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978-0-521-67832-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison

Edited by Justine Tally

Excerpt

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JUSTINE TALLY

Introduction: “All necks are on the line”

In her seminal essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison throws down the gauntlet. What we do as writers and critics is not just important, it is crucial; it is not just informative, it is formative; it is not just interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others, come to “know” it. It is a responsibility that we as critics must take extremely seriously because what we do makes a difference, whether it is fawning over a popular writer whose subtext is actually pernicious to human relationships, or unfairly criticizing a more complex writer struggling to speak from a different world. The choices we make are not gratuitous; they are most often political, emerging from an ideology that we are not even, not necessarily anyway, aware of. If there is one thing that Toni Morrison – author, playwright, librettist, lyricist, Nobel Prize winner, social and literary critic – has taught us, it is that we are all responsible for those choices, and ignorance is not a lawful excuse for committing an infraction: For Morrison “. . . as far as the future is concerned, when one writes, as critic or as author, all necks are on the line.”¹

But as Morrison herself (following Bakhtin) has noted, “responsibility” is also “response-ability,” the capacity for a dialogue between writer and reading public, often mediated by the critic, which demands that (1) we take the author and her work seriously and meet her on her own terms, and (2) we prepare ourselves, yes, academically, but equally important, psychically to free our minds from the strictures and constraints of the inherited, the given, the unquestioned, the “unspeakable,” in order to meet “marginal” authors on their own terms. These days, however, it is more than inappropriate to define Morrison as “marginal,” not because she has moved to the center of the canon, but because she has managed to move the center; or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that because of her multi-faceted and untiring work, she has helped change a restricted, predominantly white, and male-centered literary world into a multicultural mosaic.

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Not that it did not take enormous effort on her part to attain the canonization seldom granted to women writers, almost never to blacks. And yet Morrison was hardly the first non-white, non-male author to challenge the hegemony of the white-male center: that effort has also been both political and collective in nature as, for example, in the open letter to the *New York Times* by forty-eight black writers, decrying the non-recognition of *Beloved*, inexplicably passed over in 1987 for both the American Book Award and the Pulitzer. (She later indicated that that support and recognition by her own writerly community was one of the most meaningful “awards” she has ever received.) It is fascinating that in an informal survey among writers and other literati by the same news institution in May 2006, the very same book was voted the best piece of fiction written in the US in the last twenty-five years; in fact it was *a priori* considered to be the “front runner,” no matter that one letter to the editor protested that not even 30 percent of those surveyed were women. It is fascinating as well to remember that the winner for the previous twenty-five years was Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, an important reference for Morrison’s first novel. Two hundred years after the proscription of literacy for slaves in the United States, black writes back: the exquisite taste of revenge, the profound dismay over the enforced silencing. Faulkner’s two-word description of Dilsey and her family in his Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*² – “they endured” – also succinctly epitomizes Morrison’s abiding respect for her own black legacy.

The essays included in this volume are testimony precisely to Morrison’s resonance on an international, intergenerational, and intercultural scale; the contributors include both men and women, “black” and “white,” Americans and Europeans, younger scholars and more established critics. Some contributors have chosen to capitalize the “B” in “Black” as a political statement; others think it more political to use the lower case. As editor, I believe that Morrison’s work demands that respect for difference, so I am simply explaining, not “apologizing” for, these choices. Because if there is one crucial link to be found in all of this author’s multifarious work, and indeed among the distinctly varied approaches to be found in this volume, it is the concept that language is politically loaded and that in our critical writing, even in our everyday conversations, we must heighten our sensitivity to the use we make of it.

“[W]here your hands are. Now,” to quote Morrison, is holding a vibrant addition to the copious scholarship already available on the author. What makes it all new is not only its cross-fertilization of international minds and critiques, but also the focus on the “entirety” of her work: not just new essays on her eight novels, but innovative discussions of her less well-known “shorter pieces,” her influential career as editor and teacher, her

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ground-breaking literary criticism, and her perceptive social criticism. No volume before this *Companion to Toni Morrison* has attempted to look at her oeuvre as an entity – though she herself has stated: "It's one job" – yet doing so illuminates her life's project as a consistent attempt to make a difference.

It has been suggested that because of Morrison's investment in the recovery of black history, her novels might well be read in the chronological order of their respective time frames: the rural slave-holding South; the Great Migration to the North; post-World War I and the Harlem Renaissance; the Great Depression; World War II and pre-Civil Rights; the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War; and the "Age of Greed" with its political, social, and personal backsliding, which also has witnessed an insidious return to scientific racism (as if it had ever really gone away). The Chronology included at the beginning of the volume is an attempt to reference many of the historical events mentioned (or at least tacitly understood) in these particular essays and relevant for the historical background, which is ever present in a Morrison novel and crucial for understanding other aspects of her work. It does not pretend to be exhaustive either for the historical data, or for Morrison's biography, simply helpful.

For the purposes of organizing this volume, however, the novels discussed in the essays in Part I appear in order of publication, with the exception of Abena Busia's discussion of Morrison's "shorter pieces." Rather than covering the historical bent of the novels (which is exceedingly difficult anyway, given the fusion of past and present so often at the core of her work), this "straightforward" setting out of her fiction facilitates an analysis of Morrison's development as a writer, both as to her narrative strategies and techniques as well as to the political concerns of contemporary society. As with most great authors, Morrison may be talking about the past, but she is speaking to the present.

Ágnes Surányi looks at both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* within the problematic of growing up black and female, on the one hand, and the crucial support systems offered by female relationships, on the other. Both novels speak to their respective moments: Morrison's reaction to "Black is Beautiful" in the first, and to the early women's movement in the second. For Surányi, the narrative technique of both novels, each in its own way, is highly innovative, emphasizing both the metaphors and the language itself as central to the author's vision, and mapping out early concerns that will continue to surface in her later work.

Joyce Hope Scott also emphasizes Morrison's language in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, specifically from the point of view of Bakhtin's carnivalesque as a tool for subversion and survival in a hostile world. Milkman Dead

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and Jadine Childs may both be involved in quests for the meaning of their “blackness,” but their decisions differ vastly even as they grow in humanity. In addition to extending the author’s signature technique of “circularity,” these texts are “open-ended,” a characteristic that will also become a hallmark of Morrison’s novels.

Because of the monumental impact of *Beloved*, and the extraordinary outpouring of critical work on this novel, Claudine Raynaud devotes her entire essay both to the critical work it has generated and the centrality of memory to the poetics of the text. Through the language of memory, metaphor, and dream, Morrison at once examines what was suppressed, determines what is useful for survival, and discards what is too painful to carry forward. Though history is central, it is a “history of consciousness,” a “ghost story,” which, simply because it lacks “materiality,” is no less real. “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” as Carl Sagan has said.

Shirely A. (Holly) Stave also takes on “Historical Revisionism” in *Jazz* and *Paradise*, the “zero-moment” of the Harlem Renaissance, and the backdrop of the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War, respectively. Though the present is serendipitous in *Jazz*, and the music of the 1920s resonant in both the text and the narrative technique, the past continues to haunt the migrants to the City. The playful yet ultimately unreliable narrator foregrounds the language of the story recounted again and again in multiple voices, “tracks” echoing the records, the hunt, the City itself. In *Paradise*, however, history becomes monolithic and lethal, and women its victims. Symbolic language is confronted with the *semiotique*.

I have always found the reluctance to examine Morrison’s self-proclaimed “trilogy” (*Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*) as a trilogy rather perplexing. My own contribution to this volume, then, is an attempt to open up the discussion, using various approaches, and suggesting ways in which we can understand the trilogy as one complete project, independently of the fact that each of its components brilliantly stands on its own. Again, the network of language, memory, and history supports and sustains the texts, but I also want to raise issues of Morrison’s investment in the theoretical debates of the last three decades of the twentieth century. It is my hope that this essay will serve as a springboard for more investigation into the textual and extra-textual aspects that, I believe, securely link these three novels to each other.

Mar Gallego also looks at *Love*, Morrison’s latest novel, through the lens of historical recovery, here the pre-Civil Rights movement of the “past” and the “present” of the 1990s, focusing on the loss that went hand-in-hand with the gains of the 1960s. Gallego, however, also emphasizes the heartbreak and breakdown in female friendships caused by the loss of traditional black communal values, and celebrates the value of a loving female relationship,

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free of patriarchal interventions and class distinctions. A valiant and valuable first approximation to a new text.

Except for Morrison's only published short story, "Recitatif," no critical work has to date been available on the author's incursions into other genres. Abena Busia's "field work" has itself been a diligent job of "historical recovery," given the fact that three of the four pieces discussed here have not even been published. Busia has relied on personal interviews, two with Morrison herself, and the fortuitous recovery of a manuscript of *Dreaming Emmett*, which the author kindly lent her for work on this piece. From a copy of the libretto and her attendance at two performances of *Margaret Garner*, and with personal input from the producers of the musical *Storyville*, Busia has creatively traced Morrison's "artistic impulse" for the benefit of everyone interested in the writer's complete works. Through this work Busia demonstrates Morrison's restless curiosity, willingness to experiment creatively, and her interest in close collaboration with others in different artistic fields.

Part II of this *Companion* deals with other, less well-known, but highly influential aspects of Toni Morrison's writing. Hanna Wallinger navigates the complexities of the author's literary criticism as set out in her two major contributions to the field, specifically her examination of "American Africanisms." Students of American literature will find Wallinger's explanations both clarifying and exceedingly useful as she follows the intricacies of Morrison's arguments, providing the historical background from which these arguments derive, and highlights the influence this new focus in criticism has had, and continues to have, on studies of American literature.

Given the avowedly political nature of Morrison's writing, it is somewhat surprising that more attention has not been given to her "social criticism." Sämi Ludwig uses cognitive theory to identify two different thrusts in the author's social criticism: first, the direct critique of the type of narration used to define and confine black participants in the national discourse (and the usefulness of such stereotyping in important national debates), and second, the more intricate examination of how language carries heavy ideological weight and the author's own struggle to achieve a language that is race-based but not racist. Ludwig's contribution also highlights Morrison's indebtedness to some of the great philosophers, and how she adapts certain of their premises to her own uses.

Again, to date no one has examined Morrison's influential work undertaken while she was a senior editor at Random House. Cheryl Wall has uncovered a wealth of information, both on the encouragement offered to young African Americans knocking at the doors of publishing houses, and the crucial role Morrison has played in shaping the American literary scene by getting their work into print. Wall's examination of the writers whose

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work was ushered into the light with Morrison as midwife lays bare the foundations of the world of publishing and what impact Morrison's personal politics have had on what we now read. Those politics are on display particularly here in Wall's in-depth discussion of the creation and compilation of *The Black Book*.

Part III is devoted to essays that take a comprehensive look at Morrison's oeuvre considered as a whole. Judylyn Ryan brings to her analysis of Morrison's language a background in the narrative techniques not only of writing but also of cinema. The resulting, innovative readings sustain Ryan's arguments that the author's "social vision" and "democratic narrative" are part and parcel of her "teacherly role . . . of the artist in a democratic society," designed to reclaim and strengthen reader competence. This essay once again supports the contention that Morrison's personal politics are indeed political.

It is more than just interesting that at a historical moment in which civil liberties in the US seem to be under threat, Ryan emphasizes the "democratic," while Dwight McBride, in examining Morrison as an intellectual, focuses on her "pursuits of freedom." History can produce such irony: it is seemingly the black community, too long shackled by slavery and discrimination, which may be shouldering the responsibility for the true meaning of the "American Dream." In McBride's essay, language again is the central force furthering the vision of the author. Even as he draws on textual examples that appear elsewhere in this volume, the reading he offers of these same words evidence the "heteroglossia" of Morrison's writing.

The last essay, written by Deidre Raynor and Johnnella Butler, is a diligent overview of the major critical approaches to Morrison's work to date, presented in succinct, easily accessible form. Here students, teachers, and researchers can get an idea of the breadth of Morrison scholarship and at the same time quickly locate specific sources for their own research. It is certainly a gigantic task to try to be "exhaustive," but Raynor and Butler's work is admirable in its comprehensiveness and certainly offers some much-needed "shorthand" for those daunted by the sheer range and volume of Morrison criticism.

The Further Reading section at the end of the volume includes only book entries and is intended for use as quick reference, on the one hand, and on the other, to inspire others to "keep on keeping on" with their reading and study of Morrison.

As editor I am deeply appreciative of the time, energy, and thoughtfulness that the contributors to this *Companion* have invested in their essays. If the work and vision of Toni Morrison is furthered in any meaningful way by the

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addition of these analyses to the scholarship, maybe somewhere down the line our necks will still be in tact.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in America Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28.1 (Winter 1989): 5.
2. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text with Faulkner’s Appendix* (New York: Modern Library; Rpt. 1992). Though the novel itself was first published in 1929, Faulkner wrote his Appendix in 1946.

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PART ONE

Toni Morrison's fiction

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I

ÁGNES SURÁNYI

The Bluest Eye and *Sula*:
black female experience from childhood
to womanhood

The Bluest Eye

The publication of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) heralded the arrival of a brilliant young novelist – but it took almost five years for many to sit up and take notice. Though Sarah Blackburn remarks that Toni Morrison’s first novel was published “at an auspicious time when a growing, middle-class women’s movement was just beginning to acknowledge the reality of its black and poor sisters,”¹ an overview of the critical discourse of the time shows that from the readership the book received little, if any, understanding. It is noteworthy that after its first publication the novel was out of print for quite a long time. A tragic story of child abuse, with race, gender and class mixed in, *The Bluest Eye* is concerned with racial self-loathing, the loss of identity, and shame. Even though the setting for the story is 1940–41 – the beginning of World War II for the United States – it is also “presentist” in concept, ideologically grounded in the 1960s when “Black is Beautiful” entered into the popular, if more militant, discourse. Setting out to write a story that she herself wanted to read, Morrison worried that this slogan of racial pride would be unable to dispel the long-term psychic effects of prejudices rooted in racialism and sexism.

The locale of this imaginative narrative is Lorrain, Ohio, the protagonist Pecola Breedlove, a little black girl at the most vulnerable phase of her life. The title *The Bluest Eye* calls attention to itself immediately: the superlative degree of color as well as the singular form of the noun in the title is rather unusual, resulting in a pun. The singular noun may refer to the damaging white gaze; the omitted plural to the object of desire, an epitome of beauty according to mainstream society; or alternatively, to the saddest story of the demise of a child’s identity (the “eye” as “I”), integral to the blues sung by Claudia’s mother. The multivocality of the I/eye serves also to reinforce the text’s emphasis on the visual, evident in everything from the white men’s gaze as Cholly engages in his first sexual exploit, to the imposition of Hollywood

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icons in the cinema, and to Claudia's mutilation of the doll, punching out its startled blue plastic eyes in an attempt to find out what made it beautiful in the eyes of grown-ups. Pecola, desperately trying to escape the squalor of her life, finds that she can will her body to disappear, limb by limb, piece by piece, but never manages to free herself of her eyes, her invisibility never quite complete. Yet in her encounter with Mr. Yacobowski, the store-keeper who will sell her nine lovely orgasmic Mary Janes² without ever touching her dirty little hand, his refusal to even look at her confirms for her the insignificance and invisibility of a little black girl for the white gaze. Like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* her "ugly" black skin impedes any acknowledgment of the child within. Told in the present tense, which suggests timelessness as well as repetitiveness, the incident confirms for Pecola her lack of self-worth. The dandelions she had formerly thought to be quite beautiful are now simply the weeds everyone has said they are.

Morrison's denunciation of the fetishism involved in the fixation on physical beauty is augmented by the time frame of her story, the moment the US is entering a war precisely to fight such racist ideology in the imposition of an Aryan "ideal." World War II is also present in Morrison's penchant for giving her characters poignant names, her "subtle delight in nominalism."³ This grand narrative of history is represented in her designation of the three whores as Maginot Line, China, and Poland, significant places during the war. By merely giving hints of the distant world events Morrison emphasizes that it is the individual life-stories in the black community that are of interest to her. Yet, in Jennifer Gillan's insightful reading, *The Bluest Eye* is an indirect "commentary on the artificial boundaries of citizenship, gender, race, and history."⁴ She points out the importance of Morrison's setting her story during 1940–1941, because in that year the United States was posing as the champion of democracy abroad, while ignoring its own long-standing history of obsession with racial purity and preference for blue-eyed and blonde-haired Aryans. "The names China and Poland signify the European and Asian fronts, Maginot Line refers both literally and metaphorically to the tendency to focus on the wrong front,"⁵ i.e., projecting one's guilt onto another.

On the home front, distraction from the socio-economic collapse and the calamity of war in Europe of the 1930s was provided by Hollywood, a rising industry dedicated to creating illusions of wealth and happiness while simultaneously and insidiously reinforcing white notions of beauty. The oft-mentioned film stars in the text – Shirley Temple, Jean Harlow, Ginger Rogers, etc. – serve to emphasize the omnipresence of the white gaze and its pernicious influence on the identity formation of the psychologically weakest characters in the book. Only Claudia as a young girl has the security