

AN INTERVIEW WITH TONI MORRISON, AND A COMMENTARY ABOUT HER WORK

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Toni Morrison was interviewed by Wayne Pond for his radio programme *Soundings* in February 1991. The interview was followed by a commentary on Morrison's writings from professor Trudier Harris. Thanks are here given to *Soundings* and to its sponsor, the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, for granting permission to print the interview and the commentary offered below.

I

WAYNE POND: In celebration of Black History Month 1991, *Soundings* this week explores the contributions of black women to North American Literature and History. I'll talk first with Toni Morrison about her fiction and about her teaching at Princeton University. Following that discussion, Commentary about Toni Morrison's work from Trudier Harris, a Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Toni Morrison's books include *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. In 1988, Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*, her novel of motherhood and slavery in nineteenth-century America.

Q: Toni Morrison, welcome to the National Humanities Center. Let's talk about Black Studies. Let's talk about questions of teaching undergraduates. Let's talk a little bit about your own work. First of all, Black Studies. How do they find a legitimacy? How do they find a niche? How do they find an authenticity in our undergraduate education these days?

A: Well, it is difficult for some traditional schools and curricula to identify courses and justify reasons for studying black culture. It is difficult for them only because they are making two assumptions. One is that black culture is marginal, or if it isn't marginal it ought to be and has already been subsumed by in its contains within American culture. Which continues in the struggle against a complex and regular and dependable course of studies that it can be called Black or African History or to delete that from the curriculum. To delete that from the Studies still botomize white students as well as black. The country does not reflect in its history, in its politics, in any of its discourse that absence of black people. We are *always* there. Always the subject of all conversations.

Q: What about the work of black women writers. Now, here is an issue. Here is an area that is coming to the fore, thanks to people like you, Henry Louis Gates, Jr... I will look at you wide-eyed, Toni Morrison. Why have they been neglected?

A: Well, now, we have based on the sexism [she laughs]. They are twins in a curious way. In order to deal with thoughts, and the intellect, and the energy of black women, honestly and to prove it, a lot of things come about, a lot of things surface. If you read carefully Harriet Jacobs—she is one of these slave women, the narratives of the slave women that Professor Gates has helped to make public—, then you have to deal with something that nobody wants to deal with concerning slavery which is its sexual licence...

Q: Here is a woman who was in hiding for what? five, six, seven years, down on the coast of North Carolina and writing, communicating as it were with a double voice *even* then...

A: *Even then.*

Q: ...before she comes out.

A: So, if you understand slavery in addition to its economic shape, and you understand that you have generation after generation, after generation of *white* men who could, literally, do sexually anything they wanted—men, women, children, *anything*— and upon that structure of complete sexual licence rested the concept of white female virginity. And on the

backs of those women, and with the pain with which their men understood and watched this, an enormous part of the history of slavery in this country rests.

Q: Toni Morrison, let's talk about... You used a word just now: *pain*. I remember a phrase for an interview that you did with one of our national magazines: "The Pain of Being Black"¹...

A: Oh, I hated that!

Q: You didn't like the interview? You didn't like the phrase?

A: No, well, that was —that *is*— the classic example of what I think something like Black Studies would correct. I talked to a woman at *Time* magazine about a number of things, one of which is: it is very difficult for me to understand how you, meaning her or someone like her, can sell your souls this way —she did a lovely interview— and when it is translated in the hands of *Time* editors it doesn't come out about the pain of being a racist, or being the victim of racism. It comes out about how black is pathological and painful. The pain of being black...

Q: And you don't want that...

A: There is no pain in being black. There was a pain in being black next to racist systems and assumptions.

Q: Let's talk for a moment about victims and oppressors. One of the harshest criticism that I have read about you and your work, Toni Morrison, about your work —let's put it that way— is that you enjoy being a victim. That you love to point the finger. Now, make some distinctions for me here: who are the bad guys? Who are the good guys? We are really talking about a much larger issue. The interplay of an artist's life and work. How about this?

A: I don't enjoy being a victim, but I enjoy identifying the process by which one is victimized in order to point the finger at exits. Not as escape hatches based on fantasy and wishful thinking, not as escape hatches

¹ Bonnie, Angelo. 1989. «The Pain of Being Black.» *Time*. 22 May: 46-48

based on re-inventing the world the way you would desire it, but real ones. Ones in which the knowledge of the past —wide-eyed, confrontational— makes it possible for one to go forward honestly, carefully.

Q: I am thinking of the work, for instance, of a scholar out in California, a man, by the name of Shelby Steele.² He has written a book called *The Content of Our Character*. As I understand it, one of the arguments there, Toni Morrison, is that black people should now begin to take upon themselves a solid, as you said, wide-eyed responsibility for their own lives. That we should, as a society, black and white people, quit pointing the finger, and begin —as you said— living in the future. Now, that makes eminent sense —just sort of paraphrase it that way—, but this man, and you just now here in what you are saying, Toni Morrison, might be accused of being a sort of black conservative. Have I got this right? Help me understand the interplay between this backward looking, and forward looking.

A: I don't think that is a dichotomy. I think. Unfortunately, to have to separate as if it were a jealous head; that if you look forward you cannot look backward, and if you look backward you cannot look forward. I mean, the mind does not construct that way, and neither should our solutions to problems be. There is absolute truth in those observations about black people *must* take responsibility, and stop pointing the finger, and go forward. That has been the history of black people. I do not know *why* anybody thinks that is a brand-new idea. It is embarrassing to have somebody project that, as though it had never been *exactly* what black people did.

Q: Do you think of yourself, Toni Morrison, as something of a social scientist in the way you do your writing? I am thinking of a work like *Beloved*, this powerful novel of the nineteenth century in the United States. Were you an anthropologist of the black mind? Was this an exercise in your imagination? How do we figure that out?

A: I'm totally the latter. I don't believe that good art can separate itself from the world in which it lives. And I don't even think the idea of the

² Shelby, Steele. 1990. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*. St Martin P.

separation of art from politics is really worth discussing any more. It is about eighty years old! Nobody ever thought about that before...

Q: It makes good radio!

A: Oh, you are not the only one! It is the subject of everybody's, you know, editorials. But I do think that if you think about the world in which you live, and you try to transform some aspect of it into an art form, then it can be two things: it can exist in its own context—its political and historical context—and have a kind of faithfulness to that, and, —not *or*, but *and*— it should be irrevocably, almost irretrievably beautiful.

Q: Does it mean, that you, again I say this with notice respect, and I say it utterly serious, Toni Morrison, does it mean that you are happy with yourself? That you have figured yourself out and now you can take what is inside there creatively to the world? Again, we are getting at this wonderful interplay between what you are, and what you write.

A: Well, I figured out the questions. I know the important questions. And I know how to distinguish between the detritus and the thing of value. The job, then, becomes how to articulate it; how to make it accessible to somebody else. How to deal with art that is best, which is to handle the consequences of political and natural sciences Nobody can do that better than artists.

Q: I've read that you were reluctant to come to the Civil War, to come to the nineteenth century as a subject for your own work.

A: It's true.

Q: Why was that? Why did it present a difficulty?

A: I thought it would be too emotionally vivid. That it would be...

Q: Like a Jewish person writing about the Holocaust?

A: Perhaps. To write about institutionalized horror, and to try to single out from it, and in it, human beings who are themselves not bestialized. I do not become beasts because they are treated that way.

Q: All of these are the reasons why you did not want to write *Be-loved*. Why did you write it?

A: Because that is an immature and silly way to respond, I figured out that if those people could live through that, then I could write about.

Q: Tell me how you imagined Sethe. Help me with the pronunciation [Toni Morrison corrects the interviewer's pronunciation of Sethe]. Tell me how you figured her out in your mind.

A: Oh, we had somethings in common! Feminine, I mean, female and black, a mother, something about Ohio, even though that is a part of Ohio that I don't live. I removed from her, historically, her husband and the other people in that party—in the historical instances of Margaret Gardner—and gave her a kind of single parenthood which made her a little bit more contemporary.

Q: Does that have echoes with you personally?

A: Yes [very emphatic]. I have raised my children—my sons—alone. And again, to try to surrender my imagination to the situation *then*, to try to project into her, to do maybe even what an actress does when she's trying to find out how a character feels and sees. And I found it scary, humbling. But there was a fundamental question that I had when I wrote about her, and knowing what her act was. A fundamental question that remains outside the book even now.

Q: Put that question into words for me.

A: "How could you do that?"

Q: Right.

A: "How could you do that?" Understanding everything, that she... or believing... trying to understand everything that she must have feared and things she knew. Trying to say, well, suppose that I knew for example that my sons were being sold to, in contemporary terms, say a ring of child pornography. Say that I knew that, and there was no way out, and they were infants. I am trying to put together all sorts of situations where

you know that life is unlivable. The question does remain: who has the right to do that? And because I could not answer that question, I introduced into the book the one figure that I thought had the right to ask it, and that would be a sort of version of her dead daughter returned.

Q: The ghost.

A: Yes.

Q: That is an incredible presence that permeates that novel. Toni Morrison, let me bring us back to a earlier point in our conversation, and that is to say apropos of what you were talking about your novel, *Be-loved*, apropos of the teaching of black literature. Whose shoulders do you stand on? Not only in the creation of Sethe, but in these characters in *Be-loved*? Who do you look back to, and draw upon for inspiration and models as you went through this particular book, indeed, all of your writing.

A: Well, in the research I was terribly indebted to historians. John Hope Franklin being principal among them; also to the collection of slave narratives, and the letters that were collected by other historians of the things that slaves had actually wrote and said. I was indebted to slave owners who kept diaries and long explanations and apologias for their lives. That for the detail, but for the quality, the texture of their lives, I was dependent almost completely on the stories and the life and the music that merges from me in the life of my... the people of my own family.

Q: So, that was a very personal exercise for you.

A: Exactly.

Q: Let us move toward a conclusion of our conversation, Toni Morrison. As you look around the literary cultural landscape in the United States, you come at this from what? —the standpoint of a professor? You are a senior editor at Random House for many years, you raised a family [he laughs], that counts for something. Where do you look for the new voices, the exciting things that are happening not just in Black Studies, but in American Literature. If we are gonna live in a colour blind-society, how do we look around and judge the other coming talents? Where is the next Toni Morrison?

A: What is exciting about American Literature at this juncture is the change that has taken place in the ways in which white writers write about themselves and minorities. It is thrilling, it is stunning.

Q: Can you name some names for me? Or are you reluctant to do that?

A: No, no. There is an interesting book, its name I am going to mess up —*The Oldest Confederate Widow, Living Widow Tells All*³...

Q: Yes, Allan Gurganus.

A: Yes. There is a black woman in there that is marvellous. The writing, he never misses a step. It is incredible. And there are younger writers, women and men, who are writing that way. They do not have to straight jackets themselves anymore. It frees them up to begin to contemplate those lives. They have already done it in films, you know. The young directors who are just exhausted, tired of the restraints that racism puts on art.

Q: You are talking about people like Spike Lee?

A: No, first I am talking about European directors. I mean, movies like *Diva*, movies like *Around Midnight*, although that was not an American film, but other films in which the critical presence of a black artist influences the white sort of fan. And there is some problems with the sort of *Jungle Fever* films that goes on in those movies. But nevertheless, what I am saying is that what happens when, just technically, I remember the time when people said they could not photograph black people in film. A friend of mine who was a director told me ...

Q: [Laughs] Talking about being invisible!

A: He told me you could not see it. And this is a man who did a movie that I can't remember the name of, but it had a very famous, beautiful black horse in it [she laughs]. I said: "You photographed the black horse, we saw all of it, I mean, every little colour, every little

³ Allan, Gurganus. 1992. *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*. Ivy Books.

gesture, everything” Anyway, technically, all these things have changed. The colour of movies has changed. The Japanese used to be the only people who would produce films that had the range of colours that could accommodate dark-skinned people. Kodak now has it, but it took a long time for them to do it. All sorts of things are happening, in addition to the narrative. The tensions, the conflicts have changed, interestingly, in film and in place, and that of course is reflected in the literature, if not has been preceded by the literature. I am very interested in what these new writers, younger writers. You look at somebody like Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston⁴... When native Americans began to say what that was; when Spanish, Hispanic people, Asian people. It is not a question of exchanging dominances, it is a question of listening, and having a life that is rich, and interesting because it has this kind of variety in it.

Q: Here is a final question, Toni Morrison. What is your public/social responsibility. Is it to teach well, to write well, to talk to your students compellingly? What do you do to say to yourself: “I am carrying on; I am doing the right thing.”

A: You make it sound complicated, but it is really just about books. I edit books, I teach books, I write books.

II

WAYNE POND: Here is a commentary about Toni Morrison’s writing. The speaker is Trudier Harris, Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Trudier Harris is the author of *From*

⁴ Erdrich, Louise. 1984: *Jacklight: Poems*. Holt and Co.; 1986: *The Beet Queen*. Holt and Co.; 1987: *Love Medicine*. Bantam; 1991: *Baptism of Desire: Poems*. Harpcourt. Dorris, Michael. 1992: *The Broken Cord*. Harpcourt; 1992: *Morning Girl*. Hypron; 1993: *Rooms in the House of Stone*. Milkweed; 1993: *Working Men*. Holt and Co.; 1993: *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*. Holt and Co. Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1977. *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood*. Random; 1989: *China Men*. Random; 1989: *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Knopf. Silko, Leslie Marmon. 1986: *Ceremony*. Viking Penguin; 1986: *Storyteller*. Arcade; 1991: *Almanac of the Dead*. S and S Trade; 1993: *Sacred Water*. Flood Plain; 1993: *Yellow Woman*. Rutgers U. P.

Mammys to Militants, published by Temple University Press. Her most recent book is *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, scheduled for publication this year by the University of Tennessee Press. Here is Trudier Harris.⁵

TRUDIER HARRIS. When I introduced Toni Morrison before her reading at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in October, I compared her to Michael Jordan, Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova to suggest that she is just as much a phenomenon as they. Like them, she practices her craft so well, is so expert at what she does, that it will probably be a long time before we see her lights again.

From being featured on the cover of *News Week* in 1981 to winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1987, Morrison's name has become as recognizable to the public as those athletics superstars. Her works were as popular around literature classes as those of Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner and Virginia Wolf. An increasing number of students are electing to write thesis and dissertations on her novels. Readers appreciate Morrison for a variety of reasons. Some applaud her for daring to explore the complexities of interracial prejudice as she did in *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. Others focus on her unforgettable characters such as *Sula* in the 1974 novel of the same title, or Pilate Dead, the conjurer and converser with spirits in *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, or the blind Therese whose sight beyond sight enables her to guide to the land of myth in *Tar Baby*, which appeared in 1981.

But for the past four years *Beloved* has brought Morrison the most acolytes. It depicts a world in which a slave woman who is told that she cannot be a mother, indeed, she cannot legally own her own body assumes the right of motherhood in spite of such legalities. Sethe, *Beloved's* mother, kills her baby daughter to prevent her from being remanded to slavery. But she is not only re-enacting the anguish of Margaret Gardner, the slave woman upon whom Morrison loosely bases

⁵ Trudier Harris has been the J. Sitterson Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 1979 to 1993. She started teaching at Emory University (Atlanta) in 1993. Professor Harris is the author of dozens of articles which have been published in the most prestigious American literary magazines. She is an active contributor to books, and she has also edited several volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* devoted to African American writers. Trudier Harris is the author of the following books: 1985: *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. U. of Tennessee P.; 1985: *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. Indiana U. P.; 1993: *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. U. of Tennessee P.

her tale, she touches on issues that lie at the heart of contemporary society. Does a woman who has birthed a child have a right to claim it to the extent that she can kill it rather than allow it to be killed? Under what conditions is death preferable to lack of freedom? When the baby returns as the twenty-year-old ghost intending upon revenging her death, questions of guilt, innocence, and history become prominent. What is the effect of the past upon the present and the future? What do the living owe to the dead? Sethe's memories and re-memories illustrate that the past is an almost tangible part of the present. That there can be no future until the past —no matter how ugly and bloody— has been confronted squarely, and placed securely in an appropriately constructed niche.

The structuring of *Beloved* also attests to the novel's popularity. Morrison abandons lineal narration for a structure that duplicates memory. A pattern in which associative connections inspire the relating of particular events. For example, it is when Denver, Sethe's living daughter, wants to capture Beloved's attention that she tells the story of her own birth, one in which Sethe related to her white woman, Amy Denver, help the pregnant Sethe give birth a few hours after she has escaped from slavery. The story feeds Beloved's love for information about Sethe, and it gives Denver a shot of focus in the family portray from which she is rapidly fading as Sethe and Beloved focus exclusively on each other. In bits and pieces, as a trio ? leisurely string together the incidents of a client's history Morrison unravels her tale. It is less about what happened, for we know that earlier on, than about why and how. The same questions underlie the relating of the tale of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. As Ralph Ellison would say: "the end is in the begining" For we know of Pecola's mistery and insanity in the first couple of pages of the novel. The narrative then seeks to account to what has happened to make an eleven-year-old black girl in Lorraine, Ohio, desire blue eyes so intensively that she is driven insane.

In an interview earlier in her career, Morrison maintains that she writes the kind of books that she loves to read. In creating characters we would not exactly meet next door, in giving those who could live next door some unusual qualities, in challenging our petty-clinging to absolutes in morality, in pushing the boundaries of empirical knowledge, and in breaking down the barriers between life and death, Toni Morrison succeeds in writing books that thousands upon thousands of people in America, and throughout the world, also love to read.