Barbara Christian

Born 1943, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands
Died 2000, Berkeley, California

Barbara Christian was an author and professor of African-American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

She was the author or editor of several books, and over 100 published articles and reviews.

She was most well known for the 1980 study titled *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition*.

**Accomplishments**

- Taught at the City College of the City University of New York (1965–1972)
- Christian helped establish the African-American Studies Department at UC Berkeley
- She was the first African-American woman to be granted tenure at UC Berkeley (1978)
- Awarded the City of Berkeley's highest honor, the Berkeley Citation

Barbara Christian was among the first scholars to focus national attention on such major writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

She was known for her critical presence in the growing debates over the relationship between race, class, and gender.

She was known as a political activist who rebelled against the status quo of the “literary elite” who attempted to negate the importance of black women writers.

The next time you pick up a Toni Morrison novel, you should know that it was partially due to the work of Barbara Christian that the novel made it into your hands.

“I know, from literary history, that writing disappears unless there is a response to it.”
Response to “Black Women’s Texts”
by Barbara Christian

Barbara Christian and Jane Eyre

Bertha, the madwoman in the attic

Colonialism and power relations

White women and Black women

What we read, how we read, why we read
“Layered Rhythms: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison”
By Barbara Christian

• *Layered rhythms* is a musical term used to describe the different rhythms played simultaneously in a piece of Jazz music.

Barbara Christian defines *layered rhythms* as Morrison and Woolf’s “different, yet related, projects” (Christian 484).

• Morrison’s graduate thesis *The Treatment of the Alienated in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner* was on suicide in the works of Woolf and Faulkner.

• Early 1950s Morrison attended Cornell University as a graduate student majoring in English.
  o Morrison was a female black graduate student in a predominantly white male college.
  o “1953 is New Criticism at its height: the text is all. No world lies outside the text; the text had nothing to do with race or even cultural specificity” (Christian 486).
  o In 1953 there was no such thing as African American literature. Blacks appear to be absent from “American” literature.
  o Morrison studies probably focused on Chaucer and Shakespeare or Hawthorne and Melville, the two new American authors admitted into the canon.
  o Faulkner? Even though he is still alive, Faulkner might have made it into the curriculum. He did not become popular until the 1960s for those who wanted to study blacks in literature (Christian 486).
    He was “one of the few Anglo-American writers to fight out ‘the moral problem [of Negros in America] which was repressed after the nineteenth century’” (qtd. in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison 43; Christian 484).
  o Virginia Woolf? Woolf’s books were mostly out of print in the early 50s and were included in few college syllabi (Christian 488).

• Coming from different times and cultures, Morrison and Woolf are diversely connected.
  o Woolf was not an American confronted with a black presence.
  o Morrison became a mother and for most of her adult life, she was a single mother; Woolf had no children.
  o Morrison saw motherhood as “liberating.” She could see the world through her children’s imagination, an “imagination not yet tainted by stereotypes.” Woolf believed having children would “stifle her creativity and exacerbate her bouts of depression” (Christian 487).
  o As women writers, Morrison and Woolf had to overcome social stereotypes. Morrison had “to kill the mammy in the house,” while Woolf had “to kill the angel in the house” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 17; Christian 487).
  o As a woman writer, Morrison could claim no other African American woman writer as a maternal ancestor (Zora Neal Hurston’s work did not appear until the 1970s), while Woolf had women writers that she could refer to such as Jane Austen.
  o Morrison’s stories are oral and folk based, while Virginia’s were print and class based.
• Morrison and Woolf both experienced monumental social events in their time that influenced their development of “unorthodox novelistic characteristics” (qtd. in “Rootedness” 342; Christian 491).

Inner voice:
  o Morrison and Woolf’s writings are “riveted on the relationship between the inner life (consciousness) of their characters and world within which they find themselves” (Christian 492).
  o Woolf demonstrate that “memory is a central aspect of inner life, one means by which we interpret the present as well as remember the past” (Christian 493).
  o Morrison is not so much interested in retelling the past, as she is interested in involving herself and the reader in such a way as to deeply feel the experience.
  o Woolf used carefully crafted monologues “to solve the tension between the inner and outer life” of her characters. Her monologues “reveal not only the quality of a particular character’s mind, but also his or her way of perceiving the world. . . . Even as the reader is experiencing reality in terms of the characters’ inner lives, we are anchored in some time and place” (Christian 493).
  o Morrison also uses monologues to capture the inner lives of her characters, but she has “to deal with an additional problem; her readers are not use “to focusing on the inner lives of black characters” (Christian 494).

Voice of the community:
  o Morrison and Woolf transform the narrator in their different uses of chorus or community voice, “a community that includes the reader” (Christian 494).
    -Examples from Morrison’s novels includes: “The City in Jazz; the choral ‘I’ narrator of The Bluest Eyes; the town functioning as a character in Sula; the neighborhood and the community that responds in the two parts of the town in Song of Solomon; all of nature thinking, feeling, watching, and responding to the action going on in Tar Baby; and the chorus of the community, living and dead, in Beloved” (Christian 494).
    -Virginia used chorus in her later works, especially in her last work, Between the Acts when the chorus of villagers chant their lines. In Woolf’s use of chorus, no character in the plot stands above any other.
  o Using chorus different from Woolf, Morrison “insists upon the tension between individuals . . . and their relationship to the community . . .as a means of testing out the extent to which difference is allowed and might even triumph” (Christian 494-95). Consider Joe and Violet’s relationship to the City in Jazz.

Time and space:
  o Morrison, remapping historical terrain for African Americans, does not usually write about characters in the present. Woolf writes in the present. For example, Woolf wrote Between the Acts in 1939, the same year as its setting. Morrison wrote Jazz in 1992, but the novel is set in the late 1800s-1920s.
  o Using inner time and outer time, Morrison’s work does not progress linear through history, which makes the story appear oral. Virginia fuses inner and outer time by the juxtaposition of her characters’ monologues as in The Waves.
  o Nature is often central to Morrison and Woolf’s work because “nature is one constant in time and space, for all human societies” (Christian 496).
Theme of Love:

- In Morrison’s novels “life is poor and uninteresting without being able to love somebody, but love is a dilemma for human beings because, like the elements of nature, it can run so quickly to excess. . . . Love is not so much romance as it is primal ‘risk’ and freedom, incapable of being completely obtained” (Christian 497-98).

- “Woolf was concerned that women were expected to write about love—love here meaning romantic love; she insisted that women also wanted poetry, dreams, imagination” (Christian 498).