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ATTITUDES TO THE PAST IN TONI MORRISON'S *JAZZ* AND *PARADISE*

Abstract

This work analyzes the complex manner in which Toni Morrison addresses the issue of history in her novels, with a specific emphasis on her novels *Jazz* and *Paradise*. Black writing in the United States depicts experience that is specifically African American. In other words, black literature records the historical and cultural circumstances that no other group shares. Toni Morrison frequently fuses aspects of the traditional omniscient narrator with the unreliable element of more limited narrators. By merging these aspects, Morrison presents the difficulties for African Americans both in telling the story of their past and in releasing themselves from it. Moreover, Morrison creates a fiction out of a fragment of recorded history. In so doing, she has at the same time created a myth, in the sense that it is not just a piece of fiction that attempts to bear witness to historical events, but also a story that embodies a particular historical contradiction, i.e. the necessity to remember the past, while being aware of the dangers of becoming locked in it.

Key words: African Americans, United States, history, racism, women, jazz

Toni Morrison's novels explore the effects of slavery on individual black women and men, on black families and black community. They document and reinvent both historical events that are linked to slavery and they present the survival of African American people and their culture. Many of the historical events that are "disremembered" and/or "unaccounted for" Morrison tries to bring back to the lives of her readers. It comes as no surprise that Morrison, like many other African American authors, strives to change habitual American notions of race and that she desires to improve the image and position of African Americans within American society. Therefore, African American literature can be read as an effort to achieve social equality of African American individuals and their communities. From their literary beginnings African Americans have desired to reform conventional American notions of race with a general concern for social acceptance and participation. The development of their artistic culture should be seen as deriving significantly from this reformative spirit as well as from the need to create culture as a "form of protest"

(Napier 2000: 1). The formal beginnings of African American literary theory can be traced in the early part of the twentieth century when African American authors wrote mainly to report on their society (Graham 2004: 1-12), when many African American authors started voicing their concern with the use of literature as a means of affirming blacks, while counteracting traditional notions of race and prejudices that stem from it. Early African American literary critics and editors realized that the value of black literature is to be found in its ability to nurture positive self-images in the face of adversity.

During the 1920s, a number of young writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and George S. Schuyler emerged to be some of the key authors in the realization of the Harlem Renaissance. Their works addressed, among others, issues of cultural identity and psychological reconstruction. Regarded by many to be the central cultural and literary event in the history of black America, the Harlem Renaissance generated a literary and cultural environment that would establish the black author as a crucial social force. During that period the role of writers and their work towards the improvement of African American identity became increasingly recognized. Consequently, the augmented establishment of literary critical concerns played a central role in the evolution, definition and identity of black society in the United States. The writings of the authors belonging to the Harlem Renaissance created the canon which will later be analyzed by literary critics and theorists. Moreover, this literary period influenced numerous African American authors for decades to come.

Similarly to Du Bois, Alain Locke also argued that literature should be used to reconstruct African American social identities. In his introduction to *The New Negro*, Locke expressed his confidence in young black artists' dedication to represent black America in new terms. According to Locke, the New Negro has emerged with a new psychology that provides a framework for a liberation from white America's definition of blacks as culturally and intellectually barren, inferior people (Napier 2000: 2). Locke sensed that the role of the black writer was to use art to represent blacks in a different light which will serve not only as a myth eraser, but also as a means of proving how black authors could develop and regulate a positive self-identity. Locke, just like Hopkins and Du Bois, recognized the importance of authors and stated in *The New Negro* that black authors should "prove the key to that reevaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relations" (Napier 2000: 15). Black theorists could build on the political, cultural and aesthetic concerns articulated by authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, to name just a few of them. The importance of Zora Neale Hurston and her work that spans from novels and essays, to folklore and anthropological works, is essential both for the Harlem Renaissance and a number of later authors, including Toni Morrison, who draw on her work.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, black women theorists dealt with issues of race, gender, sexuality, politics and psychology as they were offered theoretical tools needed to define their own experiences and sentiments. Different approaches and different theories have led to an increased understanding of African American literary

discourse as multilateral and innovative. The writing of Toni Morrison is significant in this sense too, as it introduces different aspects and characteristics that are prototypical of her literary expression. The unprepared reader will first be amazed (and frequently confused) by the complexity of her work, although her narration appears effortless and smooth. Morrison's novels are unquestionably challenging for many readers, as there are many gaps left that need our interpretation of the various possible historical, political and cultural options that we are given.

It is the intention of this paper to show how Morrison in her novels manages to fight stereotypes about African Americans and asks for the revision of (African) American history, as well as its view from an African American perspective. Morrison creates such an aesthetic deliberately as she is using the narrative spaces of her texts as a means of understanding her poetics, cultural politics and other ideas. Black writing in the United States depicts experience that is specifically African American. In other words, black literature records the historical and cultural circumstances that no other group shares. Furthermore, Toni Morrison frequently fuses aspects of the traditional omniscient narrator with the unreliable element of more limited narrators. By merging these aspects, Morrison presents the difficulties for African Americans both in telling the story of their past and in releasing themselves from it. Moreover, Morrison creates a fiction out of a fragment of recorded history. In so doing, she has at the same time created a myth, in the sense that it is not just a piece of fiction that attempts to bear witness to historical events, but also a story that embodies a particular historical contradiction, i.e. the necessity to remember the past, while being aware of the dangers of becoming locked in it. The two novels that are analyzed in this paper are particularly informed by real tragic events in American history (e.g. American racial uprisings and revolts) that remain crucial problems in America today. Therefore they deserve particular attention and analysis as it is obvious that history is repeating itself.

Morrison's novels are open for interpretation for a number of reasons. In her view, fictional characters have an existence and integrity of their own. Therefore, the author is simply not free to manipulate the characters. Rather, the author interacts with the characters, as if they were actual people. By doing that, Morrison promotes the interaction between fictional characters and writers (or readers), inasmuch as she believes in the interaction between the living and the dead. The same can be said of the emotions of her characters which are both rational and irrational in accord with criteria which sometimes overlap (De Sousa 1987: 164).

Jazz and Morrison's other novels can also be read from an eclectic Afro-modernist point of view. An Afro-modernist reading is understood to be based on elements of African American culture that is an integral part of a given literary text. One of the features that distinguish African American culture from other American cultures is its emphasis on music, and this is particularly true for *Jazz*. The African American community is proud to have produced two original music forms – blues and jazz. Also, they have further explored and developed the distinctive music traditions, such as gospel. An Afro-modernist reading takes into consideration any of these forms. This possibility of interpretation makes *Jazz* an extremely complex novel, difficult to read and interpret.

Jazz resembles Morrison's other novels by being grounded in historical and political events. The central event, the murder of a young girl is linked to two other historic events: the St. Louis race riot of 1917 and the resulting NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) protest march in New York City.

On a historical level, we could sum the novel up by saying that the novel deals with the East St. Louis riot of 1917, an event that affected the lives of two major characters: Alice Manfred and her niece Dorcas. The novel reveals that Dorcas's parents are killed in the riot, her father dragged from a streetcar and beaten to death, her mother burned to death. The story continues in New York City, after Alice takes care of her orphaned niece.

The events of the novel are not exaggerated, as Morrison used the real historical accounts of the events to write her novel.

The City exploded the next morning [July 2, 1917]. More than six thousand men, women, and children were made homeless and many fled the City in the first hours or would return under the protection of the National Guard to root for their few belongings before departing forever. Two policemen died and two square blocks of black shanties went up in flames. All day long on the third, white people roamed the downtown area, exchanging souvenirs from the rampage, ghoulishly touring the morgues, and cheering whenever an increase in the black body count was announced. Mangled black corpses ("horribly mutilated floaters") bobbed to the surface of the Mississippi. By July 5, almost \$400,000 worth of property had been destroyed and thirty-nine black and eight white people were dead (Lewis 1993: 537).

The incident inspired the first major protest march in the history of the United States and at the same time gave rise to the NAACP, a civil rights organization which had been established seven years earlier. Morrison deliberately chooses this particular event for a symbolic meaning for the psyche of African Americans as it were the first major, organized African American protest against racist violence. On the level of the novel, the event is important for Alice who became aware of her self worth. Another important detail from the march is not only sights, but also sounds of the march. There are two distinctive sounds that linger in Alice's mind. The first is the sound of a march, the battle sound that gives direction (both physical and metaphorical), and the second sound is the sound of jazz.

Jazz evolved as part of the Harlem Renaissance, when an unrestrained development of African American culture was developed in Northern Cities with a large number of black population, most notably in Chicago and New York City. The Harlem Renaissance lasted roughly from 1910 until the beginning of the Depression in 1930, and the novel mostly concentrates on this period. Jazz, undoubtedly, remains the best known artistic product of the Harlem Renaissance. It is recognized not only in the United States, but also throughout the world, as one of America's most significant cultural contributions. The importance of jazz, as a music form, in the analysis of the novel, is in the fact that jazz is based on call and response, repetition and signifying. Another

important feature of jazz is improvisation. While improvising, jazz musicians use a set melody, which they vary – responding to the members of their band and/or to their audience. Because of that, no two performances are the same.

The complexity (and beauty) of Morrison's novel lies in the fact that the author tries to imitate the jazz structure in her text. Ralph Ellison's definition of jazz performance in *Shadow and Text* provides also a literary interpretation that can be used to understand the structure of Morrison's novel: "True jazz is an act of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvas of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition" (Ellison 1972: 234). Ellison's remark essentially tackles two issues, the relationship of the individual to collectivity i.e. community (and equally important, the relationship of the community to the individual) and their relationship with tradition.

As a link in a chain of tradition, a jazz performance improvises variations on earlier musical themes. The novel *Jazz* forms an analogous link in three different ways: (1) it shows its characters as part of a continuous spiritual community; (2) it consciously participates in the large-scale history of literature in English; and (3) it acknowledges its place in small-scale literary history – Toni Morrison's development as a writer (Kubitschek 1998: 158).

Being separated from the community and/or communal traditions frequently causes problems in establishing one's identity. In *Jazz*, the ailing bird that Joe and Violet put on their roof to heal it by listening to street musicians symbolizes their desire to reconnect with their past and their tradition. Being orphans, both Joe and Violet are disconnected from their community and their tradition. Even Joe's last name Trace indicates that he is trying to trace his origins, but also that his mother left without a trace and abandoned him.

Morrison shows how people like Joe and Violet, with the help of jazz music, can develop jazz selves, i.e. come in touch with their long lost tradition and heritage, which would enable them to rediscover their identity. The motif of jazz music is also used in connection with the rediscovery of one's identity in Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me."

For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the

jungle beyond. I follow those heathen – follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeooww!* I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something – give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly. ‘Good music they have here,’ he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips
 Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I have felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* colored (Baym 2003: 1516-1518).

Jazz also tackles the past on a meta-level of literary history as it frequently refers to earlier literary works. Hunters Hunter, for example, strongly resembles a character in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, and Golden Gray revisits Charles Bon in another of Faulkner's works, *Absalom, Absalom!* Violet frees her birds as Miss Flite does in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*; Violet's parrot echoes the bird in the opening scene in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (Kubitschek 1998: 159).

Morrison does not simply copy the above mentioned events and characters, but rather redefined them to serve the purposes that she has envisioned for the characters of her novels. By using well-known symbols and characters from English literature, Morrison establishes a link of recognition and comparison between them and African American novel, thus securing a reputable treatment of her novels.

Similar to her other novels, Morrison again demands reader's full attention and cooperation in "filling the gaps," i.e. interpreting the story and participating in it by remaking it. "[...] I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able, I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because, look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (Morrison 1992: 229).

Contrary to her previous novels, *Jazz* ends up on a positive note that leaves the reader with the feeling of hope and understanding, against all odds and previous historical tragedies. The love of Joe and Violet is presented as almighty, in spite of their unfavorable relation with the community and in spite of what the readers might have concluded previously.

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it – to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and*

on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing your answer – that's the kick (Morrison 1992: 229).

Here, Morrison not only demands an active reader, but rather demands an active partner to help her construct the meaning of the novel, since the emotions of Joe and Violet seem to change constantly.

Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise*, echoes the last of Dante's works in his *Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso* and at the same time concludes her trilogy that she started with *Beloved* and continued with *Jazz*. However, there are a few significant differences between Dante's *Paradiso* and Morrison's *Paradise*. While Dante's paradise transcends earth, Morrison's portrays earth and the spiritual world as intertwined (Kubitschek 1998: 163). Drawing from African tradition, Morrison readily mixes Christian and pagan elements in her novels, showing the persistence of spirits after characters die (most notably in *Beloved*). Morrison continues drawing on this idea in *Paradise*, by presenting spirits as active participants in the lives of the African American community. The spirits grow and age, which is another of Morrison's innovations – and another challenge for her readers. However, spirits are not the focal point of interest in the novel. The main character is the African American community, which Toni Morrison dissects and reevaluates in various historical circumstances throughout the novel. At the same time, she takes a rather critical stand towards the black community while questioning their self-governing capabilities. She had previously done it to a larger extent in *Sula*, but in *Paradise* Morrison takes an even more critical and potentially unfavorable attitude towards the black community which is prone to racism and sexism. Also, *Paradise* can be read as Morrison's reaction to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While Hurston obviously romanticized the concept of a self-governing, all-black community, Morrison shows that even among equals there are always those who believed they are more equal than others. Even black communities are not immune to racism and as long as they excommunicate their own members which they deem insufficient, the community cannot be successful.

Morrison also reverses the usual situation of her novels where the white characters are the oppressors. In *Paradise*, the oppressors are black – the first sentence of the novel suggests a change and creates a surprise, involving the reader immediately – "They shot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time" (Morrison 1994: 3). Morrison shows how the black community can also fall prey to a raging racism caused by other black people and she claims that no one is immune to prejudice. By developing a number of subplots in the novel, Morrison investigates the histories and memories of numerous black women and men and she presents the consequences that have led them to the present situation. This being probably the most challenging of all Morrison's novels, the reader is frequently left in doubt whether all the bits and pieces of the novel that were gathered throughout the novel are sufficient to enable the complete understanding of the events. Since no definitive story emerges, readers are unable to draw final conclusions. Different black communities, or groups of black people are presented and the novel consequently introduces us to the life stories of six women and their three attackers.

At the same time, the novel also presents the discord of the community members. Moreover, the community provides numerous multiple stories to explain the (historical) events of the novel. Therefore, the readers are faced with the multitude of perspectives and interpretations of the novel. What can be distinguished from those varying perspectives are a few important historical facts – that the history of the community can be traced to the collapse of Reconstruction. Morrison tackles the period of the 1870s and 1880s, when the white South revoked African Americans' civil rights, which immediately meant the end of employment rights for many black people and the starvation for their families.

Consequently, the novel presents the consequences of such political and institutional racism. The author depicts the migration of these people west to Oklahoma, where they tried to join one of all-black settlements. However, the black people there did not want to accept the black newcomers because they were black! Surprising as it may be, Morrison insists that racism is not perpetuated by white people only, but is rather a widespread phenomenon among black people as well. The unaccepted black would-be-settlers were forced to move farther away and to create the self-sufficient town of Haven which prospers until World War II. Due to the hostile atmosphere towards war veterans, fourteen families move farther west to create the town of Ruby in 1950. However, they also operated on similar unspoken premises of allowing only dark-skinned people to join their community, just like the people of Ruby. In her critique of Ruby and Haven, Morrison challenges one of African American culture's most widespread myths, the myth of unity in a black society that is devoid of white people. Morrison merges real, historical facts and her artistic modes of storytelling to show that such all-black societies are anything but perfect. Drawing from the historical occurrences of black towns and black churches, Morrison showed how various separatist movements are destined to fail. *Paradise* echoes Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, although Hurston was not so critical of her all-black community, but rather used a nuanced presentation which relied more on romantic presentation than on social criticism. In *Paradise*, Morrison exposes the divisions within a black community and provides a criticism of a separatist black community that even discriminated against light-skinned African Americans. Driving the policy of separation further, the community of Ruby is divided along the gender line. Furthermore, even the men of Ruby are divided among themselves – while some want to attack the women of Convent, others oppose the idea. Presenting the community as divided by mutually exclusive categories, Morrison shows that such a community can never prosper because separatism is inevitably artificial in a world where everyday reality is composed of mixtures, contacts and unifications.

In *Paradise*, Morrison has tackled the issue of a westward expansion that was marked by imperial policies as well as by racial and gender discrimination within American communities. In this context, the author retells the story of American colonialism from a black perspective and offers alternative endings that reflect, among other, magical realism. Situating her story in 1890, Morrison follows the lives of ex-slave families who left Louisiana after the Reconstruction and headed westward. The move is not just a physical relocation westward, but also cultural and social change which will inevitably alter their identities. Morrison presents the community in the 1960s and

1970s as still bearing the consequences from the original move of the community in the late 19th century. In *Paradise*, Morrison created her black characters after black Americans who participated in the Exoduster movement (1877 – 79) and who moved west in search of social freedom and opportunities that were promised to them by the Emancipation proclamation. Concentrating on the leadership of Zechariah Morgan, aka Big Papa, Morrison concentrates on this unrepresented chapter of African American history, while dealing with the issues of black patriarchy and its relationship to white America through one of the most exploited narratives – the story of American manifest destiny which justifies American expansion.

One could conclude that in both novels, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, Morrison showed that the only way to create viable American identities, communities, and cultures would be to explain and come to terms with the American imperial past in order to become citizens and not imperial overlords of the world. Toni Morrison has, together with some other scholars and authors, examined American literature as part of what can be referred to as the culture of United States imperialism. Within the last few decades the interest in (African) American studies has been renewed, if only from different points of view – sparking interest in the issues of identity, citizenship and minority literatures. This prompted the creation of the term *cultural citizenship* which was coined to denote the relationship between one's identity and the non-legal aspects of one's citizenship. These changes have been instrumental in understanding the novels of Toni Morrison as they help us correlate her black character's relationship to white America (Morrison 2008: 170-186), which represents the focal point of Morrison's novels. In this respect, Morrison's *Paradise* and *Jazz*, as well as her other novels, can be read both as presentations of history (from an African American point of view) and as critiques of history. In this respect, both novels challenge the standard (white) history of the United States and participate in the ongoing academic debate between new and old American history (Morrison 2016), i.e. between traditional and recent approaches to reading and understanding American history.

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ODNOS PREMA PROŠLOSTI U ROMANIMA TONI MORRISON

JAZZ I RAJ

Sažetak

Ovaj rad analizira kompleksan način na koji se Toni Morrison odnosi prema povijesti u svojim romanima, s posebnim naglaskom na romane *Jazz* i *Raj*. Književnost Afroamerikanaca u SAD-u opisuje iskustvo koje je specifično afroameričko. Drugim riječima, crnačka književnost bilježi povijesne i kulturološke okolnosti kakve ne postoje kod ni jedne druge etničke grupe. Toni Morrison često miješa aspekte tradicionalnog „sveznajućeg” pripovjedača s nepouzdanim elementima više limitiranih pripovjedača. Stapajući ove aspekte, Morrison prezentira probleme Afroamerikanaca pričajući priču o njihovoj prošlosti i oslobađajući ih od nje. Štoviše, Morrison stvara književnost iz dijelova zabilježene povijesti. Postupajući tako, istodobno stvara mit, tako da se ne radi samo o književnosti koja svjedoči povijesnom događaju, već i o priči koja obuhvaća određenu povijesnu kontradikciju, tj. potrebu da se zapamti povijest, a da se istodobno bude svjestan opasnosti da se postane njezinim zarobljenikom.

Ključne riječi: Afroamerikanci, Sjedinjene Američke Države, povijest, rasizam, žene, *jazz*