# The Fiction of Toni Morrison

## Reading and Writing on Race, Culture, and Identity

**Edited by Jami L. Carlacio**

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# Introduction: "Shareable Imaginative Worlds"

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*Word-work is sublime [. . .] because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference—the way in which we are like no other life.*

Toni Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*

*Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been "discovered" actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. [. . .] We are not, in fact, "other." We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the "raceless" one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.*

Toni Morrison, *"Unspeakable Things Unspoken"*

In early 2006, *New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus queried "a couple of hundred prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary sages, asking them to please identify 'the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years.'" As writer A. O. Scott tells it, this seemingly innocuous question raised many more, including "What do we

mean, in an era of cultural as well as economic globalization, by 'American'? Or, in the age of James Frey, reality television and phantom W.M.D.'s, what do we mean by 'fiction'? And if we know what American fiction is, then what do we mean by 'best'?" Despite the difficulty of this "simple" question, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) easily topped the list. It may be worthwhile to note that the last time such a survey was conducted, in 1965, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* "was declared 'the most memorable' work of American fiction published since the end of World War II, and the most likely to endure" (Scott 17–18). Although its history is brief compared to those of its ancestors in Europe, Africa, and Asia, American literature—along with journalism, television, and film—has defined an American *ethos* reflecting our fractured raced, gendered, and ethnic identities. When a Ralph Ellison or a Toni Morrison produces fiction that assumes what Scott calls the "burden of cultural importance" insofar as it offers "illumination of epochs, communities, of the nation itself" (Scott 18), we stand up and take notice.

And the world has taken notice. Toni Morrison is among the most important writers in recent history, evidenced not only by the numerous awards her fiction has received (including Ohioana Book Awards for Fiction for *Sula* in 1975, *Paradise* in 1999, and *Love* in 2004; the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *Song of Solomon* in 1977; the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *Beloved* in 1988; and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993) but also by the voluminous scholarship written about her and her work and by the fact that her work is taught in high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the world. Clearly, Morrison's fiction and prose have fulfilled an urgent need to make visible the heretofore invisible and mute presence that has essentially defined a past and shaped the ways in which Americans and Africans in diaspora have understood themselves and have been understood. Beginning with the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 and continuing through to *Love* in 2003,[1] Morrison's fiction and prose have highlighted the triumphs and tragedies of the African American experience; moreover, they have contested, challenged, and provoked readers in all racial categories to rethink attitudes about race and to reexamine our own racialized identities in relationship to others. In effect, Morrison could aptly

be called a critical race theorist insofar as her work probes the social construction of race and the politics and practices of racism in American culture and literature.

Specifically, her fiction and prose urges us to study the impact of racism not only on the victim but also on "those who perpetuate it" (Morrison, *Playing* 11). In a series of lectures on race and whiteness delivered at Harvard University in 1990 (eventually published in 1992 as *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*), Morrison "examine[d] the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions" (11). *Playing*'s publication came at a time when Morrison's work had already gained an important place in an otherwise whitewashed American literary canon. Her critical remarks reflect a renewed awareness (after Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Alice Walker, among others) of the emotional and visceral impact of race literature on the reader. Here, Morrison acknowledges that she is "a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work" (x–xi).[2] In other words, Morrison's attention to the language that enables this "othering" reflects her ongoing commitment to redefine (black) personhood and to articulate racial differences in a new equation that ultimately produces a new consciousness.[3]

The impact of literature that exposes cultural hegemony cannot be overstated. This kind of writing makes peculiar demands on readers, forcing us not only to question our own ingrained notions of race and to acknowledge our implication in the damaging effects of racism, but also to be willing to take responsibility to eradicate it or at the very least, as the poet Audre Lorde has suggested, to appreciate and nourish our differences and to find strength in them (111). Indeed, Morrison's fiction and prose expect us to work together, writer with reader, to "interpret and perform within a common language *shareable imaginative worlds*" (*Playing* xii; emphasis added). These worlds presuppose a heterogeneous community in which we are all participants. And

in this way, Morrison's writing is a conscious political act—literary, yes, but unquestionably political:

> If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it's not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. [. . .] It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. ("Rootedness" 344–45).

While her art may always have been both beautiful and political, it has not always garnered unequivocal praise. Nellie McKay has remarked that "recognition of Morrison was slow in coming" ("Preface" ix), and although Morrison's *Sula* was nominated for the National Book Award, it was not until *Song of Solomon* was published that critics and readers realized the value of her fiction. One reason is that Morrison refuses to write what she calls "propaganda," saying, "That's not literature" (Morrison and Richardson, "Bench" 38). Morrison admits,

> when I first began to write, my work was much criticized—even despised I think—because I was not writing happy stories, about people who were able to pull it all together in spite of difficulties, about people who had risen to a certain status. [. . .] If the critics felt that they could force me to write "positive images," then clearly they assumed I was writing for white people. It was a demand that I create an image for the "other" as opposed to my making an intimate and direct account to the people in the book and to black people. (38)

Both critics and readers alike have come to appreciate Morrison's refusal to compromise her values in the service of white hegemony. But that hasn't made her fiction any easier to read and understand. Nor does she apologize for this; in fact, just the opposite. Her novels' beginnings, enigmatic as they are, "refuse the 'presentation'; refuse the seductive safe harbor. [. . .] Refuse, in effect, to cater to the diminished expectations of the reader" ("Unspeakable" 24). Morrison's "refusal to cater" to

readers' expected ease with which to enter books was certainly manifest in *Paradise,* some of whose early readers claimed in online reviews that the book was "very hard to follow" and "disjointed and vague," not to mention that it's far from "pleasure reading" (qtd. in Kearly 9). Perhaps the issue is not so much the "difficult" nature of the text (if that is what we want to call it) but rather what the text purports to do, implicitly or explicitly. I am referring to the cultural work of a text, insofar as it both produces a specific effect in the mind of the reader and shapes (and challenges) the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the culture in which it is produced. The kind of work that Morrison's texts require of us may indeed be, well, "difficult," but the work is worthwhile; further, one of the primary ways in which we engage in textual analysis is through conversations—in journals and books, and of course in classrooms.

Particularly in the academy, undergraduate and graduate students, not to mention their instructors, look to collections of critical essays, as well as monographs, interviews, and encyclopedias, for help in navigating the complicated and complex waters that characterize Morrison's work. Among them is Nellie McKay[4] and Katherine Earle's *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1997), whose contributors address ways to teach the novels (from *The Bluest Eye* [1970] to *Jazz* [1992]) and provide readers with ideas for further research. This book was invaluable to me when in 2003 I first taught what is now a regularly offered first-year writing seminar at Cornell on the fiction of Toni Morrison. It is no exaggeration to admit that I was overwhelmed not simply by the profundity of the work but also by the sheer volume of scholarship that exists on Morrison and her novels. How could I possibly be of service to my students if I felt inadequate to the task of teaching and understanding the work myself? I turned first to McKay and Earle's *Approaches* and soon enough began to feel as if I was on solid ground; I went from there to perform my own scholarly explorations of Morrison's work.

After having taught this writing seminar several times, I saw the need for a book that updates McKay and Earle's; I wanted to go beyond its useful discussions about teaching Morrison's fiction, which is why I solicited contributions from teacher-schol-

ars that not only articulate in detail how they teach Morrison but also offer specific pedagogical suggestions as well as discussion/essay questions that a new or experienced instructor might use in teaching Morrison. In addition to the pedagogical apparatus, the book features some of the contributors' students' best writing on Morrison. I hope this book's readers—students and teachers—may use them as models for writing if not generally for class discussion. In my experience, one of the best ways to talk about and teach writing is to examine what good writing is and to imitate it.

The aim of the book, then, is to offer both new and experienced teacher-scholars alternative ways to approach Morrison's fiction and prose. The contributions included here are addressed primarily to instructors of college and university undergraduates, but some teachers of high school advanced English and perhaps instructors of beginning graduate students might find some of the entries useful, if not *in toto* then at least as springboards to more in-depth discussions on Morrison's work. The book's nine sections (excluding the two appendixes featuring the polished undergraduate student writing mentioned earlier and a bibliography of Morrison scholarship since 1997) offer readers specific, "road-tested" methods of teaching both the eight novels and the short story "Recitatif." Several of the chapters include some discussion of Morrison's nonfiction, including *Playing in the Dark,* "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," and "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." Although none of the entries addresses Morrison's children's literature (coauthored with her son Slade Morrison), it is worthwhile to point out its importance in the overall canon of her work. In 1999 Morrison and son Slade published *The Big Box,* which explores the value (for children) of individual freedom. This was followed in 2002 with *The Book of Mean People,* which offers an unapologetic and sometimes humorous look at children's negative emotions, including anger and frustration. The *Who's Got Game?* series, including *The Lion or the Mouse? The Ant or the Grasshopper? The Poppy or the Snake?* and *The Mirror or the Glass?* revise Aesop's well-known fables and update them to reflect a cultural penchant for games that involve rhyming, signifying, and outwitting. As part of an effort to investigate the impact of this literature, the Toni Morrison

Society sponsored a panel discussion at the 2004 American Literature Association conference. The call for papers sought presentations that addressed the power relationships between adults and children as well as ways to contextualize Morrison's children's stories within the canon of similar work authored by African Americans. And reviewers have not ignored the importance of Morrison's and son Slade's foray into this important genre. For example, the November-December 2002 issue of *Black Issues Book Review* offers its take on *The Book of Mean People* and the January 2004 issue of *Ebony* magazine reviews the *Who's Got Game?* series.

The contributors of this book focus primarily on Morrison's novels and are accomplished teachers familiar with important intellectual developments in literary history and theory. Although not intended to serve as an anthology of "scholarly" essays on Morrison's fiction and prose (numerous anthologies and journal articles already perform this kind of work), this text does hope to engage readers in the kinds of conversations that we have participated in and continue to participate in. In other words, the book's contributors emphasized the kind of scholarly work we all do in order to solve complex problems—we raise questions, solicit others' ideas, add our own insights (online, in journals, in books, at conferences, in our classrooms). The contributors have used Morrison's work in order to interrogate the hegemonic status of whiteness, patriarchy, class status, ethnic identity, and other issues, and to use their classrooms as a forum for an intellectual conversation rather than as a space in which to "perform" their knowledge.

Designed to facilitate a richer understanding of Morrison's work and to promote critical thinking by asking and inviting relevant questions, the entries are arranged according to this basic format. In the first section, for example, Jane Rose and Jane Barstow help students interrogate culturally accepted notions of "beauty" and examine the impact of racial self-loathing in their reading of *The Bluest Eye*. Stephanie Li offers students an alternative to reacting only with "horror" to the rape scene and other atrocities in the novel by asking them to explore the human elements of the characters and the circumstances (social, cultural, political) that produced their acts.

The two entries on *Sula* are provocative insofar as their approaches stay away from prevalent interpretations of the novel that expose the ostensibly simple binary categories of distinction (black/white, good/evil, top/bottom) and instead guide students toward what's *in*visible in the text (Ann Wallace) and toward issues of "race, violence, community, and individuality" (Tim Burns). Both Wallace and Burns focus solely on the novel in their discussions (to the exclusion of literary criticism) and nurture in students the value and pleasure of close reading. Wallace offers a unique approach to the novel in her invitation to students to engage in an imaginary epistolary exchange between two characters, while Burns attends to spatial and temporal issues as well as to the various allusions that are easy to miss in *Sula*.

The relationship between the individual and the community is the primary focus in the next set of entries, on *Song of Solomon*. Marc Schuster's "Gimme Hate, Lord!" complicates the concepts of "America" and "American culture" as well as problematizes the relationship between love and hate; alternatively, Brenda Boudreau emphasizes examining identity as a culturally and psychologically mediated concept and asks students to place *Song of Solomon* within the context of the literary *bildungsroman* and to distinguish the ways in which Milkman's journey reflects (or repeats with a difference) the timeless hero's odyssey. Finally, Durthy Washington's LIST paradigm helps students identify issues in Morrison's fiction by analyzing four distinct areas—Language, Identity, Space, and Time—in order to gain insight from multiple perspectives.

Although the question of identity is also central to *Tar Baby,* the three entries in Section IV center particularly on issues of postcolonialism and the African diaspora. Alice Deck presents Morrison in the context of other Afrocentric and African writers, such as Chinua Achebe, highlighting what she refers to as "the discursive forces of imperial power" and how these are aspects of "postcolonial embodiment." Not unlike Deck, Linda Krumholz discusses her approach to teaching *Tar Baby* in a course featuring literary and critical theories that expose racialized ways of reading and writing. With her students, Krumholz identifies notions of blackness and encourages students to define black-

ness as a conceptual and cultural category. In keeping with the focus on the postcolonial, Natalie King-Pedroso uses her southern Florida classroom to interrogate "P/plantation politics" and its manifestation in the material culture of sugar production and social caste. King-Pedroso's entry highlights ways to think about *Tar Baby* in light of community, identity, and in fact identification.

At the heart of all of Morrison's fiction is the "problem" of racial identity. In her experimental story "Recitatif," Morrison attempts to "remov[e] [. . .] all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing* xi). In "Disrupting Racial Discourse: Teaching 'Recitatif,'" Robert Patterson highlights our tendency to encode all texts with racial signification and his pedagogy obliges students to examine their own ideas about race and racial identity.

The focus on identification is strong in the next section, which focuses on *Beloved*. Paul Croon offers an example of how to lead students in a close reading of the text, not only by interrogating the de- and reconstruction of identity but also by using what he calls "the interrogative approach." Croon helps students to see the impact of identity fragmentation by leading them through the textually re-created relationships among four generations of women—from Beloved to Sethe and Sethe's ma'am to an African-born woman subsequently imprisoned on a slave ship. The "difficult" nature of *Beloved* highlights the largely inexpressible nature of the events the book narrates. As Morrison remarked in a 1989 interview with Richard Robertson in *World,*

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. (4)

The other two entries in this section, Lisa Perdigao's "Remembering *Beloved*" and Cara Ogburn's "Difficulty and Textuality: History/Storytelling, Memory, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,*" gesture toward a "bench by the road" in important ways. Perdigao offers a unique reading of the novel through the lens of "black death," memorializing, and mourning. Drawing on the work of Karla Holloway and Sharon Holland, Perdigao and her students examine *Beloved*'s "inarticulate places" and its struggle to "re-member" the dead. Cara Ogburn's focus lies more in deconstructing the "difficult" nature of the text and using this as an opportunity for productive struggle, in much the same way that Morrison defines the struggle over language as necessary, important, and affirming. By placing *Beloved* within a conversation framed by literary theories, Ogburn leads students to complicate the fluid nature of memory, storytelling, and identity.

If *Beloved* takes us back to the interior lives of African Americans during Reconstruction, *Jazz* represents a singular moment in black artistic expression, the Jazz Age. Both Tsitsi Jaji and Grace McEntee emphasize the nature of jazz as creative and improvisational; as Jaji puts it, jazz (and *Jazz*) allow for "a focus on language as opening up the possibilities of difference, and perhaps serve as a means of redemption for characters whose individual deviances from accepted norms threaten their stability and place in society." McEntee, in teaching the novel to non–English majors, necessarily focuses on the historical contexts that inform the novel as well as on Morrison's technique both in this novel and elsewhere. Like the other contributors to this volume, McEntee engages students in close reading and in a discussion of the role and reliability of the narrator.

Applying historiographic methods of inquiry to Morrison's work is essential, and this is no less true when reading and writing about *Paradise*. The two entries here engage history somewhat differently, the first paying more attention to the ways in which the line between history and fiction problematizes racial identity. In "History, Narrative, and Racial Identity in *Paradise,*" Jami Carlacio and her students begin by examining the role of language as either "living" or "dead," and by investigating the complex interrelationship between history and language insofar

as these define the self. Michael Johnson's "Teaching *Paradise:* Race, Justice, Violence, and the American West" presents a provocative study of the West, the way it is manifested in the American *ethos* and *mythos* and the ways in which *Paradise* complicates these. Johnson uses several texts, including Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader*, alongside *Paradise* in an attempt to re-envision the creation of "The West." Johnson's contribution deftly illustrates how Morrison's novel reflects, repeats, or deconstructs history.

Just as *Paradise* questions history as mythos, Morrison's *Love* reminds us that even in the contemporary setting of the civil rights years, racial identity and its relationship to black history is paramount to rethinking our relationship to America's past. Kristine Yohe's "Community, Culture, and History: Teaching *Love* with Love" examines the historical setting of the novel, placing it in the context of three eras: slavery/Reconstruction (*Beloved*); the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance (*Jazz*); and the tumultuous decades that produced the civil rights movement (*Love*). Beyond the necessary historicization of the novel, Yohe and her students interrogate the many facets of love, both between oneself and others and within the self. Love is one of the focal points of Stephanie Li's contribution, "Hatred, War, and Sex: The Secrets of Toni Morrison's *Love,"* which highlights not only the love/hate relationship between Heed and Christine but also the importance of female sexuality in the black community. Jami Carlacio's contribution on *Love* examines several interconnected issues in the novel, including the blurred distinction between love and betrayal; patriarchy and its effects on women; commodification in concert with patriarchy; and the role of language in both disrupting and making visible the discourse of oppression.

To complement these entries, six essays written by undergraduate students are included in Appendix 1. Written in response to prompts in some of the contributors' classes, these essays demonstrate both the sophistication and the creativity of students deeply committed to Morrison's work and eager to share it with readers beyond an audience of their own teachers and peers. A second appendix offers interested readers options for further study on Morrison from 1997 to the present.

All of the entries in this book—the individual entries on the fiction and the students' responses to their instructors' prompts—contribute to a conversation that began in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye* and that will undoubtedly continue long after Morrison writes her last novel. As a small cross section of the many teachers and scholars who are committed to the issues represented in Morrison's fiction, we hope this book functions as a useful springboard to rich and perhaps difficult dialogues on the subjects of race, class, identity, and culture.

## Notes

1. Morrison is in the process of completing her ninth novel, titled *Mercy*. She read excerpts from this novel at the Louvre in Paris, France, where she guest-curated the Foreigner's Home exhibit in November 2006.

2. The editor and contributors to this book made a conscious decision to use the lowercase *b* and *w* for *black* and *white* when these words are used to designate one's racial status. We realize that whatever our decision, any time a color refers to a race it is a political issue. We realize, too, that poets, novelists, playwrights, and essayists from across disciplines view this issue differently; hence, no aesthetic standards seem to apply. The consensus of this book's contributors, though not unanimous, was that to capitalize the *b* in *black* and the *w* in *white* would be to reify binary categories of distinction, thus fixing them in place. In an ideal world, the question of case would not even arise. But that's not the world we inhabit.

3. As Nancy J. Peterson contends in her introduction to the Summer 2006 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* dedicated to Morrison, the author's "revolutionary" and "subversive" contributions to American literary history have so shaped our historical and literary consciousness that we must acknowledge the ways in which "it [is] impossible [. . .] to think of America and American history without seeing black Americans and African-American history as forming the bedrock of all our lives" (261).

4. Nellie McKay (d. 2006) was one of the foremost scholars on Toni Morrison and a prolific contributor to the scholarship on African American studies in general. In addition to her work on Morrison, she coedited, with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1988 and 2004). The Spring 2006 issue of *Afri-*

*can American Review* is dedicated to the memory of Professor McKay. She is already sorely missed.

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# The Fiction of Toni Morrison

Designed to facilitate a richer understanding of Toni Morrison's work, this book features classroom-tested approaches and pedagogical suggestions for teaching each of Morrison's novels as well as the fascinating short story "Recitatif."

Each chapter includes questions and suggestions for classroom discussions, projects, and essays that illustrate how students can more fully understand Morrison's contributions to American culture—particularly the history of racism as well as identity and cultural politics.

In addition to offering a broad variety of classroom approaches to the texts, *The Fiction of Toni Morrison* promotes critical thinking by asking students to investigate issues of whiteness, historiography, critical race theory, and narratology.

The book concludes with six sample student essays and a useful bibliography.

**Jami L. Carlacio,** a lecturer in the English Department at Cornell University, has published most recently on African American women's autobiography and on the rhetorical practices of nineteenth-century European American and African American women.

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