

MASTER'S THESIS

Protest literature: aesthetics and race politics in Toni Morrison's historiographic trilogy

Cheuk, Ka Chi

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**Protest Literature: Aesthetics and Race Politics in
Toni Morrison's Historiographic Trilogy**

CHEUK Ka Chi

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Principal Supervisor: Dr. Jason S POLLEY

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ABSTRACT

This project highlights the interplay of literary aesthetics and race politics in protest literature. My thesis aims to clarify the rhetoric of protest literature. I suggest protest literature studies should concentrate on *how* the writer protests through literature by examining Toni Morrison's trilogy: *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997). Morrison utilizes aesthetics I collectively describe as "protest literary ambiguity" to deconstruct and illuminate the contradictions in African American slavery, racial renewal, and American exceptionalism. The three novels are respectively set in specific key periods of African American history: the Postbellum/Reconstruction era, the Harlem Renaissance era, and the post-Civil Rights era. But Morrison does not merely see history as factual context; Morrison views history as narratological. History, for her, is historiography and officialized histories are equally ambiguous as fictional narratives. Protest literature and protest literary ambiguity do not aim to offer solutions. The essence of protest literary ambiguity is questioning and investigation. They raise reader awareness about the complexity of social and racial issues. The novel ends but the reader's exploration continues.

My reading of Morrison's trilogy is inspired by reader response criticism which deprivileges the writer's role as the sole authority of the work's meaning. I focus on how Morrison's literary aesthetics guide readers to deconstruct African American history, and American race politics. In Chapter One, I examine how *Beloved* re-presents the African American slavery experience with a "black" voice consisting of both African and Western traditions. Morrison uses African folkloric orality and American Southern literary grotesque aesthetic to reconstruct, or "rememory," the shock and horror of African American slavery. Chapter Two discusses *Jazz* and its challenge against the idea of newness in the New Negro Movement. Morrison uses a jazzy-metafictional narrator to explain the importance of the past in the construction of black identity. In Chapter Three, I reveal how Morrison re-adopts the literary aesthetics of grotesque folklore and jazzy-metafictional narration in *Paradise*. She complicates our perception of "P/paradise" as well as the source of continuing racial discrimination in post-Civil Rights America. At the same time, the novel deconstructs itself thus revealing the difficulties of historiography. Morrison ultimately resorts to ambiguity in her protest against official African American narratives.

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