

## **Delineating the Epochs of Black History in the Novels of Toni Morrison (1973 & 1977)**

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### **Abstract**

*The building of empires and its protection denotes human progress, but it comes with its challenges as no race is completely self-sufficient and for it to survive, it must reach out for resources to expand its civilization and keep it evolving. Most often, instead of these resources to be negotiated on by countries lacking it, they are forcefully taken. This has given impetus to the presence of people of African descent in the United States and how the concept of cultural differentiation was introduced to subjugate its people so that Euro-American 'missionary explorers', turned colonial masters could take advantage of its human and material resources. In delineating the epochs of black history, it becomes imperative to look at the literatures of slavery and cultural assertion. This study therefore, deploys the New Historicism as a theoretical framework to explore black (African American) history, and its survival through the epochs of sociopolitical and economic upheavals as illustrated in *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison.*

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**Key words:** African American, history, marginalization, new historicism, slavery, Morrison.

### **Introduction**

The history of black presence in the United States may officially begin in 1619<sup>1</sup> but, the history of chattel slavery could be traced as far back as the 15th and 16th centuries. It is estimated that from 1451-1499, slaves were imported into Europe and the Atlantic Islands. Curtis argues that the slave trade began even before the so-called 'discovery' of America and attained considerable volume with the expansion of New Markets <sup>2</sup>(see Rawley and Behrendt, 2005<sup>3</sup>). However,

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<sup>1</sup>Bennett Lerone Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 29.

<sup>2</sup>Curtin Philip Dearmond, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 96.

intellectual justification of black enslavement could be traced to the Enlightenment when man believed his rationality made him less dependent on God<sup>4</sup>. This signals the emergence of science as a power that could solve human problems. It was the time of exploration and narratives that depict the black character as having no soul, nor language; and the making judgments by appearance and the notion of self-worth. The idea of European self-worth and values as supreme devaluates other cultures thereby initiating the concept of racism. With this came theories to justify it like the Biblical curse of Ham embedded in the Hamitic Theory<sup>5</sup> and the notion of a differentiated man that has the power and ability to label and to change emerged. This gave Europeans and in some cases Arabs (early as 1500s black jurists refute Arabs' claim that the Curse of Ham authorized the capture and sale of black Muslims<sup>6</sup>) the impetus to assume a moral responsibility to come to Africa on a civilizing mission.

This post-liberal humanist phase rouses the notion of self-worth, racial, national and linguistic differentiation. The Western cultural construct is designed to challenge the concept of personhood based on the assumption that some individuals are incapable of engaging in social relationships or performing social functions<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, cultural differentiation from its linguistic assumption denotes that non-European languages have no consciousness and self-worth, because its presence denotes consciousness. Thus, only Europeans have the ability to feel and figure out what is good for themselves and others. This is determined by 'an imbalance of power' and thus 'racial categories are created'<sup>8</sup> and the energy to keep this racial signifier afloat is by constantly striving to fix each

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<sup>3</sup>Rawley James and Behrendt Stephen, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (revised ed). Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>4</sup>Hume David, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume: Thoemmes Continuum in Four (IV) Volumes* (Edinburgh: Adam Black & William Tait, 1996), 57.

<sup>5</sup>Vaughan Alden, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 165.

<sup>6</sup>Lewis Bernard, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 211.

<sup>7</sup>Davies Charlotte Aull, 'Constructing Other Selves: (in) competences and the Category of Learning Difficulties' in *Questions of Competence: Culture, Classification and Intellectual Disability* (eds.), Jenkins Richard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118.

<sup>8</sup>Jenkins Richard, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations* (London: SAGE Publications, 2008), 20.

identity into its specie place<sup>9</sup>. But culture is subject to the play of signification and history and therefore, cannot be tamed.

Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau have argued that man's happiness and general wellbeing lies within his ability and application of service and reason, and that man can solve his problems by himself because human sensibility is inherent<sup>10</sup> and possess liberty of indifference (see Sorkin, 2012<sup>11</sup>; Descartes, 2008<sup>12</sup>). Beneath this context, the question arises: Who is a man? Will it include the non-European? These questions coupled with the expansion of markets and military power led to the imposition of cultural differentiation. With this also came the Judeo-Christian notion of fall, faith and redemption. The black race is assumed to have fallen and needs grace to be redeemed! This development of a complex, championed by cultural imperialism exposed the continent to outside predators. Morrison therefore, is concerned with investigating the cultural reaction to America's political history. This is because Morrison understands the genetic information about any culture is coded in the double helix of its DNA, which defines the codependent relation of its production history and its reception<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the colonial expeditions which is sociopolitical in nature, led to the European 'discovery' of black wealth, and the commodification of the black body through the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Black history is shaped and given direction from European moments and notions of empire building, and the need for control of both human and material resources. This imperialist instinct is driven by the desire to be recognized as a human being with dignity. Fukuyama broaches this battle for prestige that man has placed in the middle of his conquest and asserts that: 'The outcome of this battle is the division of human society into a class of masters, who were willing to risk

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<sup>9</sup>Hall Stuart, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 72.

<sup>10</sup>Rousseau Jean-Jacques, *Discourse on Social Economy and the Social Contract* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46 & 175.

<sup>11</sup>Sorkin David, *Moses Mendelssohn and Religious Enlightenment* (London: Halban Publishers, 2012), 313.

<sup>12</sup>Descartes Rene, *Meditations on First Philosophy and Selections from the Objections and Replies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200.

<sup>13</sup>McGann Jerome, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Production* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 23.

their lives, and a class of slaves who gave into their natural fear of death<sup>14</sup>. In American discourse of history therefore, the rise in industry made demands for more human cargoes, and this dependence on African Americans is revealed when the Declaration of Independence was adopted in 1776, a section denouncing the slave trade was deleted<sup>15</sup>. This lends weight to why it took the civil war to end slavery<sup>16</sup>. In this light, we have to collapse the difference between historical and contemporary experience because historical forces shape human lives and should be grasped in their historicity and contemporary manifestation, for the purpose of promoting unity and independence<sup>17</sup>. This is to say history is not the exclusive reserve of the West, and whatever is worthy of celebration should not be determined by any so-called dominant culture. It is in line with this train of thought that Morrison (2019) warns that those who claim superiority of Western culture could get away with it only if Western civilization is measured against others and not found wanting<sup>18</sup>. It has to be understood that ‘all possible meanings are a function of their historical emergence as material artefact’<sup>19</sup> and the African American presence in the United States is not an exception.

### **Delineating Monuments of Black Participation and Triumphs**

‘I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer’<sup>20</sup>.

After the publication of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*<sup>21</sup>, she said that she wrote it because she had not seen any work that is reflective of her kind. A similar claim

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<sup>14</sup>Fukuyama Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), xvii.

<sup>15</sup>Bennett Lerone Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 448.

<sup>16</sup>Lynch Hollis Rupert, 1967, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot 1839 – 1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1.

<sup>17</sup>Usman Yusufu Bala, ‘The State of Learning and the State of Society: From the Jihad to S.A.P.’ (Lecture, International Seminar on Islam and the History of Learning, Katsina State History and Culture Bureau, Katsina, 1992), 4.

<sup>18</sup>Morrison Toni, ‘Unspeakable Things Spoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature’ in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 305.

<sup>19</sup>McGann Jerome, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Production* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>20</sup>Ellison Ralph, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995), 53.

<sup>21</sup>Morrison Toni, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

was made by Angelou<sup>22</sup> stating that she wrote for black girls – and black boys. In Ellison's words, Morrison through her writing is 'looking' for herself, and trying to answer the riddle of the search because white America will not acknowledge her existence, let alone proffer answers to her (black) history. African Americans, therefore, have to lend their voices to the so-called grand narrative or The Great Experiment in American history because they have been one of its major contributors. In *Sula*<sup>23</sup>, Morrison situates African American history of struggles and the building of communities within the larger spectrum of what America is, and what it is meant to become. *Sula* captures the idea of friendship between two black women: Sula and Nel, from their childhood in the black community. The second part tells the return of the protagonist Sula as an adult. Morrison historicizes the novel through her chapterization which involves ten (10) different years which at first seems chronological, but the flashbacks and folkloric approaches to the novel makes it fragmentary and therefore, elliptical. What is instrumental to Morrison's excavation of black history is her ability to situate black characters within frameworks where they that have been denied, or have suffered indelible losses.

In *Sula*, Morrison takes a chronological pattern to espouse the great injustices meted on the black population by weaving the history of such denial in the 'Nigger Joke' which symbolically extrapolates the exploitation of black communities. The joke is built around the promise a white farmer made of giving his slave the bottom fertile land upon completing a task, and when he did, instead, gave him valley land where nothing grew with the claim that when God looked down from heaven, it was the bottom. Morrison blurs the distinction between fiction and history as she sandwiches characters between the slices of lived histories and their responses to forces around them. In a conversation with Stepto, Morrison (1977) gave the origin of the setting in *Sula* and how she came about it saying:

Medallion was more difficult because it was wholly fabricated, but it was based on something my mother had said some time ago. When she first got married and my father went to live in Pittsburgh. And I remember her telling me that in those days all the black people live in the hills of Pittsburgh, but now they lived amid the smoke and dirt in the heart of that

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<sup>22</sup>Angelou Maya, *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 9th Series ed., George Plimpton (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 182.

<sup>23</sup>Morrison Toni, *Sula* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

city. It's clear up in those hills, and so I used that idea, but in a small river town in Ohio<sup>24</sup>.

This improvisation as adopted by Morrison illustrates the divide between the Self and the other even in terms of settlement. The merging of history with folkloric elements as deployed in *Sula* signifies Morrison's effort to pull back the veils of history so as to expose the lives of African Americans unfolding on the margins of white American culture and national oblivion. This resonates with the claim that history is the past seen in and through the present, and the historical task is to attempt a reconstruction of the past which includes the future<sup>25</sup>. Morrison's task involves the construction of black pasts and their possibilities.

Morrison marks the epoch of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North to seek employment. This migration according to Wilkerson initially started in batches around 1882, 1915, reached its peak in 1919 and continued after World War II to 1970<sup>26</sup> (see McPherson, 2015<sup>27</sup>; Climent, 2007<sup>28</sup>; and Fabre and O'Meally, 1994<sup>29</sup>). Morrison historicizes it through the character of Shadrack, a World War I veteran who had lost his mind by the horrors of the capitalist war. This veteran serves as a microcosm for the unrecognized African American men lost by the black communities as a result of the war. The same year marked the entrance of the 369th Infantry Regiment that fought in WWI into Harlem, but their triumph was short-lived as it was named Red Summer because of the severity of race riots that ensued<sup>30</sup>. Morrison historicizes the sacrifice made by African Americans in the war due to their underrepresentation in not just American history, but world history because the

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<sup>24</sup>Morrison Toni and Stepto Robert, 'Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison' *The Massachusetts Review* 18, no: 3 (Autumn 1977): 475.

<sup>25</sup>McGann Jerome, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 105.

<sup>26</sup>Wilkerson Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 24.

<sup>27</sup>McPherson James, *The War that Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 30.

<sup>28</sup>Climent James, *Atlas of African American History* (New York: Facts on File Inc, 2007), 129.

<sup>29</sup>Fabre Genevieve and O'Meally Robert, ed., *History and Memory in African American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 238.

<sup>30</sup>Tally Justine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xv.

same war launched America into global relevance. Morrison opens *Sula* a year after the war saying:

Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day. It had taken place every January third since 1920, although Shadrack, its founder, was for many years the only celebrant. Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged....(19-20).

This WWI sacrifice, like the American Civil War (1863-1865) in which African Americans were first denied representation<sup>31</sup>, still did not give blacks the recognition they deserved. When the U.S Congress allowed black soldiers to enlist in the Act of July 1862<sup>32</sup>, roughly one million African Americans served<sup>33</sup>. Morrison lends weight to this history when she laments on poor black boys who served in the Vietnam War (1957-1975) and were seen as 'Rude feed to feed the war machine'<sup>34</sup>. This is a play on the equation of power, and Morrison is interested in the 'the operations of power in regulating ideologies' because the text is the space where power relations are made visible<sup>35</sup>. It is therefore, worthy to note as Benjamin Quarles asserts in Holland & Greene<sup>36</sup> that blacks actively participated in their own freedom and that of the nation, because they offered services to the side which recognizes their inalienable rights.

The year '1920' as a chapter projects the deep-seated racism and segregation suffered by African Americans as exemplified in Helen Wright and her daughter's trip to the South. On account of Helene's grandmother being sick, she set out on a

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<sup>31</sup>Ford Carin, *The Civil War's African American Soldiers through Primary Sources* (Berkeley: Enslow Publishers, 2013), 26.

<sup>32</sup>Du Bois William Edward Burghardt, *the Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>33</sup>Palmer Alphonso Colin, *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 1451.

<sup>34</sup>Morrison Toni, 'Unspeakable Things Spoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature' in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 302.

<sup>35</sup> Brannigan John, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 6-7.

<sup>36</sup>Holland Antonio & Debra Foster Greene, 'Not Chattel, Not Free: Quasi-Free Blacks in the Colonial Era' in *A Companion to African American History* (eds.), Alton Hornsby Jr (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 107.

train trip but mistakenly entered the wrong section instead of the COLORED ONLY, and was confronted by a white conductor who called her a ‘gal’ right in front of her daughter (35). This discrimination depicts how embroiled African Americans and whites are in the bitter conflict of the Self and the other. Morrison registers it through the domestic and segregated social amenities because what is central to the existence of racism is the politics of its denial<sup>37</sup>.

Morrison captures the Great Depression Era (1929-1934) by narrativizing the African American struggle and how they grappled with their sociocultural and political realities. Chapters ‘1927’ and ‘1937’ capture the period fascist racketeers were asking black people to return to Africa on the premise that they were stealing their jobs. Kelley argues that a white supremacist movement called Black Shirts held a march on August 22, 1930, demanding city jobs for white folks<sup>38</sup>. In *Sula* Morrison depicts how Jude Greene – the husband of Nel, craves to work on a road construction site but the foreman always picks men who are not black (111). Jude was frustrated that he was emasculated of the job that would have justified his masculinity. Moynihan in Eaton contends that ‘the rising welfare rolls, the increased poverty, and high rate of Black male unemployment is the reversed gender roles within the Black family’<sup>39</sup>. Jude’s frustration stems from his desire for recognition which is the motor driving human history<sup>40</sup>.

Morrison’s depiction of a flamboyant wedding ceremony in the black community reverses the outside reality of the Great Depression where the white population is squabbling to feed themselves. The self-sufficient nature of the black community did not let the Depression resolve them to hunger. The chapter expatiates on the history of African Americans who having faced the worst of discrimination at the plantations are not to be touched, or disconcerted by a mere Great Depression, for they are an industrious people used to facing challenges harder than the white population could survive.

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<sup>37</sup>Lubiano Wahneema, *The House that Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 10.

<sup>38</sup>Kelley Robin Davis Gibran, ‘The Great Depression’ in *Four Hundred Souls* (eds.), Ibram X Kendi & Keisha Blain (New York: One World, 2021), 548.

<sup>39</sup>Moynihan Patrick in Eaton Kalenda, *Womanism, Literature and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980*(London: Routledge, 2008), 67.

<sup>40</sup>Fukuyama Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 162.



The year 1965 was a monumental milestone both in Morrison's Medallion in *Sula* and in African American history. Malcom X, who was once the spokesman of The Nation of Islam and the most vocal speaker on sociocultural consciousness in the black community was assassinated as he spoke at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on February 21, 1965<sup>41</sup>. The year saw the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act and Voting Rights Act which gave a little freedom to African Americans by validating their participation in a democracy.<sup>42</sup> It also marks a progression in black communities with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement due to advancement in cultural nationalism and economic independence. It could be argued that the military experience of African Americans between 1965 and 1967, dignified, and gave them more freedom and room for inclusion. Morrison espouses this historical change in the black community like Medallion when she posits that:

Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed. You could go downtown and see colored people working in the dime store behind the counters, even handling money with cash-register keys around their necks. And a colored man taught mathematics at the junior high school (213).

The rise in black entrepreneurship and the general economic standard of blacks resulted in their activism for the vote and demand for equal participation. Morrison demonstrates that to write unencumbered by other people's expectation, is to be free and to extend that freedom to the creation of formidable characters and their history.

### **Between Aesthetic (In) visibility and Historical (Im) balance in Morrison's *Song of Solomon***

'I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility – and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation'<sup>43</sup>.

The above anecdote is said by the unnamed narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* because society has refused to acknowledge his existence and is therefore self-affirming his sense of being. This statement should be situated within the

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<sup>41</sup>Palmer Alphonsous Collins, *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Reference), 1366.

<sup>42</sup>Eaton Kalenda, *Womanism, Literature and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

<sup>43</sup>Ellison Ralph, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995), 50.

background of systemic racism, particularly against those white America has refused to see. The narrator resolved to live out his life underground and ends up discovering the 'recognized compulsion'<sup>44</sup> of his being. In an interview with Brown, Morrison posits that: 'Black writing has to carry that burden of other people's desires, not artistic desires but social desires; it's always perceived as working out somebody's else's agenda. No other literature has that weight'<sup>45</sup>. This historical view and aesthetic balance mediates major concerns in her writings and black history in general.

The critical acclaim Morrison's *Song of Solomon*<sup>46</sup> received in itself is historical, being the first African American text to be recognized in this manner since Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)<sup>47</sup>. *Song of Solomon* has to do with the quest motif of Macon Dead III, who embarks on a search for gold he believed to have been buried by his aunt (Pilate), but ends up unearthing his black ancestry and a spiritual quest as well as his family's legacy. Peachavars that the novel is concerned with the fears of white Americans and that of black Americans who fear the dissolution of 'black culture and erosion of black sensibilities by the pursuit of white values'<sup>48</sup>. Morrison sees history as a business where anyone controlling the strings of the narrative has enormous advantages; she therefore, pulls African American experience to the fore so they could re-claim their own piece of history. In that way, Morrison is engaged in cultural production, where she uses myths, folklore and ritual to reclaim black cultural heritage, and is concerned with historical recovery as opposed to the white construction of blackness.

In engaging African American history, Morrison blurs the boundaries between facts and fiction. For instance, Morrison took the life of Margaret Garner from the newspapers and spun it into a novel of slavery – *Beloved*<sup>49</sup>. In *Song of Solomon*, she historicizes the murder of Emmett Louis 'Bobo' Till which has become a defining moment in postwar African American history (137). Freddie who in Tommy's Barbershop believed it would make the papers, is reminded by Porter

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<sup>44</sup>Ellison Ralph, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995), 49-50.

<sup>45</sup>Brown Cecil, 'Toni Morrison Interview', *The Massachusetts Review* 36, no. 3 (1995): 455-473.

<sup>46</sup>Morrison Toni, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

<sup>47</sup>Wright Richard, *Native Son* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

<sup>48</sup>Peach Linden, *Macmillan Modern Novelists: Toni Morrison* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995), 56.

<sup>49</sup>Morrison Toni, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

that; ‘They don’t put that kind of news in no white paper. Not unless he raped somebody’ (138). In the light of this racial profiling, Jeffries in Hornsby notes that violence against African Americans has become a regular part of the discourse against white resistance<sup>50</sup>. The incident triggered a series of events in the South that led to the Montgomery Bus boycott and subsequently the Civil Rights Movement. In 2020, sixty-five (65) years after, Carolyn Bryant, the woman responsible for Till’s death confessed that her claim was untrue. Emmet’s murder is a historical testament to the over 4, 000 lynching that have stained the soul of American from 1870s to the 1950s<sup>51</sup>. It is to vindicate African Americans in the face of injustices like this, that Morrison and others incorporate everyday realities into their writing.

In Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the armed resistance – similar to that of the Black Panthers in the 1960s, as engaged by the Tommy Brothers to avenge the deaths of African Americans rouses the historical loom of the black girls bombed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963 (292). The extensive media coverage given to the trials and convictions of whites involved in the 1963 murders<sup>52</sup> reflects a long history of racial prejudice and discriminatory policies that show cracks in the American system. One of the thrusts of the new historicism is to stick the text back into the intertextual quilt of its initial contest in order to dethrone it, and ‘rob it of political innocence by exposing its discreet commitments, its subtle collusions in the cultural struggle for power’<sup>53</sup>. Through intertextual references to unjust treatments of African Americans, Morrison sparks a dialogue of exploitation and oppression which needs to be addressed and balanced in the dispensation of justice.

For Morrison, the past is symbolically entrenched in the present and needs to be either reasserted or reclaimed. This is the reason that moral responsibilities have to be assumed and redirected due to the history of subjugation, stereotypical

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<sup>50</sup>Jeffries Hasan Kwame, ‘Searching for a New Freedom’ in *A Companion to African American History* (eds.), Hornsby Alton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 504.

<sup>51</sup>Pilkington Ed, ‘Will Justice Finally Be Done for Emmett Till? Family Hopes a 65-Year Wait May Soon Be Over’ *The Guardian*. April, 25, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/25/emmett-till-long-wait-for-justice>

<sup>52</sup>Jeffries Hasan Kwame, ‘Searching for a New Freedom’ in *A Companion to African American History* (eds.), Hornsby Alton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 499.

<sup>53</sup>Ryan Kiernan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Anorld, Hodder Headling Group, 1996), xiii-xiv.

interpretation of black values and their misrepresentations. In the struggle to give a holistic portrait of the African American subject and his or her history, fragmented selves have to be forged in the smithy of memory and recollected in tranquility. While the Great Migration is an important landmark in the history of African Americans, Morrison excavates one of the causes of this exodus through Milkman's grandfather (Macon Dead I) who joined the Freedmen Bureau, ran a successful farm, but was shot down on account of his race (73). The situation of African Americans in the South during this period was akin to the Peloponnesian wars wherein the weak must give to the strong what it could not protect. The U.S Congress during this period, agreed to establish ex-slaves on the forfeited lands of their masters – a sort of poetic justice, but the bill was vetoed by President Johnson as 'unconstitutional' and 'extra-judicial'<sup>54</sup>.

Morrison's narrativization of her African American characters' experiences with the Bureau is a reassertion of the history of the United States as it relates to the black population. The Freedmen's Bureau is the US government's effort to elevate the social conditions of ex-slaves and tackle racial problems during the Reconstruction period though it was suspended in August, 1864 and later abolished in 1872<sup>55</sup>. Milkman's grandfather, Macon Dead I registered as a colored man with the Bureau (95), including his ancestor Jake, the flying African (535).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the myths shared about college education and upward mobility for all Americans have been dismantled by Morrison's historicizing of African Americans who have ticked the right boxes, but were still denied these privileges. This shows the imbalance in racial policies that segregate African Americans by rendering them invisible. This also lends weight to the argument that America's 'founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written. Black Americans fought to make them true. Without this struggle, America would have no democracy at all'<sup>56</sup>. A good example is First Corinthians, the daughter of Ruth Foster; who had a college education, but was not fit for the only isolated work designed for colored girls in the 1960s. First Corinthians is forced to perform domestic works beneath herself at Miss Graham's – a white

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<sup>54</sup>Du Bois William Edward Burghardt, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>55</sup>Du Bois William Edward Burghardt, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16-19.

<sup>56</sup>Silverstein Jake, 'The 1619 Project', *The New York Times Magazine*. August 18, 2019: 14.

woman, by pretending educated (320). This is a classical, if not stereotypical example of how racial injustice works in the lives of black people; particularly how 'Injustice is telling them education is key, while you (white people) continue to change the locks.'<sup>57</sup> First Corinthians even condescends to befriending Henry Porter, a mere yardman (333) and she is not to blame, but the historical chokehold of institutionalized racism.

## **Conclusion**

The progressive history of the United States cannot be discussed without the contributions of African Americans; in fact, most of the landmarks in its history have to do with their first contact through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Morrison, who has always looked for herself or her kind in the fabric of her nation's history, and in realizing the absence of black people, decides to narrativize their experiences in the manner that garners them mainstream attention. In excavating these experiences Morrison reinstates the importance of African Americans where it mattered in the annals of global history. Through Morrison's engagement, African Americans become cultural figures who have contributed to the mutual progress of the country, and therefore, erase the singular, stereotypical and derogatory perspectives from which they have always been viewed. In this wise, Morrison contributes to cultural recovery of the black essence, as well as recalibrates black culture and resistance in the sociohistorical and political imagination of both the United States and the world.

There may not be a universal history, but history has shown a universal trajectory towards the condescending and negative treatment of black people – almost everywhere. Though it takes being black to understand the frustration and enduring hope of black people, history has helped to reconcile these emotions. Therefore, the experiences of African Americans as espoused by the new historicism, demonstrates not just black progress, provincial understanding and the evolution of conscience, but tolerance in the face of interracial prejudices as well as socioeconomic divisions. This study shows Morrison's narrativization of the black experience and its historiography therefore as the democratization of scholarship, cultural convergence, and opens up conversations about the making of

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<sup>57</sup>Livingston Donovan, *Lift Off: From the Classroom to the Stars* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2017), 69.

history alongside identity formation and how it has often been downplayed by occidental worldviews to create distinctions between the races.

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