

TONI MORRISON, MEMORY AND MEANING

Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally, eds.

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Toni Morrison's body of work has turned her into an imposing presence in US literature. Her ten novels (to date) have proved to be decisive in the attempt to reshape the African American experience and to facilitate its way from the margins to the center of the American literary canon. In so doing, Morrison's oeuvre has fostered new understandings of the black self, bringing it to the fore and reimagining its representation as "a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole" (Gilroy 1993: 158). Thus, as a commemorative and celebratory output that acknowledges "the fortieth anniversary of her first novel, the twentieth anniversary of the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), and the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Toni Morrison Society" (Seward and Tally 2014: xvi), the timing of the publication of *Toni Morrison, Memory and Meaning* could not be more propitious. The volume, edited by Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally, brings together an array of essays by distinguished Morrison scholars from Europe and the US engaging multidirectional perspectives that put forward innovative interpretations of Morrison's work as well as brand new readings of her two latest publications to date, the novel *Home* (2012), and the play *Desdemona* (2012).

The book is divided into five parts, each of which is headed by a quote from Morrison's latest novel, as the essays grapple with themes that are also prevalent in

Home, and framed by a couple of poems that belong to acclaimed poets Rita Dove and Sonia Sanchez.

Carolyn C. Denard, founder of The Toni Morrison Society, opens the volume with an enlightening foreword in which she honors Morrison's literary status as a writer of the first order. Taking their cue from this, both editors remind us that reading Morrison is to read beyond the page (Seward and Tally 2014: xv) and present her tenth novel in which the nature of love and its musings, once more, lie at the core of the story.

Part one is made up of four essays that explore the concept of belonging and lay bare the literary framework taking into account the humanist and modernist approach that Morrison's work encompasses. In the first chapter Philip Weinstein reviews the concept of the 'Africanist presence' that Morrison developed in her 1992 study *Playing in the Dark*. Weinstein contends that the author tries to counteract a depiction of romanticized blackness in her work by delving into raw concepts such as belonging and unbelonging that ultimately signal the pitfalls of innocence and commit the reader to read at great risk. Unbelonging is precisely the key concept of Marc C. Conner's contribution in which he highlights the figure of the outcast in several of Morrison's novels and winds up stating that by understanding the world as an ontological space such sense of homelessness, as portrayed in Toni Morrison's work, reflects the "crisis of modernity" (Seward and Tally 2014: 20). In her essay dealing with Morrison's trilogy (*Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*) Ann Hostetler focuses on the trope of the dead girl—common to the three novels—offering the author's version of a feminized history, or *herstory*, in which the trope of the dead girl opens out towards a larger cultural narrative that voices the ongoing sufferings of black women. Dana A. Williams closes this first part linking the concept of belonging to Morrison's professional work as an editor and thus agent and curator of the African American cultural identity.

Part two is devoted to the crucial role of memory in Morrison's work. With an emphasis on *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise* Cheryl Wall shows how blackness has historically been fetishized in spite of the black self. Morrison's novels, Wall submits, offer spiritual cartographies that show the way towards acknowledging the completion of black subjectivity. Claudine Raynaud and Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber analyze *Beloved* and *A Mercy* respectively and draw on memory as the tenet for the return of the repressed that can reconfigure a black self, for both scholars argue that creation is memory work. On the other hand, Lucille Fults reads *Love* as a meaningful depiction of the outcomes of the racist zeitgeist of the Civil Rights era as the novel, Fults argues, offers a nuanced reexamination of the multifarious choices that the black community had to put up with in such tumultuous times.

Part three is entirely dedicated to Morrison's indebtedness to the Bible as a ur-text central to each end every single one of her novels. Toni Morrison herself once admitted that the "Bible wasn't part of my reading, it was part of my life" (in Brown 1999: 157). Shirle A. Stave traces Morrison's position on Christianity in her study of the author's acclaimed trilogy and points how misogynistic violence impinged on black women and how Morrison eventually came to disregard a theology that privileges spirit over flesh. Katherine Clay Bassard's essay feeds on black women's biblicism from the nineteenth century to the present to ponder black women's religious agency in Morrison's rendition of Christianity. The exploration of John Winthrop's sermon "A Model for Christian Charity" serves Justine Tally to propose a typological reading of Morrison's trilogy in which The Law of Nature and The Law of Gospel intermesh to offer the healing of the black community. To finish this third part, David Carrasco continues to surmount a religious vision of the magical and biblical flight through his reading of *Song of Solomon*. In it Carrasco asserts that the flight encodes a spiritual meaning and acts as a religious strategy to fight racial sufferings.

Part four is a palimpsest of identity-building and search for an African American integrity. Through her reading of *Beloved* Loverly King discusses the concepts of identity and property under the slavery system to highlight, mirroring Sethe's whereabouts, black slaves' refusal to be defined as subhuman. Tessa Roynon selects *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Love* to suggest that such novels bring about fresh readings of black integrity as they eschew the American legal system by presenting alternative means of social atonement. Alma Jean Billingslea Brown contends that *Song of Solomon* traces back Milkman's identity through folklore and the African legacy and, drawing on *Home*, Valerie Thomas studies the process of the decolonization of the black psyche as the perfect means to achieve a balance that can allow for the representation of African American subjectivity.

The last part of the volume praises the representation of the aesthetics of several of Morrison's novels. Claudia Brodsky blends the political and the cultural in Morrison to challenge Walter Benjamin's assumption of the conflicting nature that fuses aesthetics and politics. In tune with Brodsky's essay, Herman Beavers presents *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* as an exploration of alternative forms of female representation in which black aesthetics takes central part. Jan Furman centers on *Home* to pinpoint Frank Money's geographical and psychological journey, in which trauma arises to facilitate self-acceptance and a healthier version of masculinity. Mar Gallego-Durán's chapter also focuses on male identity with special interest in the representation of white masculinity as it is conjured up in *A Mercy*. The white patriarchy that Morrison presents plunges into the difficulties that ethnic epistemologies had to endure from the outset in the nation that was to be known

as the United States of America. In the last essay *Desdemona* is the object of Lenor Kitts' study in which she affirms that, through Morrison's rewriting of *Othello*, Shakespearean characters can be understood in new and the same time the playwright's vision of Africa can be remodeled.

The book attests to Morrison's literary legacy in (African) American literature but since much of it has been devoted to the acclaimed trilogy –as Justine Tally's *Toni Morrison's 'Beloved': Origins: Possible Worlds* and *Paradise Reconsidered* alongside her edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* confirms, it would have been of greater interest to bring to the fore more insights on and readings of the latest contributions that Morrison has added to the literary scenario.

On the whole, *Toni Morrison, Memory and Meaning* argues for new understandings of Morrison's whole work and attempts to extend a tradition of literary discussion about her reputation as a major figure in North American letters in an attempt to elicit new responses, bearing in mind the forthcoming publication of her eleventh novel *God Help the Child*, due to be launched in April 2015.

Works cited

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