

Guest Editors' Introduction: Toni Morrison: New Directions

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This special issue of *MELUS* reflects a rich and wide-ranging field and an international research conversation that is currently occurring on the writing and position of Toni Morrison. Its aims are to generate discussion about the entire breadth of Morrison's oeuvre, considered in the context of the mature stage of her literary career, the huge body of criticism that her work has inspired to date, and this point in United States, and global, history. We are interested in exploring responses to Morrison's work *now*, particularly in the wake of *A Mercy* (2008), a text that almost from the moment of its issue has been identified as a watershed publication. The historical content of this novel combined with its apparent contemporary resonance in US culture and politics, chiming with the election of Barack Obama, seems to have compelled readers and critics to reflect anew on Morrison's influence and relevance as an artist and public intellectual. We hope here to locate and investigate a significant critical juncture in the author's diverse output and reception and to initiate new approaches and directions in Toni Morrison studies. Assembled together, the essays and reviews consider Morrison as a writer in multiple genres who speaks to multiple audiences; what unfolds is how her presence has reshaped US literature but also her wider impact and appeal, the increasing transnationalism both of her engagements and of scholarly dialogues.¹

Most of the articles retain a focus on Morrison's novels, but the author's short fiction and picture books for children also receive close attention. Issues of reception are addressed by

Jessica Wells Cantiello, who scrutinizes *A Mercy* and how the novel has been reviewed, while Morrison's own critical commentary is central to Cynthia Dobbs's exploration of notions of "home" in *Paradise* (1998) and Sandra Stanley's reading of difference in terms of disability, drawing on the concept of an Africanist presence. The recent novels *A Mercy* and *Paradise* receive a variety of treatments here while *Beloved* (1987), Morrison's best known and most analyzed work to date, is approached from new directions by two of the articles. The review section picks up several of the threads found in the essays, featuring evaluations of book-length works of criticism published on Morrison in the last five years, a view of *A Mercy*, and two review essays that examine collections of the author's nonfiction commentary and student/teacher guides. Some of the reviews address recent comparative work on Morrison and other writers, and others assess scholarship that furthers the understanding of composite cultural and religious legacies in her oeuvre.

Doreen Fowler's "'Nobody Could Make It Alone': Fathers and Boundaries in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" opens up fresh lines of inquiry into familiar material. Significantly extending a field of criticism on *Beloved* that employs psychoanalytic discourse, Fowler focuses on a wide range of figures who perform a paternal function, exploring the depiction of processes of African American individuation, socialization, and attachment. Fowler draws on the theories of Julia Kristeva, Jessica Benjamin, and Hortense J. Spillers, arguing for the "critical role in *Beloved* of a father figure or third party in helping to form boundaries that both distinguish an autonomous subject and allow for alliances with others." Unlike previous analyses using similar frameworks, this essay turns from mother-child relations to find Morrison reconceptualizing the place of the paternal.

Another article revisiting Morrison's fifth novel is Mark Sandy's "'Cut by Rainbow': Tales, Tellers, and Reimagining Wordsworth's Pastoral Poetics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*." Sandy's contribution offers a contrasting framework and approach that takes up Morrison's literary dialogue with and reworking of Romantic legacies. Interweaving readings of Wordsworth's verse, the poetry of Robert Frost and Derek Walcott, and both *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Sandy offers a rich sense of Morrison's engagement "with a Romantic duality of vision that oscillates between nature's compensatory power and unsympathetic indifference to grief and loss." Exploring natural imagery, tales of marginality, obliteration and restoration, relations between memory and location, and the value of partial and multiple perspectives, Sandy argues that "Morrison translates the darker features of Wordsworth's rural poetics into her own version of the American pastoral."

Two essays turn to other genres of writing experimented with by Morrison that have been subject to less critical scrutiny. The author's only short story to date, "Recitatif" (1983), and the literature for children she coauthored with her son Slade are examined as exemplifying broader patterns found in Morrison's more prominent fiction. In "Of Snakes and Men: Toni and Slade Morrison's and Pascal Lemaître's Adaptations of Aesop in *Who's Got Game?*," Rebecca Ferguson makes an illuminating case for Morrison's dialogic engagement with cultural canons, considering her recasting of a selection of Aesop's fables in the three stories collected in *Who's Got Game?* (2007). Ferguson investigates how Morrison disrupts or moves beyond the lessons expected from instructive fabular forms, drawing out connections to African American oral heritage, elucidating references to classical tradition, and exploring the subtleties of the graphic aspects of Lemaître's illustrations. On the handling of "the fine line between the 'moral' and 'moralistic,'" Ferguson concludes that the picture books "are directed to the interests of the

contemporary child reader in such a manner as to sustain inquiry and provoke interrogation.” In “Maggie in Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’: The Africanist Presence and Disability Studies,” Sandra Stanley analyzes Morrison’s short story from a disability studies perspective. Focusing on the neglected figure of Maggie and what she means to other characters, Stanley brings together several discourses of otherness, including Morrison’s notion of Africanism articulated in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). Considering how Twyla and Roberta come to recognize that they have used the disabled subject as an arena for their own enablement, Stanley proposes that “the serviceability of the Africanist presence . . . is provocatively transposed to the serviceability of the disabled presence in the figure of Maggie,” persuasively arguing that Morrison thus “asks readers to investigate how they read the stigmatized differences embedded in multiple narratives of identity, including race and disability.”

This issue includes three approaches to *Paradise*. Extant criticism on Morrison’s seventh novel has taken up its engagement with gender politics, with nationalism and ethnic absolutism, and with religious heritages and reinventions. These topics remain prominent across the pieces on *Paradise* included here, yet new lines of inquiry are followed, in part as awareness of an international dimension illuminates each. Majda Atieh’s “The Revelation of the Veiled in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*: The Whirling Dervishes in the Harem of the Convent” combines a feminist perspective with a rich sense of Sufi thought, practice, and tradition. The Convent community receives close attention in relation to themes of sustenance, revelation and ecstasy as seen through a religious lens. Atieh argues that the novel “emerges as a harem narrative that culls liberatory Sufi rituals. . . . *Paradise* celebrates Sufism as a paradigmatic vision for female resistance, empowerment, and liberation.” While Atieh presents a heritage traced via the spread of Islam into Africa and the displacement to the Americas engendered by racial slavery, in

“Diasporic Designs of House, Home, and Haven in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” Cynthia Dobbs turns to various visions of home in the black diaspora. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Morrison’s own critical commentary on unbelonging and imagining a space of haven, Dobbs engagingly poses a revised and expansive sense of the domestic, exploring such communal sites as the Convent, the Oven and Anna Flood’s store as well as ideas of an African home. As competing and often gendered visions are played out, Dobbs asserts “architecture encodes the novel’s various utopian designs to erase difference, resistance, and the sheer messiness of history, while also exposing the failure of such designs.” In the third essay on *Paradise*, “On the Idea of In(ter)dependence: *Paradise* and Foreign Policy,” Daniel Grausam focuses on relations between the Convent and the town of Ruby, locating an allegory of the interdependence between North America and the developing world in the 1970s. Contextualizing Morrison’s fiction in terms of US global economic policies and foreign affairs, Grausam introduces an original framework and finds in the text a complex account of resources, production, commerce, exceptionalism, and expansionism. Grausam suggests that “*Paradise* exposes the presence of the global third world in even the most apparently national of settings and significantly extends Morrison’s project of revealing the blindness at the heart of national narratives.”

Morrison’s most recent novel is the central text for the final two articles. In “E Pluribus Unum? The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” Valerie Babb takes up how Morrison’s novel is in dialogue with narratives of the beginnings and pre-Revolutionary history of the US and its founding documents. Babb focuses on how *A Mercy* works to counter and critique the erasure of density and diversity in what have emerged as dominant accounts of America’s origins. She presents a compelling sense of the text’s expansive vision and argues that *A Mercy* “is an American origins narrative that re-replaces the racial, gender, and class

complexities lost in the creation of a canonical narrative that sought to privilege the few over the many.” Jessica Wells Cantiello’s “From Pre-racial to Post-racial? Reading and Reviewing *A Mercy* in the Age of Obama” also explores Morrison’s look back at a moment before the racial divisions, hierarchies, and silencings of the nascent nation had taken a rigid form. Her contribution, however, scrutinizes racialized encounters and constructions in *A Mercy* while problematizing the easy connections made between the apparently reborn US political scene of the time of the novel’s publication and the society of the text’s setting. Cantiello insightfully analyzes the initial reception of Morrison’s work, drawing on a wide range of book reviews to show how the reviewers’ “tendency to emphasize certain comparisons, particularly the semantic relationship between Morrison’s use of *pre-racial* to describe the novel’s late-seventeenth-century racial landscape and the media’s use of *post-racial* to describe Obama’s America, simplify and at times misread the complexity of the racial relations Morrison explores in the text.” In particular, Cantiello finds the ambiguous figure of Sorrow to be destabilizing; reticent or anxious responses to her identity illustrate the limitations of early interpretations: “the reviews . . . remind us . . . how invested in racial categories and how used to the black/white binary readers and reviewers continue to be.”

In putting together this special issue, and as guest editors positioned outside of the US, we were excited to see the continuation of a trend in recent Morrison studies in which the internationalism of her work, and in particular her later publications, has been recognized, elaborated, and celebrated. This growing internationalism in both Morrison’s own career and scholarly approaches is perhaps illustrated by recent events in Paris: the author’s curatorship of the Louvre exhibition *Étranger chez soi* in 2006, and the 2010 Toni Morrison Society conference held in the same city. Envisioning the special issue as an opportunity to consider the place of

Toni Morrison *now* has also shaped the content, both in terms of fostering a focus on the author's recent output and engagements and in relation to encouraging reevaluations and re-framings of her more established interests and work. The essays bring to bear many different, often original contexts, whether that be in the form of critical or theoretical paradigms, socioeconomic histories, cultural and religious traditions, literary or political heritages, or diverse moments and sites of reception.

However, even as in 2011 Toni Morrison celebrates her eightieth birthday and a life as a writer spanning more than forty years, there is no room for complacency. The kinds of recognition she has received in the more recent past require scrutiny. Morrison's significant position, so apparently evident in public responses to *A Mercy*, and at a stage in her career when her canonical status appears to be assured, remains at times curiously under question. This ambiguity can be seen in a recent article in the left-leaning UK broadsheet *The Guardian* titled with deliberate irony "Masters of American Literature" and written following the death of J. D. Salinger to commemorate "the passing of an unrivalled generation" of American writers. Although the piece is illustrated with a picture of Morrison, it makes barely any reference to her work. While she appears to be functioning in this non-US context as an image of the "difference" of American Literature, her multi-faceted, multi-genre body of work is reduced by Mark Lawson to a comment on the "grudging, late admission to the halls of fame of writers such as Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates." Lawson directs the reader who wishes to learn more to Elaine Showalter's *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009). In an introductory piece to her own book in the same newspaper, tellingly Showalter concludes that since she has space only to discuss a limited number of writers, "Toni Morrison is so well known she does not need to be included." The article is once again illustrated

with an image of Morrison, despite her exclusion from the text. Conscious of this surely ambiguous, if not problematic positioning of the author, at times both foregrounded as representative icon and simultaneously in some ways marginalized, we urge the necessity of ongoing reflection, interrogation, and dialogue well beyond the starting points and directions offered here.

Note

ⁱ The pervasive impact of Toni Morrison's work and the international nature of intellectual debate about it is reflected by the fact that some of the essays in this issue have their origin in a one-day symposium titled "Toni Morrison: New Directions" hosted in the United Kingdom by the University of Durham in the summer of 2009. This symposium brought together scholars from the UK and elsewhere and we are pleased that the special issue further opens up and broadens the dialogue. For their generous support of our work, the editors would like to thank the British Association for American Studies, English Studies at the University of Durham, the Clinton Institute for American Studies at University College, Dublin, our review section assistant Rebecca White, and the vigilant editorial board and many associate staff at *MELUS*.

Works Cited

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