

# 'I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free': an essay by Toni Morrison

In this piece from her personal archive, Morrison reflects on how 'the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting' powered her novels, and in particular, *Beloved*

Toni Morrison Thu 8 Aug 2019 08.00 BST



'I wanted my imagination as unencumbered and responsible as possible' ... Toni Morrison. Photograph: Murdo Macleod/The Guardian

I suspect my dependency on memory as trustworthy ignition is more anxious

than it is for most fiction writers – not because I write (or want to) autobiographically, but because I am keenly aware of the fact that I write in a wholly racialised society that can and does hobble the imagination. Labels about centrality, marginality, minority, gestures of appropriated and appropriating cultures and literary heritages, pressures to take a position – all these surface when I am read or critiqued and when I compose. It is both an intolerable and inevitable condition. I am asked bizarre questions inconceivable if put to other writers: Do you think you will ever write about white people? Isn't it awful to be called a black writer?

I wanted my imagination as unencumbered as possible and as responsible as possible. I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and “race-free”. All of which presented itself to me as a project full of paradox and contradiction. Western or European writers believe or can choose to believe their work is naturally “race-free” or “race transcendent”. Whether it is or not is another question – the fact is the problem has not worried them. They can take it for granted that it is because Others are “raced” – whites are not. Or so the conventional wisdom goes. The truth, of course, is that we are all “raced”. Wanting that same sovereignty, I had to originate my own fictional projects in a manner I hoped would liberate me, the work and my ability to do it. I had three choices: to ignore race or try to altogether and write about the second world war or domestic strife without referencing race. But that would erase one, although not the only, most impinging fact of my existence and my intelligence. Two, I could become a cool “objective” observer writing about race conflict and/or harmony. There, however, I would be forced to surrender the centre of the stage to received ideas of centrality and the subject would always and forever be race. Or, three, I could strike out for new territory: to find a way to free my imagination of the impositions and limitations of race and explore the consequences of its centrality in the world and in the lives of the people I was hungry to write about.

*In the final pages of Beloved memory is insistent yet becomes the mutation of fact into fiction then folklore and then into nothing*

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. Second, I determined to diminish, exclude, even freeze any (overt) debt to western literary history. Neither effort has been entirely successful, nor should I be congratulated if it had been. Yet it seemed to me extremely important to try. You will understand how reckless it would have been for me to rely on [Joseph Conrad](#) or [Mark Twain](#) or [Herman Melville](#) or [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#) or [Walt Whitman](#) or [Henry James](#) or [James Fenimore Cooper](#), or [Saul Bellow](#) for that matter, or [Flannery O'Connor](#) or [Ernest Hemingway](#) for insights into my own culture. It would have been equally dim-witted, as well as devastating, for me to rely on Kenneth Stampf or Lewis Mumford, or Herbert Gutman, or Eugene Genovese or Daniel Patrick Moynihan, or Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Thomas Jefferson or any of those sages in the history of the United States for research that would enlighten me on these matters. There was and is another source that I have at my disposal, however: my own literary heritage of slave narratives.

For imaginative entrance into that territory I urged memory to metamorphose itself into metaphorical and imagistic associations. But writing is not simply recollecting or reminiscing or even epiphany. It is doing; creating a narrative infused (in my case) with legitimate and authentic characteristics of the culture. Mindful of and rebellious towards the cultural and racial expectations and impositions my fiction would encourage, it was important for me not to reveal, that is, reinforce, already established reality

(literary or historical) that the reader and I agree upon beforehand. I could not, without engaging in another kind of cultural totalising process, assume or exercise that kind of authority. It was in *Beloved* that all of these matters coalesced for me in new and major ways. History versus memory, and memory versus memorylessness. Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. The effort to both remember and not know became the structure of the text. Nobody in the book can bear too long to dwell on the past; nobody can avoid it. There is no reliable literary or journalistic or scholarly history available to them, to help them, because they are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives. They are spoken of and written about – objects of history, not subjects within it. Therefore not only is the major preoccupation of the central characters that of reconstituting and recollecting a usable past (Sethe to know what happened to her and to not know in order to justify her violent action; Paul D to stand still and remember what has helped to construct his self; Denver to demystify her own birth and enter the contemporary world that she is reluctant to engage) but also the narrative strategy the plot formation turns on the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process. In the final pages memory is insistent yet becomes the mutation of fact into fiction then folklore and then into nothing.

• *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations by Toni Morrison is published by Chatto & Windus. To order a copy go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.*

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