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Bodily Evidence: Racism, Slavery, and Maternal Power in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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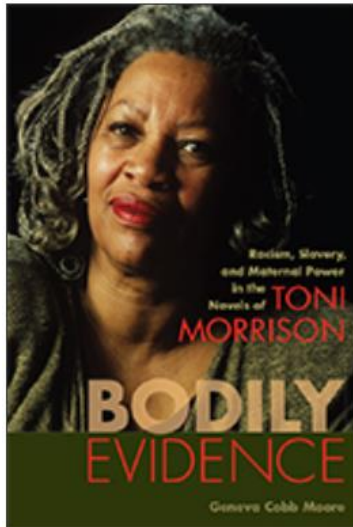
Bodily Evidence: Racism, Slavery, and Maternal Power in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Abstract

Jonathan Garren reviews *Bodily Evidence: Racism, Slavery, and Maternal Power in the Novels of Toni Morrison* by Geneva Cobb Moore.

Keywords

literature, literary criticism, African-American, maternal, demonic parody, parody

Bodily Evidence: Racism, Slavery, and Maternal Power in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Geneva Cobb Moore
University of South Carolina Press, 2020, \$19.99
ISBN: 978-1-64336-100-0

Bodily Evidence is an expansion of Geneva Cobb Moore’s excellent essay, “A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” in which Moore expands on her analysis of demonic parody and bodily representation throughout all of Morrison’s novels. Beginning with an introduction to social theories related to the representation of generational and cultural trauma on the bodies of the oppressed and marginalized, Moore seamlessly shifts the focus to a comprehensive analysis of how these themes profoundly and subtly weave their way throughout Toni Morrison’s novels. Through the canvas of female bodies, Moore investigates how Morrison uses maternal power and representation to not only expose the racial inequities, violence, and oppression of Black bodies throughout United States history; but also how the trauma endured become physical representations of power, hope, and healing. This healing and hope extends beyond the investigation of systemic racial injustices inherent within our system of “democracy” to also include the maternal power of women against the patriarchal forces both within and outside of the African-American community. All of this culminates in a work of unflinching

analysis that seeks to, as Morrison describes of her writing, “...teach a history that is unrecorded and untaught in mainstream education.” (p. 1)

I chose to read this book not long after the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. The subsequent protests painted a vivid realism behind the violence, oppression, and trauma discussed throughout Moore’s analysis of Morrison’s novels. What became clear in the continuing aftermath of these deaths and protests is the overwhelming historical ignorance that still pervades our society, and the continuing use of Black bodies as a means through which our past history and current history are being told and repressed. Taking these current events into consideration, what struck me most while reading *Bodily Evidence* was the discussion of Morrison’s use of demonic parody to represent the “hellish” experience of African-Americans throughout United States history. A demonic backdrop, in most occasions, violently displayed upon Black bodies throughout Morrison’s novels; however, is not always negatively represented. Morrison also takes great care in representing the women in her novels as regenerative, healers, and supernatural. The maternal power and bodies of Morrison’s characters are not only meant to display the vicious, but also display the deeply entrenched and never-ending paths of redemption – a redemption not only for the characters in her novels but also pathways for healing in African-American communities.

Meticulously researched and documented, Moore has given us a detailed roadmap to not only better understand Morrison as an author, but also an activist and unflinching historian of America’s dark and often whitewashed past. In a time when we are actively seeking voices to help us all become more engaged, informed, and empathetic citizens, it is important to also have books like this to help us reinforce our vision of American history through the lens of an artist – because an artist’s job is always to lift the veil and reveal not only our darkest inclinations but also the ways in which we can begin to collectively heal. I highly recommend *Bodily Evidence* for literary criticism collections in academic and public libraries. While the language used can be academic in nature, Moore does a great job of

grounding complicated subject matter and literary themes in a way that should be easy for readers of most levels – especially 11th-12th grade through undergraduate/graduate.

Jonathan Garren holds a BA in English from Clemson University, a MA in Humanities Interdisciplinary Studies from SUNY – University at Buffalo, and a MLIS from the University of South Carolina. He currently works as the Instruction and Outreach Librarian at Coker University in Hartsville, SC and lives peacefully reading away the days with his thirteen-year-old cat, Harry.