KEYNOTE · NYBALF 2026

# Namwali Serpell: Toni Morrison and the Black World

*Namwali Serpell*

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What did Africa mean to Toni Morrison, a writer who never travelled there? In the opening keynote of NYBALF 2026, Namwali Serpell reads Morrison's idea of "village literature" as an Afro-diasporic aesthetic, drawing on the argument of her book On Morrison.

Serpell follows Morrison's reading of Africa from the offering plates of her childhood church and white-authored fiction to Chinua Achebe, Camara Laye and Bessie Head, and to the anthology Contemporary African Literature (1972), which Morrison developed as an editor. She then turns to the fiction and identifies two techniques: syncretism, the blending of African and other traditions, and paralepsis, drawing attention to something by appearing to pass over it. Her examples include the flying Africans of Song of Solomon, the trickster Eshu in Milkman Dead's uneven legs, and her reading of Beloved as both a murdered child and an African survivor of the Middle Passage.

The keynote closes with Morrison's African readers and heirs, and with the fact that Morrison never set foot on the continent. In the questions, Serpell speaks about contemporary Zambia, Morrison's commitment to the novel, and why she believes Morrison would have refused today's online arguments between Africans and African Americans.

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0:00

## Morrison's “Village Literature” as an Afro-Diasporic Aesthetic

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 0:01

Don’t pass any judgments. The village participates in the story and makes it whatever it is. So that accounts for the structure, the sort of call and response thing that goes on. The narrator in her work functions as chorus. When Morrison applies Berger’s concept of peasant stories to her novels, when she’s saying she’s writing village literature and describes its structure and its function, she really means the African village. I am interested in folklore, Black folklore. And most of my novels are very much like folktale endings. It’s open-ended folkloric tales, sort of open-ended. They don’t close and shut the door, which is like the Western tradition, where the moral is click, locked up. But in African folktale, the people often say, “You end it.”

Or, “What do you think?” It’s a more communal response. So she’s aspiring to translate that experience of the village listening to stories to her work and to its reception. So what I want to speak with you about today is how her village aesthetics are in fact Afro-diasporic aesthetics with qualities and functions that crisscross the Black Atlantic, the Black world. As I show in my book on Morrison, many of Morrison’s techniques combine African ideas and sensibilities with European fairy tales, Greek myths, and religious parables from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Some of these elements are clear to readers, but it has taken time for critics to trace out the Afro-diasporic threads in particular. As she once bemoaned, “I long for a critic who will know what when I say church or community, or when I say ancestor or chorus, because my books come out of those things and represent how they function in the Black cosmology.”

So as someone who tries to understand what Morrison means, I try in my book to provide that context, to explain the Black cultural forms in her work, and to offer a set of interpretations that open up her writing so that we understand how she’s invoking and playing with this Black cosmology, this village tradition in the novel. As an African and as an American, as a writer and a critic, I’m doing a kind

of translation work in my book. So this talk, which runs about 45 minutes, will proceed in three parts. One, we'll look at how Morrison reads Africa. Two, we'll look at how Morrison writes Africa in her novels, and I'll conclude with some remarks about her reception by Africans. That is how we read her.

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3:00

## Reading Africa: Lorain, the Church, Howard and the "White Gaze"

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 3:00

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 in the Midwest of the United States in Lorain, Ohio, an industrial town to which her parents had migrated from the South. Lorain, she said, was quote, "neither plantation nor ghetto," and many of her classmates were in fact white immigrants. As you can see from her high school yearbook photo, her birth name was actually Chloe Wofford. The surname Morrison is from her ex-husband, an architect from Jamaica, and the Toni is from her choice to convert to Catholicism as a teenager. She took her conversion name from St Anthony and shortened it to Toni. The church was in fact Morrison's introduction to Africa. [Reading from Toni Morrison's introduction to The Radiance of the King] "One of the velvet-lined offering plates passed down the pews on Sunday.

The last one was the smallest and the most nearly empty. In position and size, it signaled the dutiful but limited expectations that characterized most things in the 30s. The coins, never bills, sprinkled there were mostly from children encouraged to give up their pennies and nickels for the charitable work so necessary for the redemption of Africa. Such a beautiful word, Africa. Unfortunately, its seductive sound was riven by the complicated emotions with which the name was associated. Unlike starving China, Africa was both ours and theirs, us and other. A huge, meaty homeland none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness, cultivated by textbooks, films, cartoons, and the hostile name-calling children learn to love."

She goes on in this essay on the Ghanaian [Editor's note: Camara Laye was Guinean] writer Camara Laye to describe her discovery of Africa through reading, beginning first with fiction set in Africa, but written by white authors. Joseph Conrad, Isak Dinesen, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway. So this is what she was reading in the 40s and up through the 50s. In the late 40s, Morrison went to Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she studied English and minored in classics, and where she found her most lively intellectual stimulation in theater at the Howard Players Club, playing Queen Elizabeth in a production of Richard III, for example. Only after she graduated and began her career as a professor and as an editor did she come to read African fiction by African writers.

"In 1965, I began reading African literature, devouring it actually. It was a literature previously unavailable to me, but by then I had discovered a New York bookstore called Africa House, which offered among other things back issues of the magazines Transition and Black Orpheus and works by a host of African writers from all over the continent. The jolt these writers gave me was explosive. Chinua Achebe, along with Camara Laye, Bessie Head, and others constituted a complete education for me, learning how to disassemble the gaze that I was wrestling with, the habitual but self-conscious

writing toward a non-Black reader that threatened and coded much African-American literature, discovering how to eliminate, to manipulate the Eurocentric eye in order to stretch and plumb my own imagination."

In other words, it was African literature that made Morrison realize she needed to free herself from what she called the white gaze. A sense of writing… That means you're always translating for a white audience or in response to a white tradition. So here is the clip from a 1998 interview.

**TONI MORRISON (ARCHIVAL AUDIO)** 7:04

[inaudible] those writers who assumed the centrality of their race, because of what happened, and they didn't explain anything to anybody. Those questions were incomprehensible to them, those questions that I would have as a minority in a non-white country like the United States. But when I read [inaudible] the poetry says [inaudible] only because there was a language, there was a possibility, there were the parameters. I could step in, and I didn't have to be consumed by it or be concerned by it. The white gaze: that was the liberation. It has nothing to do with who reads the books. Everyone, I hope, of any race, any gender, any country. But my sovereignty and my authority as a racialized person had to be struck immediately.

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 8:38

She says there immediately with the very first book and that very first book of course is The Bluest Eye which she began writing in the 60s and published in 1970. During that period, Morrison was reading Africans in part because she had returned to Howard to teach and was now colleagues with Black diasporic intellectuals who were finally teaching African literature. They had not been doing that when she was there as a student.

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9:07

## Morrison as Editor: Contemporary African Literature, Herskovits and Chinweizu

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 9:07

Her real deep dive into African literature came as the result of her editing career, which began with a position in 1965 at a textbook company, L.W. Singer, where her very first project was an anthology of Contemporary African Literature. "The confirmation that African literature was not limited to Doris Lessing and Joseph Conrad was so stunning, it led me to secure the aid of two academics who could help me anthologize this literature. At that time, African literature was not a subject to be taught in American schools. Even in so-called world literature courses, it had no reputation and no presence. But I was determined to funnel the delight, the significance, and the power of that literature into my work as an editor.

The publication of the book Contemporary African Literature in 1972 was the beginning of my love affair." This is what that anthology looks like. It's sadly a little hard to find now. The first editor that Morrison found for it was a Gambian scholar and teacher of Wolof, Edris Makward, who was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the time. He suggested Leslie Alexander Lacy, a Black American

expatriate in Ghana during the Nkrumah years, who had lectured in African history, politics, and literature, and had already published a high school textbook called "Black Africa on the Move." The esteemed dean and professor at Howard University, Dana Williams, published a remarkable book last year, "Toni at Random," which follows Morrison's career as an editor.

Williams explains that with this anthology, Morrison was interested in what we now call decolonizing the syllabus. And she wanted, at a foundational level, a book that could course correct the assumption that Africa was without a rich cultural heritage. Contemporary African Literature, the anthology, was pitched to students in the last two years of high school and the first year of college, and it laid out its aspirations and its political orientation in its introduction. It begins this way: "Africa was discovered by Africans. Simple as that statement is, it cannot be made too often. Long before Europeans cast their eyes on that continent, Africa was a land of stable, prosperous kingdoms with thousands of years of history, culture, and art.

Sadly, Zambia is not featured. The divisions between the genres are marked with beautifully designed pages and with clusters of 36 color photographs that Morrison herself chose, mapping them onto the geographic locations of the African writers that the editors selected. They are very much in the type of ethnographic or anthropological pictures meant to showcase — they're meant to showcase foreign cultures. But they did include a few gestures toward what was in 1972 a rapidly modernizing post-independence Africa. Morrison continued engaging with African writing and thought through other editorial projects. One was this book, "Cultural Relativism," a 1973 posthumous collection of essays by the anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who taught African studies at Howard and Northwestern. Herskovits famously argued for what are called African "retentions."

This is a central claim for those of us like me and Morrison who believe in the syncretic nature of African diasporic cultures. Herskovits's idea was that the people of Africa who were brought across the Atlantic Ocean kept with them or retained African artistic cultures philosophical ideas and religious practices that they then amalgamated or merged with forms from Europe and the Americas that they encountered. In 1975, Morrison also published a book by one of the Nigerian essayists from the anthology of Contemporary African Literature, Chinweizu Ibekwe, who sometimes just goes by his first name as a mononym: Chinweizu. The book that she edited, The West and the Rest of Us, used post-colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa as a case study for broader anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist arguments.

Morrison and Chinweizu debated in Dana Williams' book, she talks about their letters going back and forth arguing about both the inside and the outside of the book, about its claims and how it would be packaged. But from the very beginning, Chinweizu's fierce political writing exposed Morrison to ideas that she would absorb and disseminate in her own career as a writer and public intellectual. So I want to show you briefly how Morrison picked up and developed this African thinker's ideas. So here's a quote from the essay that Morrison anthologized. It is titled, "The Myth of Inferiority and the Trap of Proof." And he says, and this is, I think he is more convoluted in how he explains his idea than Morrison

is, but we'll move slowly through it, "The racist ideology of colonialism, an ideology that fostered belief in the innate inferiority of the colonized, made it a prime psychic preoccupation of the colonized to assert their non-inferiority."

Since the humiliating charge of inferiority was couched in the language and criteria of the colonizers, it was perhaps unavoidable that the first refutations had to be given point by painful point by showing that in each of the areas of supposed inferiority, the colonized could perform just as well as their colonizers. So compare this quote to what Morrison says here.

**TONI MORRISON (ARCHIVAL AUDIO)** 16:33

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary.

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 17:20

So that's from 1975. And you can hear her picking up Chinweizu's emphasis on this futile and, you know… understandable, but relatively ineffective desire on the part of the colonized to refute their supposed inferiority. Morrison is saying not only will there always be one more thing, but it's a distraction and a waste of time, and what it takes us away from is the art itself. She goes on to say, "Since not history, not anthropology, not social sciences seem capable in a strong and consistent way to grapple with that problem, it may very well be left to the artists to do it. For art focuses on the single grain of rice, the tree-shaped scar, and the names of people, not only the number that arrived."

So we see Morrison integrating her pan-Africanist sensibility, which she's developing as an editor, with her aesthetic philosophy in a way that would then bear fruit in her work as a writer of fiction.

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18:30

## Morrison Writes Africa: Retentions, Syncretism and Paralepsis

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 18:30

So I want to turn now to Morrison's fiction to consider how African thought, philosophy, and culture appear there. So part two, Morrison writes Africa. In 1986, over a decade after the publication of Contemporary African Literature, that anthology, Christina Davis did an interview with Morrison for the important African literature journal, Présence Africaine. Davis asked whether Morrison saw any links between African and Afro-American literatures. Morrison, who was at that time writing her masterwork, Beloved, replied, "I am only discovering those links in a large sense, that is, as a reader and as a scholar. When I first began to write, I would do no research in that area because I distrusted the sources of research, that is, the books that were available, whether they were religion or philosophy and so on.

I would rely heavily and almost totally on my own recollections, and more important on my own insight about those recollections, and in doing so, was able to imagine and to recreate cultural linkages that were identified for me by Africans who had a more familiar and overt recognition of them." So Morrison here is relying on her recollections of those African retentions, those things that have stayed, but also on the knowledge of real Africans whom she knows to confirm the discredited African retentions in Black American culture. Now these retentions I want to remind you are necessarily syncretic. They are a thread in that weave of the Afro-diasporic aesthetic with which I began. Morrison's sense of having to rediscover the Black world, to learn what has been historically denied, discredited, or distorted by these books that were available, I think explains the ephemeral quality to her allusions to Africa, but also that quality in her fiction itself.

My book opens with a chapter on difficulty, and a lot of it is about Morrison's insistence on using obscure, oblique, ambiguous techniques in order to tell her story. We've already seen her say in some of these quotes, "The artistic demands of Black culture are such that I cannot patronize, control, or pontificate." She's also said she writes open-ended folkloric tales and that she, quote, "tends not to explain things." This quality is called, or I call it, paralepsis. Paralepsis is a rhetorical device whereby you emphasize or draw attention to something by professing to say little or nothing about it, by pretending to pass over it or omit it. The most common examples of paralepsis are everyday colloquialisms whereby for instance you might say not to mention but then you go ahead and mention anyway or to say nothing of but then you go ahead and state it.

This has a striking effect in literature, and it's one that Morrison uses all the time. It's a way of writing under the sign of erasure, or using what she called quiet language that doesn't shout out its meaning. She draws attention to the fact that she's not mentioning, only to mention. As I'll show in this part of the talk, Morrison's references to African religions, characters, deities, languages, and cultural norms are often presented in this fashion, both syncretic and paraleptic, both a cultural mixture of things and always somewhat ambiguous or under the sign of erasure. So let's consider how this two-pronged aesthetic works in her fiction.

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22:21

## Song of Solomon: The Flying Africans, Pilate and Eshu

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 22:21

In May of 1803, a group of enslaved Africans of Igbo descent from modern-day Nigeria leapt from a ship into a creek in Georgia. One slave agent concluded that the Africans had drowned in a mass suicide, either in the creek or in the sea nearby. But oral accounts from the enslaved and their descendants claimed that the Igbo actually flew or walked across the water all the way back to Africa. Others claimed that they were singing as they flew and the lyrics that were passed down map onto the lyrics of the song that Morrison includes in Song of Solomon. So this is an example of Morrison's use of the retention of African history or mythology, the story of the Igbo people who flew back home in Black American culture.

In the novel it comes to us obliquely through the lyrics to a song that someone overhears. Africa's presence is also felt in the novel however through the presence of Milkman's aunt whose name is Pilate. She's described as dark-skinned and she practices a syncretic religion that mixes and mingles Christianity and traditional medicine. At one point in the story, Milkman and his friend Guitar try to steal the inheritance that they believe that their aunt, that aunt Pilate is hoarding in her home in a sack hanging from the ceiling. An odor like crystallized ginger is blowing through the town that night, breathing the air that could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra. They stood for what seemed to them a very long time.

One leaned against a tree, his foot hovering off the ground. So we have this foreshadow of flight, but we also are being reminded that Milkman Dead, the main character, has one leg shorter than the other. And that, I think, is a reference to Africa. Specifically to the trickster god Eshu, who is associated with the crossroads, mischief, and chaos. One of his names translates to "he who creates problems for the innocent." Eshu is depicted as having two hats, heads, or sides to his face, and he occasionally appears to have two genders as well. But even more pertinent, he has one longer leg, which stands in the realm of the gods, and one shorter leg, which stands in the world of humans.

So in depictions, often one knee is higher than the other. Having traversed the Middle Passage with the African people brought to North and South America to be enslaved, Eshu crops up all over the Black world in syncretic convergence with Christian rites and rituals. So he's a deity in Haitian Vodou. He appears in the Candomblé and Umbanda religions of Latin America. One of his avatars appears in African American culture as well, The Devil at the Crossroads, whom the blues singer Robert Johnson famously meets there. Like Eshu, Morrison's Milkman stands at a tilt at the Afro-diasporic crossroads where mythic folk and religious lore from various parts of the world collide in a kind of cross-cultural syncretic game.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

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25:43

## Beloved: An African Survivor and a Murdered Child in One Being

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 25:43

If we turn to Morrison's masterpiece, Beloved, we find her most sustained engagement with Africa in the titular character of the novel, Beloved herself. The idea for Beloved first came to Morrison while she was editing The Black Book, an eclectic collection of Black cultural artifacts. And actually if you look at The Black Book, it's like an anthology of syncretism, of African retentions, because you see all of these different elements that have remained in the currents of Black culture over the course of centuries. A newspaper article that Morrison read from the 19th century had caught her eye. It was about a slave woman who had killed her child. That's the headline on the newspaper. Morrison was very struck by this historical incident.

An enslaved woman on the run as a fugitive killed one daughter and tried to kill her other children rather than let them be taken back into slavery. Morrison said she had made up her mind that they would not suffer the way she had and it was better for them to die. So the premise of Beloved is, what

if the child that this woman killed came back from the dead? Morrison said of her character, whom she named Sethe, "Asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn't, and nobody else that knew her could, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed. And from there, Beloved inserted herself into the text."

So this novel has been analyzed and read by a lot of people in a lot of depth. So I just want to focus on the relationship between Beloved and Africanness. I find it very striking that there is a distinct possibility that Beloved the character is in fact an African woman. To many of the novel's characters and many of its readers, Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's baby, an infant born and murdered in America. But there's long been a debate about Beloved's identity, much of it prompted by an eerie fragmentary chapter written from her point of view. The character speaks of being separated from a woman with a round basket and earrings. Is this her mother in Africa?

She describes crouching in a small space with others wearing iron circles around their necks, a man dying on her, and people being thrown into the water. Is this the slave ship that brought her to America over the Atlantic Ocean, the Middle Passage? Are those she describes as "men without skin" white enslavers, from the point of view of someone who hasn't met white people before? When she later speaks of a man who "hurts where I sleep and puts his finger there," is this the entrapment and abuse of an enslaved African? One character hypothesizes that Beloved had, quote, "been locked up by some white man for his own purposes and never let out the door," that she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind.

Another character passes on a rumor: "Was a girl locked up in the house with a white man over by Deer Creek? Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Folks said he had her in there since she was a pup." Both Sethe and her other daughter Denver seem to recognize Beloved as their dead family member who has returned to them. As does their neighbor Ella, who says, "Nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge. As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place, shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such, Ella respected it." But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot.

When Beloved first shows up, as Ella notes, she is a human woman. She takes flesh, she's able to bleed, to have sex, and eventually becomes pregnant. What kind of ghosts can take flesh? And how did a baby girl ghost become a grown-up evil sitting at the table? If Sethe killed a crawling infant, why does she reappear as a grown woman? And if she was born on a plantation in the southern United States, why does she seem to recall the Middle Passage? Morrison sets up an irresolvable ambiguity about Beloved. She keeps it open-ended. When Beloved is exorcized from the home she's seen as a devil child and as a Christ figure, some readers think she represents all the Africans who died on the Middle Passage to whom the novel is dedicated.

Others speculate that she is the ghost of Sethe's mother, who was an African woman who spoke an African language and was lynched when she was around Beloved's age. In effect, the novel gives us all of these possibilities of identity for Beloved, but Morrison never tells us which one is correct. I have long believed that Beloved is in fact a combination of people. She is an African slave ship survivor

whose fleshly body has been possessed by the spirit of Sethe's dead baby. The novel even seems to stage their merging: "I'm looking for the join. I'm loving my face so much. My dark face is close to me. I want to join. She whispers to me. She whispers.

I reach for her. She touches me. She knows I want to join. I'm gone now. I am her face." So in this poetic merging, two beings join and become one. This is a familiar African entity, a double being which emerges through spirit possession. And an interview Morrison gave while writing the novel lends credence to my interpretation. Morrison said, quote, "She is a spirit on one hand. Literally, she is what Sethe thinks she is. Her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is a survivor from the true factual slave ship. It was clear to me that it was not at all a violation of African religion and philosophy.

It's very easy for a son or parent or neighbor to appear in a child or in another person." I've since found more evidence for this theory and Morrison's notes on the novel in the archives at Princeton. The implications of this double identity cannot be overstated. Not only does it make us reimagine the novel entirely, and it has led me to think about questions of narration. When Beloved speaks, who is speaking? Which voice is coming out of her? The baby or the slave ship survivor? It also raises philosophical questions about what it means to be a being, to be a spirit, to take responsibility. Beloved as a human African woman merged with an American baby girl ghost is a fitting symbol, I think, for Morrison's aesthetic tendencies when depicting Africa.

We get that ghostliness of paralepsis, her refusal to land on one specific identity. But we also get syncretism, that will to join, to amalgamate Africa and America into one being. I outline this theory in my book and draw out the aesthetic and philosophical implications of Morrison's use of these aesthetics, the way it draws us, the inhabitants of the Black world, around her texts, like we're sitting in a village discussing the tale.

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33:30

## How Africans Read Morrison: Achebe and Her Literary Heirs

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 33:30

So that's just one example of how an African like me reads Morrison. There has actually been a surge in the 21st century of studies about Morrison's relationship to African traditions, La Vinia Delois Jennings's 2008 Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa being the most comprehensive and detailed. There also have been works of criticism and scholarship that take up the real life and literary relationships between Morrison and specific African writers like Ben Okri, Bessie Head and Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe and Morrison were actually born just three months apart in 1931 [Editor's note: Achebe was born in November 1930, Morrison in February 1931] and they are both Nobel laureates [Editor's note: Chinua Achebe was not awarded the Nobel Prize].

They were good friends and mutual inspirations. They read each other. As I noted earlier, Morrison felt that Achebe's work liberated her artistic intelligence as nothing else ever had. And when Achebe was asked in 2011, which book he'd take to a desert island, he said, "Beloved." "She is the only one," he said, "who is probing the conundrum of color, the question of what happened to us on the continent and in the diaspora. We have not dealt with that question on the continent, but Morrison has the courage to begin to deal with it." So beyond this mutual influence between these fraternal literary twins, there are also Morrison's collaborations over the years with various African artists, many through the Atelier program she ran at Princeton.

I think the most striking of these is her 2011 play Desdemona, which is her response to a production of Shakespeare's Othello directed by Peter Sellars. Morrison famously gives voice to Desdemona in this play, but she also gives voice to Desdemona's nurse, whose name in the play, in Shakespeare's play, is Barbary. And Morrison points out that this very likely means she came from the Barbary Coast of Africa. So the white woman at the center of Shakespeare's play had a Black nurse. Morrison even uses the play to argue that this is why she falls for Othello. She's used to hearing stories of Africa from her nurse. Morrison corresponded with the Malian singer Rokia Traoré who performed the role and wrote songs for it in Bambara using a syncretic blend of North African and Black American instruments and tones.

So this is one of those Africa-African America collaborations Morrison participated in. And finally, there's Morrison's African legacy, her many literary sons and daughters, among whom I include myself. The Nigerian-Ghanaian writer, Taiye Selasi, was directly mentored by Morrison, who gave her a deadline to finish a novella, and which she went on to publish as a prize-winning short story. When Morrison passed away, the eulogies from all over the world included many other African literary luminaries, including Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chigozie Obioma, Afua Hirsch, and Sarah Ladipo Manyika. When Vintage reissued her novels in 2022, three of the authors commissioned to write new introductions were of African origin: me, a Zambian American, and two Nigerian-British writers, Bernardine Evaristo and Diana Evans.

We are published alongside Morrison in a two-volume anthology, Daughters of Africa, edited by the Ghanaian, Barbadian, British writer Margaret Busby. What an honor. Reading Morrison has become a way of writing with her.

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36:58

## Morrison Never Went to Africa

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 36:58

In the process of researching on Morrison, I discovered a remarkable irony. Unlike her good friends, James Baldwin and Angela Davis, Toni Morrison never stepped foot in Africa. In 1998, an interviewer asked her, "Have you ever been?" Morrison said no, professing that she had an urge to go. But when she was asked if this is an important journey for Black Americans to make, she replied with some

hesitation. “I don’t know,” she said. “We romanticize it so much, but maybe so for that reason, because we’re so easily drawn, into the myth of whatever, a history, a useful little test story.” Ten years later, Morrison was asked again but said that her health, now that she was in her late 70s, wouldn’t allow it.

Quote, “How could I? How could I go to Africa now, at my age?” In an interview in 2017, just two years before her death, the Nigerian writer Sarah Ladipo Manyika described Morrison’s home in New York as a place filled with Africa, even though she’d not been: “Someone has thought carefully about the home’s furnishings, understated, modern, and contemplative, with accents from Africa. A Dogon figure, an Akua’ba fertility doll, and a small Shona sculpture are all on display. I smile, feeling at home. This is simultaneously Kingston, Accra, Lagos, Harare and New York. I wonder if Ms. Morrison has ever visited the African continent. Would Ms. Morrison ever write a story set in Africa? If so, what century would she set her story in?

What would she say about the motherland?” Now that Morrison is gone, we know that she will never go. But one of her African children, maybe one of them in this very room, will have to write that story. You end it. What do you think?

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38:48

## Q&A: A Modern Zambia and the Novel as Morrison's Form

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 38:49

Thank you. [Applause] I’m happy to take questions or comments. Yes.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 1** 39:09

[Question largely inaudible on the recording]

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 39:25

It’s a very good question. So I was born in Zambia. I’m from there. I grew up there until middle school and then went back. And my whole family moved back in 2002. And I guess the best example I can give is my husband, who is African American, and his experience in coming to Zambia to visit. he loves it. I think one of the reasons that I feel sad that Morrison never went is because… A lot of her references to Africa are historical. A lot of them are about the past or about traditions that have changed because we now live in a very modern Africa. And so I think one of the things that is surprising to African Americans who come is this combination of older traditions and contemporary American and Western influenced traditions as well.

That is another form of syncretism, right? Where African and African-American are kind of combining. So, we have Zambian rappers, we have hip-hop artists. They’re obviously taking a lot of that inspiration from America. But, the foods, those… ceremonies that we forced my husband to go through, we had two weeks of ceremonies and rituals to go through with my family, those are still maintained. So, yeah,

I think that's probably the most striking thing, is that combination, how modern it is at the same time as how traditional it still feels. Other questions? I saw another hand back there. The microphone. I don't know who has the microphone. I can't see it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 2** 41:46

[Inaudible] ...novels. And she's obviously critiquing the foreignness of the form for Black folks, but she's also really invested in it. And I'm just curious — she edited lots of non-fiction also. What do you think it is about? Why do you think — what do you think her relationship or commitment to that form is about?

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 42:30

That's a really good question. So, as you say, she did edit non-fiction. She also wrote non-fiction, so she has many published essays. She wrote literary criticism. She wrote plays, and I think the play form for her... was her attempt to get as close as possible to that communal African village form. My father has done research in Zambia, specifically in Chipata with the Chewa, and he was looking very much at... theater and the combination of theater with, for example, Nyau ceremonies, which is a kind of animistic... religion, secret society really for men. And how there are these performances but then they turn into drama. And the whole community gathers and it's very much a live space.

It's also an educational space. So when Morrison talks about the chorus and the notion of the audience participating, I think she very much has that in mind and I think that's what she wanted when she wrote plays. So she had a play called Dreaming Emmett, which was produced only once and... But you can now read versions of it in the archives. And I think there was someone who was going to put up a new production of it. And then there's Desdemona. And then she did also with the Atelier program, she did these various things that were more communal. She was an actress at Howard. She loved being in the Howard Players Club. And I think drama is really important to her in that way.

She also is interested in making films, but, I think Beloved and the making of that film, she actually talks about how there are things that film does that... it can't ever actually do what the novel does. For example, Beloved's identity is not vague in that film. It can't be. It can't be ambiguous. So she dabbled in these forms. I fundamentally think that she was just a fiction writer at heart. Even her attempts at poetry, which I will admit I throw some shade at in my book because I did not like her poetry, but she didn't like her poetry. She was like, "I'm not a poet." She said over and over again, "I write poetically maybe, but I'm not a poet."

She saw the novel as her form. She only published one short story. So there's this sense that that is her home. That's what she studied. She got a master's at Cornell and she studied the novels of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. So I think it just, and it's true for me as well, like the novel is just my home. What she does with the novel, she bends it, she blackens it, she tries to make it into a communal form that will have us talking to each other the way that a play might.

45:37

## Q&A: Why Morrison Would Have Resisted the "Diaspora Wars"

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 3** 45:37

Hello. I've read your work, as well as Toni at Random, which examines her work as an editor, and you've highlighted some of the work she did, especially publishing African writers like Chinweizu. What I'm curious about, as someone who has studied her and someone who is of mixed race, who grew up in Africa and who is married to an African American, is: what do you think when you look at the conversations we're having as Africans versus African Americans, especially on social media, these really contentious conversations that seem to have taken hold? What do you think we can learn from Morrison's work and exploration of African identity? And from your own experience, what do you think her work can tell us as to how to navigate current realities? Thank you.

**NAMWALI SERPELL** 46:23

So if I understand you correctly, you're asking what would Morrison be-- what would she say or what can she teach us in the wake of the social media diasporic battles that we see all the time? Yeah, okay. It's funny because I just saw a little debate along these lines. Someone posted... that Zora Neale Hurston is the reason Toni Morrison wrote the way that she wrote, that Zora Neale Hurston was the most influential and then listed off a bunch of other authors. And an African writer replied and said, actually, and this is true, and I talk about it in my book, Morrison had not read "Their Eyes Were Watching God" when she wrote her first three novels.

So she says, I'd read one little short story. She's like, people always want to draw this lineage between me and Zora, but it's not quite there. And the response to this African who then said, actually the people who inspired her, Chinua Achebe and Bessie Head and Wole Soyinka, which, we've seen the quote where she says that, she says it all the time. And people were furious at the idea that the lineage would go all the way to Africa and it would not go through Zora Neale Hurston. So this is the kind of argument that I see all the time. I think Morrison would have just refused it. I think because... Again, she believed that we had retained aspects of African culture in African American culture.

The food we eat, the languages we speak, the certain words. She talks about how an African American child, if they go to a white school, they won't be informed that the words they're speaking are Africanisms, that they come from Africa, actually, like words like "okay," even, or words like "what does signifying mean?" So I think for her, there was just no difficulty in acknowledging that. She talks about the tar baby story, which is an African-American story, but she traces it back to a tar lady story in Africa, right? Her reading, she read very widely. She didn't go to the continent, but she read extremely widely. And in the archives, you see the amount of research she did for her books.

She could see the connections between Africa and African-American culture. And for her, it was unmistakable. So the idea that there would be some kind of division there, I think it would have bothered her and I think she would have refused it.

## ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

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