

Excerpt from "The Radical Vision of Toni Morrison"

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

- 1 On one level, Morrison's project is obvious: It is a history that stretches across 11 novels and just as many geographies and eras to tell a story that is hardly chronological but is thematically chained and somewhat continuous. This is the project most readily understood and accepted by even her least generous critics. But then there is the other mission, the less obvious one, the one in which Morrison often does the unthinkable as a minority, as a woman, as a former member of the working class: She democratically opens the door to all of her books only to say, "You can come in and you can sit, and you can tell me what you think, and I'm glad you are here, but you should know that this house isn't built for you or by you." Here, blackness isn't a commodity; it isn't inherently political; it is the race of a people who are varied and complicated. This is where her works become less of a history and more of a liturgy¹, still stretching across geographies and time, but now more pointedly, to capture and historicize: This is how we pray, this is how we escape, this is how we hurt, this is how we repent, this is how we move on. It is a project that, although ignored by many critics, evidences itself on the page. It has allowed Morrison to play with language, to take chances with how stories unravel and to consistently resist the demand to create an empirical understanding of black life in America. Instead, she makes black life—regular, quotidian² black life, the kind that doesn't sell out concert halls or sports stadiums—complex, fantastic and heroic, despite its devaluation. It is both aphorism³ and beyond aphorism, and a result has been pure possibility.
- 2 Often, in black literature, it seems as though the author is performing two roles: that of the explorer and the explainer. Morrison does not do this. Morrison writes stories that

¹ a fixed set of ceremonies, words, etc., that are used during public worship in a religion

² ordinary or everyday

³ saying that concisely expresses a moral principle or an observation about the world, presenting it as a general or universal truth.

are more aesthetic⁴ than overtly⁵ political, better expressed in accurate Tolstoyan⁶ detail than in generalizing sentiments blunted with anger. Most important, she is an author who writes to tease and complicate her world, not to convince others it is valid.

- 3 "What I'm interested in is writing without the gaze, without the white gaze⁷," she told me. "In so many earlier books by African-American writers, particularly the men, I felt that they were not writing to me. But what interested me was the African-American experience throughout whichever time I spoke of. It was always about African-American culture and people—good, bad, indifferent, whatever—but that was, for me, the universe."

⁴ concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty

⁵ openly

⁶ A reference to the 19th century Russian writer Leo Tolstoy who is known for writing with great detail and psychological insights

⁷ a concept that describes how white people's perspective is assumed to be the default, and how people of color may feel the need to consider the white audience's reaction