



The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable

Marc C. Conner

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A traditional yet fresh approach to grasping the power of Morrison's writing

With essays by Yvonne Atkinson, Marc C. Conner, Susan Corey, Maria DiBattista, Barbara Johnson, Cheryl Lester, Katherine Stern, and Michael Wood

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novels have almost exclusively been examined as sagas illuminating history, race, culture, and gender politics. This gathering of eight essays by top scholars probes Morrison's novels and her growing body of nonfiction and critical work for the complex and potent aesthetic elements that have made her a major American novelist of the twentieth century.

Through traditional aesthetic concepts such as the sublime, the beautiful, and the grotesque, through issues of form, narrative, and language, and through questions of affect and reader response, the nine essays in this volume bring into relief the dynamic and often overlooked range within Morrison's writing. Employing aesthetic ideas that range from the ancient Greeks to contemporary research in the black English oral tradition, *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison* shows the potency of these ideas for interpreting Morrison's writing. This is a force Morrison herself has often suggested in her claims that Greek tragedy bears a striking similarity to "Afro-American communal structures."

At the same time each essay attends to the ways in which Morrison also challenges traditional aesthetic concepts, establishing the African American and female voices that are essential to her sensibility. The result is a series of readings that simultaneously expands our understanding of Morrison's work and also provokes new thinking about an aesthetic tradition that is nearly 2,500 years old.

These essays offer a rich complement to the dominant approaches in Morrison scholarship by revealing aspects of her work that purely ideological approaches have obscured or about which they have remained oddly silent. Each essay focuses particularly on the relations between the aesthetic and the ethical in Morrison's writing and between the artistic production and its role in the world at large. These relations show the rich political implications that aesthetic analysis engenders.

By treating both Morrison's fiction and her nonfiction, the essays reveal a mind and imagination that have long been intimately engaged with the questions and traditions of the aesthetic domain. The result is a provocative and original contribution to Morrison scholarship, and to scholarship in American letters generally.

Marc C. Conner is an assistant professor of English at Washington and Lee University. He has published articles in *Studies in American Fiction* and *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.

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