



title: Bridging the Americas : The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones

author: Coser, Stelamaris.

publisher: Temple University Press

isbn10 | asin: 1566392675

print isbn13: 9781566392679

ebook isbn13: 9780585364568

language: English

subject: American fiction--African American authors--History and criticism, Women and literature--United States--History--20th century, American fiction--20th century--History and criticism, Marshall, Paule,--1929- --Criticism and interpretation, Morrison, Toni--C

publication date: 1995

lcc: PS153.N5C73 1994eb

ddc: 813/.54099287/08996073

subject: American fiction--African American authors--History and criticism, Women and literature--United States--History--20th century, American fiction--20th century--History and criticism, Marshall, Paule,--1929- --Criticism and interpretation, Morrison, Toni--C

Bridging the Americas

The Literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl
Jones

Stelamaris Coser



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia

Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122

Copyright © 1994 by Temple University

All rights reserved

Published 1995

Excerpts from *Song for Anninho* by Gayl Jones are reprinted by permission of Lotus Press, Inc.

Excerpt from "A Weekend in Austin: A Poet, the People, and the KKK" in *See No Evil: Prefaces, Essays, & Accounts 1976-1983* by Ntozake Shange. Published by Momo's Press.

Excerpts from "Bocas: A Daughter's Geography" in *A Daughter's Geography* by Ntozake Shange. Published by St. Martin's Press, Inc.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ☞ ANSI Z39.48-1984

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Coser, Stelamaris, 1948

Bridging the Americas : the literature of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones / Stelamaris Coser.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-56639-266-7 (acid-free) ISBN 1-56639-267-5

(paper : acid-free)

1. American fiction—Afro-American authors—History and criticism.
2. Women and literature—United States—History—20th century.
3. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism.
4. Marshall, Paule, 1929—Criticism and interpretation.
5. Morrison, Toni—Criticism and interpretation.
6. Jones, Gayl—Criticism and interpretation.
7. Caribbean Area—In literature.
8. Afro-Americans in literature.
9. Sex role in literature.
10. Brazil—In literature. I. Title.

PS153.N5C73 1994

813'.54099287'08996073dc20

94-30421
CIP

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Preface	ix
1. Stepping-Stones between the Americas: The Works of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones	1
2. From the Natives' Point of View: The Ethnographic Novels of Paule Marshall	27
3. The Redefinition of American Geography and History: Toni Morrison's <i>Song of Solomon</i> and <i>Tar Baby</i>	81
4. The Dry Wombs of Black Women: Memories of Brazilian Slavery in <i>Corregidora</i> and <i>Song for Anninho</i>	120
5. No Final Chord: The Music of Morrison, Jones, and Marshall	164
Notes	175
Index	217

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to a number of people and institutions that have in one way or another contributed to the completion of this project: family and friends, colleagues and staff at both the University of Minnesota and the Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES), and the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) in Brazil. This work would not have been possible without the funding from UFES and CNPq and the invaluable support of my Brazilian university throughout my doctoral program in 1987-1991. I also thank my colleagues in the Department of Languages and Letters at UFES for allowing me time and conditions to revise my dissertation and for adding their suggestions, bibliographical references, and helping hands. I particularly thank Mirtis Caser and Solange Bonn for their constant solidarity.

The interdisciplinary orientation of my project has much to do with the critical openness in the various departments constituting the field of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. I am indebted to Clarke Chambers, Stuart Schwartz, Prabhakara Jha, David W. Noble, John Wright, Joanna O'Connell, Gayle G. Yates, and George Lipsitz, professors who shared with me their experience and expertise and nudged me on with their example and encouragement. I am especially thankful to David, John, Joanna, Gayle, and George for their careful reading and response to my work. As my major adviser, George Lipsitz gave me friendly and competent guidance through the intricacies of cultural politics and contemporary theory;

I am thankful for his orientation and for the stimulating example of his own scholarship. Providential help with sources for my research came from Patricia Turner, bibliographer for humanities and social sciences at Wilson Library. It was a privilege to discuss my work with all of these people throughout the writing process.

I am indebted to colleagues and friends who shared their thoughts with me and helped me with their insights, particularly Jun Xing, Roberta Hill Whiteman (Bobbie), and Arlene and Luiz Diaz. Providential computer assistance came from my friends Beth Gama and Wes Olson. These and other people inside and outside the academy provided me with a much-needed multicultural community in the United States. Constant support came from my "sister" Charlayne Myers and from my "American Mom and Dad" Charlotte and Wayne Owens, whose family I joined as a foreign exchange student in 1966, and I thank them all.

Finally, I thank my parents, Orlando and Delourdes Coser, as well as my brothers and sisters for always being there for me. My deepest gratitude goes to my daughter, Marilia. She always supported me through the years even when that meant separation and *saudade*. Without her love, her companionship, and her patience, my work would not have been completed. I dedicate this book to her.

Preface

This book examines some inter-American characteristics in work developed over the last four decades by black women writers from the United States. Even as the recent "renaissance" of literature by black women suggests parallel developments with the so-called boom of Latin American writers, novels such as *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, by Paule Marshall; *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison; and *Corregidora*, by Gayl Jones also represent an affirmation, unprecedented in U.S. literature, of a sense of proximity and commonality between the Americas, particularly the shared heritage of colonialism and racism in the coasts and fields of the "extended Caribbean." The continental stretch thus baptized by Immanuel Wallerstein borders the Atlantic Ocean from Maryland in the United States to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, with the Caribbean as its nodal point.

The storytelling of Morrison, Jones, and Marshall explores and expands that space and construes inter-American links in several different ways. The links may occur through intertextuality, mainly with the work of Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes; by making an effective intervention in the ongoing debate over the history of gender and race relations in the *New World*; by exposing postcolonial domination within and between American nation-states; and above all, by illuminating the African roots of the Americas. The works of Morrison, Marshall, and Jones assume an innovatively "American" perspective and break a long tradition of estrangement and suspicion between a whiter "Anglo-America" and the multi-

colored "Nuestra America" idealized by José Martí. They now present the two hemispheres as equally multicolored and equally whitedominated. Their stories bridge individual and collective forms of resistance and sociocultural and ideological processes in Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States. Political boundaries between nation-states still signal separation and difference, but identities and histories overlap and crisscross over and beyond those limits.

In addition to the combined focus on race, class, and gender, the articulation of a multicultural and polyglot inter-Americanness assumes special significance in a decade the 1990s, five hundred years after Christopher Columbus named the continent that calls forth a dynamic reinterpretation of *New World* myths, traditions, and conflicts. In their personal and literary histories, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones emphasize their black womanhood and their U.S. citizenship. But they are also American citizens in a larger way, having transgressed traditional boundaries and established enclaves. Their interracial, inter-American, intertextual stories, crossing the borders of fact and fiction, stand out as truly American literature.

1

Stepping-Stones between the Americas: The Works of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones

The islands of the Caribbean "steppingstones that might have been placed there long ago by some giant race to span the distance between the Americas, North and South."

Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*

Contemporary black women writers in the United States have interrogated issues of history, culture, and literature related to the Americas. The connections drawn in their fiction between the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America introduce a new cosmopolitanism and internationalism to U.S. literature. By thinking of America as one continent with a common history and by challenging dominant hierarchies of race, class, and gender, black women writers pose important challenges for readers and critics in general. They have made significant contributions to their own nation's literature and culture by bringing inside its borders sensibilities and concerns familiar to the "Third World" below the southern borders of the United States.

1

The Caribbean and Brazil are choices for setting and reference points in *Tar Baby*, by Toni Morrison; *Corregidora* and *Song of Anninho*, by Gayl Jones; and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (among several other works), by Paule Marshall. In spite of these writers' differences in style and perspective, the history of the African diaspora in the *New World* binds together the imaginative worlds they have created in fiction. Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*,

although not directly connected with the larger America in geographical and historical aspects, is intertextually related to Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Style and imagery in Gayl Jones's works likewise respond to her reading of Carlos Fuentes. Incorporating geographical, historical, or literary spaces of the Caribbean and Latin America into their works, Morrison and Jones have drawn on the concept of literature as agent of social transformation, articulated by, among others, Latin American novelists García Márquez and Fuentes. Morrison and Jones have also acknowledged that they share with their Latin American colleagues a model of writing as storytelling, grounded in folk traditions and beliefs. They create a literary inter-space (*entre-lugar*) between the discourses of the Americas, a contaminated area of exchange. 2

At the same time that Jones and Morrison permit a new reading of their works by this intertextual movement, they also graft onto Latin American novels the gaze of black women in the United States. Two of the most important phenomena in the post-1960s literary scene thus come together: the new visibility of writings by black women and the unprecedented popularity of Latin American novelists in the publishing industry and academic circles of the United States. By overstepping conventional closures of nationality, race, and gender, Morrison, Jones, and Marshall rewrite the boundaries between the American hemispheres on the basis of shared cultural, social, and economic relationships and common cultural roots in Africa.

The polyglot and multicultural texts of these writers reinvigorate and also subvert the literature of the United States. Long before Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, she and Marshall and Jones had been receiving extensive critical attention for their important role in the imaginative writing of black culture and history from the perspectives of black women. As an additional reading, this book constitutes an interrogation of the inter-American quality of their narratives. The three women help to blur the dividing line between the "advanced" society of North America and the neocolonial structure of the Caribbean (Anglo or otherwise) and Latin America by dealing with the complex and contradictory realities of mixed racial heritage in the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil. The importance of their novels on an inter-American level is two-fold. At the same time that they give visibility to and recognize bonds with the Southern Hemisphere, pulling together memories and expe-

riences, they also inscribe their gender and race in the literature of the United States and of the continent. Avoiding essentialisms, they reinterpret gender and ethnicity in the process of remembering and writing Africa in the Caribbean, in the United States, in Brazil, and in the whole continent of America.

The islands of the Caribbean mark the birth of America. "Steppingstones" linking North and South, they are a continuing symbol for the meeting of different "cultural tributaries," as well as the initial place of displacement and domination of native peoples and Africans in the *New World*. Historian Gordon K. Lewis points out that it was in the Caribbean "sugar islands" that "the agrosocial system of slavery developed in its fullest and most harsh form." 3 Immanuel Wallerstein uses the term *extended Caribbean* to identify those societies developed on the basis of cotton, sugar, or coffee plantations that were supported by slave labor. Although such societies and the Caribbean islands as a whole resist simplistic generalizations regarding their sociocultural formation and development, Wallerstein's concept seems appropriate as a "unifying alibi" for a discussion of novels by Marshall, Morrison, and Jones.⁴

In Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, the Caribbean islands continue to perform their historical and carnivalesque roles as the original and central space where "creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated" in the *New World*.⁵ These novels, along with Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* and her long narrative poem *Song for Anninho*, are set in areas within the extended Caribbean, interconnecting them and branching out along the routes of migration of African descendants into the largest cities of the United States and Europe. The stories focus on the struggles and negotiations within a continental "Afroamerica" throughout its long and complex processes of constructing cultural identity in the *New World*.⁶

The works of Jones, Marshall, and Morrison tell tales of sorrow and bitterness blended with sounds of music and joy, expressing the mixed colors and conflicting emotions of the American continent. In the attempt to define their own place and identity as black women in the United States, these writers cross centuries and lands and write a larger American narrative. Even as they record the process of reconstructing identity through black protagonists and their specific communities, they illuminate forms of resistance by groups

oppressed in the neocolonial structure persisting today in the Caribbean-Latin

American region and among marginalized groups in the United States.

By so doing, their works also transgress conventional boundaries of genre and discipline. Morrison writes poetic fiction, Jones resorts to narrative poetry, and all three writers explore a mixture of autobiography, collective history, and ethnography. Much as in modern interpretive ethnography, they weave facts out of the memories of people, stories told and retold in their homes, rites of song and dance, dreams and incantations. Much as in history, they describe racial and sexual exploitation, economic destitution, and racial segregation in the struggles of modern urban life as well as of colonial times. Although the texts are creative and imaginary, they grow out of individual and collective experience and are fueled with materials that have long been of interest to anthropologists and historians of comparative slavery in the Americas. 7

Through close reading of specific works by Morrison, Marshall, and Jones, I propose to examine the various ways in which their storytelling constructs inter-American bridges. These can be formed through intertextuality, through their intervention in the historical debate over gender and race relations in the *New World*, through the ethnographic representation of black culture and the affirmation of African roots, or through the exploration of postcolonial relations of power in and between nation-states of the American continent.

The Meaning of America

The cultural approximation of the different Americas is a new undertaking. Extremely asymmetrical levels of development and power, as well as conflicting "national interest" priorities, have complicated and delayed the prospects of a true dialogue between the hemispheres. While the United States is a necessary reference point in Latin American/Caribbean identity and history, whether as model or antagonist, Latin America has usually been denied any importance in the North except in Cold War strategic maneuvering and economic expansionism. The United States reinvented "America" the country as a continent in and of itself, in history books and in popular understanding. According to historian David W. Noble, the word *America* is used here to "mean a single nation, the United States," revealing a deep commitment "to isolating our national culture."⁸

Rapid and successful capitalist development, political and tech-

nological achievements, and attending politics of racism and expansionism in the United States contrast markedly with the slower growth of the more economically isolated and racially heterogeneous populations of the rest of the continent, contributing to solidifying the "American" rhetoric and widening the gulf between "Anglos" and "Latinos." The perception of sharp differences separating the two cultural hemispheres has often been reinforced in Latin American critiques and in the work of the so-called Latin Americanists. Among them is anthropologist Charles Wagley, who traces the cultural barrier to the persistence of two fundamentally different "culture spheres" derived from "distinctive adaptations" to the *New World*. Quite contrastive "mother countries" supplied North and South America with "the basic social and cultural institutions." On the one hand was the "Protestant, neo-capitalistic, and bourgeois" northern Europe; on the other hand, the "Catholic, semi-feudalistic, and aristocratic-oriented" southern realm. Historian Richard Morse, another Latin Americanist, believes that the U.S. difficulty in relating to Latin America has to do with "economic and military asymmetries," as well as a parochial universalization of hegemonic U.S. values and categories. Such categories could not grasp the interweaving of Creole, American Indian, and African cultures of the Southern Hemisphere or the "heterodox world views" in the "multiple ethics" flourishing there. Mexican writer Octavio Paz has long portrayed Mexico and the United States as "two distinct versions of Western civilization," separated not only by their different social, economic, and historical developments but principally by abstract, fluid cultural aspects that cannot be easily measured. 9

In the United States, stereotypes of "the other Americans" from below the border are part of the colonial heritage and often conflate with similar simplifications, ambiguities, and oppositions in images of African descendants or Native Americans. The "troublesome border" that exists between Mexico and the United States is similar to the line drawn between races and ethnicities within the latter country, particularly between whites on one side and blacks and Indians on the other.¹⁰ The inherited stereotypes of Indians and Africans in the dominant culture of the United States intertwine with perceptions of the Caribbean and Latin America, areas where the percentage of "peoples of color" was usually greater than the European population during colonial times and tends to remain so today (except for Argentina, Uruguay, and the southern part of Brazil).

In the Hollywood imaginary, Latin America has been paradoxically synonymous with paradise and hell, nature and sin, attraction and repulsion. Ignorant and greasy bandits from Mexican deserts alternate with sensual, dark women on sunny beaches. In either case, the superior character of the North American white man is ascertained as he defeats the beast and conquers the beauty, thus gaining symbolic control over the continent. Even when Latinos are intentionally portrayed more positively, as in the movie *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), they are still represented as different and alien, incomprehensible to the gaze of the Anglo eye. "What have these South Americans got below the equator that we haven't?" wonder blonde girls gasping at the seductive games of a dark Brazilian woman in that film. 11

The representation of the Caribbean islands and Brazil as havens for passion and "dark" mistresses recalls the colonialist pattern of mating outside marriage, established by the colonizers and solidified by the upper classes.¹² The movie industry has thus voiced and reinforced a difference from barbarism and sensuality that has been constructed by the white European since antiquity and that turned particularly problematic and contradictory in the age of "colonial encounters" in the *New World*. The repugnant Mexican "greaser" in early Hollywood stories is Caliban/cannibal/Carib/Caribbean, the same word and image of the "native," corrupted and carried down in major European texts and first immortalized by William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.¹³

Latin Americans and black people in the United States share a similarly uneasy relation to "white America." The process of negotiation and construction of their identities often takes the form of a reactive response to white European traditions and principles. In most of Spanish America, wars of independence coincided with antislavery movements. Many newborn nations constructed themselves as mixed or mestizo to affirm their antagonism to the white colonizer. The ideology of an America of mixed races was established as early as 1819, when Simon Bolívar, the celebrated "liberator" of Spanish America, affirmed the dream of social syncretism to distinguish the newborn nations from the Spanish rulers who had decimated the majority of the Indian population. In Venezuela, for instance, Bolívar exhorted the congress to accept the country's mixed origins and the fact that Venezuelans "are neither European nor North American."¹⁴

By contrast, the anti-colonial pride and the nationalist ideologies of *mestizaje* do not preclude discrimination within Latin America against people of African descent. Bolívar was a Venezuelan from the *criollo* elite of Caracas and shared its fear of a black rebellion. His America may have been mixed but was required to remain under the power and control of the white upper class. Several decades would intervene before Cuban revolutionaries incorporated African color and heritage into their definition of nation, rewriting the dream and facing similar paradoxes.

In the case of Cuba, the abolition of slavery and independence from Spain were closely linked to anti-imperialist feelings regarding the domination of the United States.¹⁵ The contrast between two Americas with clashing worldviews became even more focused. The Cuban poet and revolutionary hero José Martí (1853-1895) responded to the outside threat by underlining the difference between a white and racist Anglo-America and "Nuestra America," which he defined as non-Western. For Martí, the multifaceted space lying "from Rio Bravo to Patagonia" was marked by both a combination of cultures and a history of multiple exploitations. "Our America" was not an integral part of "the West" because of its racial, cultural, and social mixture and its peripheral and dependent status in relation to advanced capitalism.

A major leader in the struggle for the belated independence of Cuba and the abolition of slavery in the country, Martí sustained hope in a plurality of voices and colors joined together by the dream of the nation: "a Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black." Pride and faith in their own *patria* should draw white Creoles away from the racism of the "despotic and perverse colonizer" and also convince grieving Negroes, "the most oppressed Cubans," to forgive and trust. Recognizing the violent past and the persistent colonial shadow in the republican moment, Martí was nevertheless optimistic about the radical shift toward equality after the revolution of 1868.¹⁶

The association between the revolutionary struggle for independence, still taking place in Cuba and Puerto Rico at the end of the nineteenth century, and the unique geographical location of the islands gave the Caribbean (as Paule Marshall would later recognize) a special role in the development of American history. According to Martí, it had a "greater mission made obligatory by the times, and by its position at the crossroads of the world."¹⁷ In political and eco-