

TRIBUTE |

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"There is no reliable literary or journalistic or scholarly history available to [black lives], to help them, because they are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives," she explained. "First was my effort to substitute and rely on memory rather than history because I knew I could not, should not, trust recorded history to give me the insight into the cultural specificity I wanted. There was and is another source that I have at my disposal, however: my own literary heritage of slave narratives." On a somewhat similar vein, to *The Paris Review*, she addressed how, "In American literature we have been so totalised—as though there is only one version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way."

And so her project became one of not just depicting, but de-totalising history, of unpinning it from a white-washed, male dominated narrative and bringing it down to the personal, the specific, the uniquely remembered. In her debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), we experience the young Pecola struggling with her African American features, longing for blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. What are the implications of such a desire? *Sula* (1973) pushes the premise of 'evil'—which Toni believed is perceived somewhat differently by African Americans ("They don't destroy it or throw it out of the house.")—to the centre of a novel that explores the contrasting experiences of stability and the lack thereof in black lives. *Song of Solomon* (1977) bottles in the journey of a single character—Milkman Dead—a saga of American history, infusing its ties with fantasy, folklore, music, and family roots. In her sixth novel *Jazz* (1992), Morrison takes us into 1926 Harlem, ringing with the cacophony of black urban lives.

These and her other works hardly ever aim for a clinical and 'objective' portrayal of events; instead, Toni's stories are richly coloured by the anger, resignation, and wonder felt by its inhabitants. The colours shine through in her nonfiction as much as in her 11 novels and handful of short stories. In her article "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" for *The Times* written in 1971, she parses through a permutation of opinions regarding race and autonomy between black men, white men, black women, and white women. Both black and white men have historically dominated their female counterparts, but the black man's dominion over black women is also touched by a need to vent his pent-up rage. The black woman, unlike her white counterpart, has also historically known how to retaliate, because of the relative autonomy she possesses from having a place in the job market. The black woman also can't afford to exist simply as a sexual object even if the men around her cast her in that role, because she has *had* to be so many other things. "In a way black women have known something of the freedom white women are now beginning to crave. But oddly, freedom is only sweet when it is won. When it is forced, it is called responsibility. White women, on the other hand, have had too little responsibility, white men too much. It's a wonder the sexes of either race even

speak to each other," she wrote.

Fascination with literature drove Toni Morrison through high school, through her undergraduate and Master's degrees in English from Howard and Cornell universities respectively. It bore her through an editorship at Random House, her teaching tenure at Princeton, and the many awards she earned, the most prestigious of which were the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction 1988 and the Nobel Prize in Literature 1993. But as she asserted time and again in interviews, Toni was, above all, a reader. She basked completely

and entirely in the joy of reading, in the way a text can generate joy and ideas and resolve and empathy if one only knows how to play with language the right way. Her own words are proof of that, push and prod as they do the traditional boundaries of the English language. She has always twisted words to tweak their meanings—"memory" to "rememory", "rememory" to "re-remember"—and, by extension, our emotional and ideological responses to story and history. She economised with images and description, ensuring that we would imagine and feel,

instead of simply watching as a bystander. And with simple jumps in punctuation, she tempered her sentences to radiate nostalgia and anger and affection all in the same paragraph. Reading her, you recognise both a woman of fierce strength and courage, and a human being who believed utterly in storytelling as a vehicle of power and agency. The right kind of agency. In her absence, the words she left behind keep her project alive.

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