



CASE WESTERN RESERVE  
UNIVERSITY EST. 1826

# Identity, Language and Power: Toni Morrison's Perspective on the History of Enslavement

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## A Context for Dialogue about Toni Morrison

“Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.”

--Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture*, 1999

“This, then, is the end of his [or her] striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture...”

--W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

“Race can be defined externally (how others see us), internally (how we see ourselves), and expressively (how we present ourselves to others)...[To] think that people possess the traits they do because they are essential...is to commit what psychologists call a fundamental attribution error.

--Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*, 2007

# Goals and Objectives

1. To reflect on American history through Toni Morrison's writing
2. To demonstrate how language shapes our worldview and the stories we tell about ourselves and others
3. To discuss the power of language to create change within ourselves and within our community

# Identity and History

## Identity Matters

- Your Name
- How You Identify Yourself
- Some Unique Aspect of Your Identity
- What You Value Most about Yourself

## History Matters

- Slavery vs. Enslavement
- Legal, Social, Psychological Perspectives
- The Power of Love
- Knowledge as Empowerment

## Who is Toni Morrison?

“The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie...Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn to do so.

--Toni Morrison, 1993



# Biographical Information about Toni Morrison

- Born Chloe Wofford, February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio
- Graduate of Howard University and Cornell University
- Taught at Texas Southern, State University of New York at Albany, Bard College, Yale University and Princeton University
- Mother of two sons
- Former editor at Random House
- Author of 11 novels, play, *Dreaming Emmett*, opera, *Margaret Garner*
- Guest curator at the Louvre Museum in Paris (2006) of “The Foreigner’s Home Exhibit”
- Awards include Nationals Book Critics’ Circle Award (1977), Pulitzer Prize (1988), Nobel Prize (1993)
- Has an author’s society named for her—The Toni Morrison Society ([www.tonimorrisonociety.org](http://www.tonimorrisonociety.org))

# The Work of Toni Morrison

- *The Bluest Eye* (1970)
- *Sula* (1973)
- *Song of Solomon* (1977)
- *Tar Baby* (1981)
- *Beloved* (1987)
- *Jazz* (1992)
- *Paradise* (1998)
- *Love* (2003)
- *A Mercy* (2009)
- *Home* (2013)
- *God Bless the Child* (2015)
- “Recitatif” (short story, 1983)
- “Dreaming Emmett” (play, 1986)
- “Margaret” (opera, 2005)

## Dialogue on Excerpt from *Beloved*

- What words, phrases or ideas caught your attention in the excerpt?
- What kind of relationship does it appear Sethe had with her mother-in-law Baby Suggs?
- Why is the Clearing an important place to Sethe?
- What used to happen there?
- What did Baby Suggs teach the women, men, and children to do?
- How is what she taught them important?
- Identify a time/place where the language someone used helped you change your thinking about yourself, a situation you faced, or your attitude about your community for the better?



# Our Stories as Resources

As members of a community, we have stories.

Consider what story you have to tell about your journey as a member of the Provost Scholar community. How can your story, your lessons learned empower your classmates? How can the oral tradition or the cultural function of narrative help you succeed in your classes and other parts of your life?

- What is your story?
- What does it reveal about you?
- How can you use your story/lessons learned to empower your peers, be a mentor to others?
- How have you shown up as a change agent? How do you want to show up as a change agent in the future?

## Works Cited

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Thank You!