construction of the conventions of a lived system of meanings and values that are supposed to represent reality, and in their representation of reality reconfirm this system of meanings and values.

The dominant culture's conventions, however, are particularly problematic for writers and readers who are not members of the dominant culture. Narratives of difference—be it of race, gender, or religion—often break with the conventions of the dominant culture, sometimes for the very purpose of demonstrating the biases of the conventions. As one can understand from the debate in African-American literature in the last century described in this chapter, one of the major shifts in literary criticism has been to focus on the relationship between hegemony and western critical methodologies. For example, in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison wonders

whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (5)

The thematic and formal hegemony of these characteristics is precisely what Fredric Jameson and Mikhail Bakhtin identify in their critical texts on narrative theory. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson defines ideology in terms of a narrative model. Jameson understands art as an ideological form of consciousness because of its power of allusion: a novel, or any symbolic act, produces its social context even as it reacts against it, and thus it provides a textual avenue toward the recovery of history (79). In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin comments on this process of recovering history through the dialogic and heteroglossic form of the novel:

even in those eras where the hegemony has long since been displaced—in the already historical epochs of language consciousness—a mythological feeling for the authority of language and a faith in the unmediated transformation into a seamless unity of the entire sense, the entire expressiveness inherent in that authority, are still powerful enough in all higher ideological genres to exclude the possibility of any *artistic* use of linguistic speech diversity in the major literary forms. The resistance of a unitary, canonic language, of a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity, is still too strong for heteroglossia to relativize and decenter literary and language consciousness. The verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off

and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages. (370)

Bakhtin's comments on the limits of the novel to counter hegemony are significant to understanding how Morrison's novels revise genres in this study, and again, closely relate to the polemic of African-American literary theory. On the one hand, the canon of American literature and its conventions puts writers in a difficult position; one has to be literate in those conventions order to break them. On the other, writing effectively for a political purpose demands an audience literate in "reading" those conventions, which in turn often requires writers to employ conventions as a way of leading a reader through the narrative. So, while the assumption of this project is that formalism and ideology are linked in narrative, Morrison's novels cannot completely break with the traditions of American literature. However, Bakhtin's prediction that decentering can only occur when a novel "becomes conscious of itself as only one among *other* cultures and languages" support an optimistic reading that Morrison's novels and their increasing canonical status may signal just such a change in American literature.

Though one may analyze how Morrison's novels revise any narratives of cultural categories of the dominant culture, this study focuses mainly on the relationship between genre and race. For race is the centripetal and centrifugal force at the center of the debate in African-American literature, as well as the "problems" critics identify with "the lack of resolution" in Morrison's novels. However, there is no shortage of debate over the definition of race. Race is a signifier without a signified; science has disproved any biological definition of race, and an entire (similarly un-signified) language is employed to talk about race without using the word: "ethnicity," "culture," "identity." Nevertheless, perceptions of differences between people are real, differences the word "race" attempts to define, differences which affect how the social system of the dominant culture operates. For example, in *Playing in the Dark* Toni Morrison describes the consequences of literary language's definitions of these differences: a language "can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and languages which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in [her] work" (x). The definition of race I employ in this book is informed by Critical Race Theory, including the writings of Angela P. Harris, Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Robert S. Chang. I understand race as a construct of the dominant culture of the United States used as a cultural category to define people. In *Race Matters*, Cornell West describes how race is a construction influenced by many cultural categories and undermines essentialist definitions of race:

any claim to black authenticity—beyond that of being a potential object of racist abuse and an heir to a grand tradition of black struggle—is contingent on one's political definition of black interest and

one's ethical understanding of how this interest relates to individuals and communities in and outside black America. In short, blackness is a political and ethical construct. Appeals to black authenticity ignore this fact; such appeals hide and conceal the political and ethical dimensions of blackness. [. . .] Every claim to racial authenticity presupposes elaborate conceptions of political and ethical relations of interests, individuals, and communities. Racial reasoning conceals these presuppositions behind a deceptive cloak of racial consensus—yet racial reasoning is seductive because it invokes an undeniable history of racial abuse and racial struggle. (25–26)

West's definition of race as a construction of politics and ethics in this context is extendable to religion, class, geography, nation, and phenotypical markers. One assumption of this definition is that racism is an ingrained feature of American culture, and that "racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado and Stefancic xvi). Moreover, as a cultural category, race is a set of actions and attitudes that may or may not be performed by all people, depending on how it relates to other cultural categories performed by a person. In this way, race functions similarly to gender. This definition of race is used to ground my analysis of its relationship to genre in this project.

No less slippery of a category than race, "genre" is also difficult to define. It is a category that is ultimately defined by example because no platonic form of a novel or a specific genre exists, except perhaps in readers' imaginations. Bakhtin's definition of the novel, however, is helpful for understanding the tradition of the novel as a dialogic form, which informs my definition of genre. The novel is best understood as a supergenre, or one which can engulf all other genres and their distinct heteroglossia: "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" which is a "prerequisite for the novel as a genre" (Bakhtin 365, 262, 263). However, definitions of the novel as a genre, as well as many subgenres of it, exist and are one of the ways literature is both taught and organized. These definitions have been largely defined by the dominant culture. As Jameson argues, "[g]enres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (106). Williams agrees that there is a clear relationship between the forms of genre and the dominant culture: "For it is of the essence of a convention that it ratifies an assumption or a point of view, so that the work can be made and received" (179). This is problematic because these genres, represented as "truth," do not account for those outside the dominant culture.

Narrative truth is the end result of a reader's process of discernment of the structure and content of a novel. Bakhtin argues that readers arrive at narrative truth because the dialogic form of the novel shows the author's