

BLACKS, MODERNISM, AND THE AMERICAN SOUTH: AN
INTERVIEW WITH TONI MORRISON

DENARD: You are not a Southerner. You were born and grew up in Lorain, Ohio. So your sense of the South and what African-Americans value and/or hate about the South comes largely from your parents' memories of the South—the stories told to you when you were growing up. What was the perception, the sense of the South that you gained from your parents?

MORRISON: They had diametrically opposed positions. My father was born in Georgia. My mother was born in Alabama. Both were from very small towns in those states. My father thought that the most racist state in the Union was Georgia and that it would never change. My mother had much fonder memories. She was very nostalgic about the South. But she never visited it—ever. While my father went back every year. Quarreling and fussing all the way, he went back to see his family—aunts, uncles—there. So I grew up with a complicated notion of the South, neither sentimental nor wholly frightening. On the one hand, with no encouragement, my mother was nostalgic about the Alabama farm, yet she would talk in a language of fear about her family's escape from the South. On the other hand, my father recounted vividly the violence that he had seen first-hand from White southerners, but he regularly returned.

DENARD: What about your own impressions of the South when you toured with the Howard Players, or when you taught at Texas Southern University, or when you've visited since then?

MORRISON: What impressed me when I first went to the South for a sustained period of time (with a theater group from Howard) was the sight of so many people like me, like my relatives. I think Ralph Ellison said something elegant but similar when he was trying to answer Irving Howe. Howe had asked why would he have any good feelings about the South, and Ellison said that the South was full of Black people. Well that's suddenly what I realized. When you go there, while it was true that I was going into a white domain, what I was aware of primarily are the Black people there, and they were like people in Lorain, Ohio. And I didn't have to change my language or my manners. The accents were different but the language was not. I recognized and participated in the culture. I mean the food, the music, the way in which you behaved in other people's houses, what you don't do with strangers, what you do—they were no different whatsoever from the way I had been reared in Lorain, Ohio. Also, I had a sense of—I hate to use these over-taxed words—a sense of belonging and community that was lifesaving. I used to tell my children about how I felt when my sister and I as young girls were in the company of so-called

vaguely criminal men in Lorain. Men who gambled, sold illegal liquor, or what have you. But when we saw them on the street they were safety zones for us. If we needed to get home, they took us. If we were someplace where we shouldn't be, they told us. If we needed protection, they gave it. So I always felt surrounded by these Black men who were safe. I knew I was safe with them; the people I ran from were not them. I felt the same thing traveling through the South on trains. The porters—even when I was a grown woman traveling with my children the porters were the praetorian guard. They were the ones who gave me extra orange juice and didn't charge me for it because I had a little boy with me; they were the ones who gave me the pillow anyway whether I purchased one or not. It was a kind of chivalry that I had come to expect from Black men. You see a Black man, you know you're safe. And that was precisely the feeling I had in the South, of protection and care and solicitous, unflirtatious behavior. This very recent notion of Black men as threats stuns me

DENARD: Were there other people in Lorain, other family members or friends or people you met at Howard, who had lived in the South and who expressed the similar views of the South that your parents did?

MORRISON: Many.

DENARD: Tell me about those people.

MORRISON: Many of my father's people lived in Chicago and most of my mother's people lived in areas around Ohio, Michigan and California, but all of them had come from the South originally. My mother came north very young. She was six. And she went to school in Ohio as did her sisters and brothers. And her parents, along with many of the aunts and uncles in Cleveland and Lorain, made up a culture that I didn't identify by region but only as Black. I learned later how pronounced the variations of culture—from state to state or region to region—are. I've never felt that sense of familiarity within variety anywhere else except in Brazil where you see evidence of intrinsic, even dominant, Black cultures—each one of which is strikingly different in cuisine and dress and music from the others, and they all speak different kinds of Portuguese. But somehow, however, they relate to each other. When you are in that company, you feel as though you are in exalted company.

There is another aspect of the South that I remember which exemplifies that notion of community that we talked about earlier. When I first went South with the theater group from Howard, we couldn't count on living quarters. I mean they made adequate reservations in advance, but we were traveling in several cars, and sometimes we arrived too late and the rooms were taken. As faculty members, they were all dedicated to making sure that we were all safe. So they looked in the yellow pages of the telephone book and called up churches. And invariably, the minister or his wife would answer, and the fac-

ulty would tell them who we were and where we were from and that we were on our way to do a performance at some school or whatever and then ask where we might find lodging. Invariably, the minister said "call me back" or "come." He would find three or four parishioners who were pleased to house us.

DENARD: This sounds very familiar. This kind of house-lodging continued right up through my high school years in the late 60s. We would go to conferences at other schools, and we stayed at people's homes. That's the way it happened; they never tried to get hotels. Instead, they had a registration table with a list of people's homes and addresses. So they didn't choose not to have the conference because they didn't have lodging. They just facilitated it with the help of the members of the church or others who were willing to offer their homes for the church.

MORRISON: Well when we went there, I thought that was fascinating, not because I wasn't accustomed to that kind of hospitality within the community, but because these were emergency circumstances it was like an underground railroad. This included places to eat. I remember when we were in Virginia and there was no restaurant in this tiny little town where we could eat at all. But one of the faculty members knew or had heard of a man who had been a chef in New York who was retired now. He didn't have a restaurant, but he cooked for guests in his house. And that was easily one of the best meals I've ever had.

DENARD: I'm sure. When we travel now, we often look for these small mom and pop kind of places in Black communities rather than the large restaurants so we can have what we still consider the "better" food.

MORRISON: And it was. The preserves they had canned, the biscuits were homemade. It was like eating at my grandmother's table.

DENARD: In the novels, the ambivalence that the migrant characters feel about the South rings so true. It rings true to the experiences that your parents had and that I had with my family. The ambivalence echoes the feelings that migrants expressed in letters to the *Chicago Defender* and ones collected by Emmet Scott, where repeatedly they said things like "I miss the folks down home, please send me vegetables and preserves," but they also said "there's no Jim Crow car, I can sit anywhere I want," or "here I can be a man or a woman with a decent paying job."

MORRISON: You give up a lot, you know, to take advantage or benefits of urban or working life elsewhere. The problem is trying to balance those two environments. Sidney doesn't want to live in Baltimore. And Pauline could not go back either. Some of the fault of the urban areas, it seems to me, was it took a longer time to become part of that community. Urban Blacks were very much

on the defensive. We used to joke about calling up relatives or friends in New York and they'd greet you by saying "where are you staying?"

DENARD: (Laughter) They were trying hard NOT to be southern. I wonder whether part of the tension of living in the North really was mediating between the way you remember yourself versus the new way you wanted to be. In every novel there is this tension, of course the saddest being Sethe's re-memory of Sweet Home in *Beloved*. There's Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and then there's Violet in *Jazz* who says it all—"I knew who I was before I came up here and got my mind all messed up." These instances point clearly to the tensions. No one has articulated that tension in literature in the kind of sustained way that you do in your fiction.

MORRISON: Maybe because they are mostly women who feel that tension in my books. When men come to the city, perhaps they feel more urgency to conquer and make their way out in the street, so to speak. For women, because they are domestic, they remember domestic support—friends, exchange of food, and so on—and they have difficulty trying to reproduce it in the urban North. In a very large city you have to pick your clan very carefully. In a small town like Lorain, it would just be easier to be near a city like Cleveland, but not in it.

DENARD: John Leonard said in his review of *Jazz*, that if you read a Morrison novel, "you know sooner or later she's going to go South." It may be, he says, "all the way back to antebellum or sometimes it's the trials and tribulations and the horrors," but it is also for what he calls "those ghostly waters and that bag of ancestral bones." When you start to write, in terms of character development, and in trying to say something about the characters' past and the impact of African-American history, of African-American identity and psychology, how important is the presence of the South in that development? Is it just drawing an authentic character and that's how they flesh out, or were you thinking first of placing the South self-consciously in the development of the character?

MORRISON: It starts with characters. When I think about the context in which to put a character, I think about the characters' preceding generation. I didn't want to create an "atom"—a family just sort of sitting there in a vacuum—which seemed to me to be at one time not just current in literature but demanded. In the 50s and 60s in certain literature certain authors preferred to create characters in isolation. Hemingway never writes about his character's families; Fitzgerald writes about family in terms of what a character is running away from. But it's all very much now—the woman they're falling in love with; the work they're doing at the moment. When they describe a region—Michigan or Paris—that's enough to give the narrative its context. For me, in doing

novels about African- Americans, I was trying very hard to move away from the unstated but overwhelming and dominant context that was white history and to move into another one. So in thinking about place and where these people come from, I did the inevitable thing because what I knew most about were the people I lived among and where they had come from and my own sense of what the place was like. I was trying to do a very modern novel and comment on what I thought were contemporary issues between Black men and women. Nevertheless, even in dealing with an orphan like Jadine—and although she despised being an orphan—at the same time she relished the freedom of not having any familial or cultural weights. But the people who did feel responsible for her—her aunt and her uncle—were themselves very much a product of the South even though they lived in splendor in a sense—as servants they lived a comfortable life.

DENARD: In *Sula*, there is less of a sense of an affective South. In most of the novels, both sides are shown—Cholly Breedlove remembering his humiliation with Darlene and his father on the one hand and Pauline remembering blackberry vines and lemonade on the other. Or Sidney priding himself in being a Philadelphia Negro while dreaming refreshing dreams of Baltimore. There are always both sides of the memory. *Sula*, however, seems to be the only novel where there is no affective memory of the South—except perhaps Nel who realizes some sense of herself as separate when she returns from the South when she say's "I'm me, I'm me," but it's not an affective memory of being in the South.

MORRISON: In that book—it was the second book I wrote—that culture was intact for me. It was like a moveable feast—you could take it anywhere, and you didn't have to identify geographically with anything because it was all there.

DENARD: So it works thematically not to bring in this other history.

MORRISON: It's almost as though it didn't matter where Black people were in the 20's and 30's. They were still operating under the aegis, or umbrella, of a culture that had probably been reconfigured in the new world in the South. Most of the major themes and threats I think had originated there.

DENARD: I often wonder whether this lack of an affective connection to the land or the community is some of the difficulty with *Sula*—with her trying to create an existential self and not really being able to do that. I think sometimes because she does not have that tie to the land or to something larger than her household, she flounders. There is the hint that she goes South to Nashville—although she doesn't seem to find anything there.

MORRISON: The enterprise of being a complete individual, which is what she wanted to be, is associated with—not necessarily bound to—the goals of solitariness. I am complete by myself or maybe with my friend. When I lose comfort in my solitude, I have nothing. She had few normal responses to collective things—at all—not to her neighbors, her hometown, her friend, not to her mother, not to anyone. I find her eccentric, but it was only by using a very eccentric character—for her time—that I could talk about the relationship between the two of them and give each of them something the other wanted a little bit of.

DENARD: *Sula* was the first novel that I read and surprisingly Medallion—a (northern) Ohio town—had great resonance for me. It was a lot like Black community life in the small southern town I grew up in. I have always been curious about that resonance, and I have wondered whether or not this is just Black resonance or southern resonance, or small community resonance. What do you think accounts for what I am calling the Black southern resonance that Medallion has?

MORRISON: The problem even now is the question of what's southern and what's Black, and as a writer I can't always figure it out. I just place things once I know where they ought to be. Even when I took Black people out of the United States altogether in *Tar Baby*, the dynamic still operated. Here you had Son who is a southern boy—who hadn't been there in a long time, but that's where he's from. All of his noble instincts about what women ought to be and what people ought to be come from that milieu. He didn't learn that in the Navy or at sea.

DENARD: In addition to the sustaining aspects of southern community life, there are also obviously aspects of the South that you think are repressive, or are obstacles for a full self-awareness. I am thinking specifically here of the women like Geraldine and Helene Wright in *The Bluest Eye*—those domestic women from southern towns like Mobile, Baton Rouge, and Meridian, whom you say are so prudish that they will not allow "the funk to erupt." Tell me about those women or those aspects of the South.

MORRISON: Well at that time I was thinking of the repression in the South for nefarious purposes, for pleasing White people—not for the health of the community. I meant those women who won't dance—not for religious reasons, but because they are afraid to express joy or sensual pleasure, because both are associated, in White culture, with lack of discipline. Maybe they've all died now. I remember a lot of them. They were very busy. The eye that looked at them was not another Black person's eye. It was a distant White eye that looked at them that they were aspiring to emulate or correct. That was what

I thought was sad—not the Southern regions from which they came, but how they absorbed the dominant culture. They could have come from Detroit.

DENARD: Most of the manifestations of the South in your work are of memory—an historical consciousness of the South that exists in their minds. Are there other places where or ways in which you are trying to bring in the South in your work? I remember, for example, the passage in *Jazz* when Joe Trace comes in to Felice's apartment when the other women are there, and there is that "pitch" in his voice that reminds them of people down South who sat on the porch and wore their hats—a southern, rural metaphor.

MORRISON: There may be a different sense of the South for men and women. I found Joe's incorporation of the South in the city different from Violet's. Even though they met there, they fell in love there, they got married and they left. Her memories are not good. He had terrible things happen to him as well in the South, but he does not feel devastated by the South.

DENARD: What about the language? Many reviewers talked about the Harlem community in *Jazz* as a place where women "quit" their husbands, as if "quit" were a word they had not heard before. It seemed very southern to me. Is "quit" one of those language hold overs from the South, or is it Black, or just old fashioned?

MORRISON: That's all I ever heard.

DENARD: It's all I ever heard.

MORRISON: "Did she quit him?" "Did he quit her?" "Yeah, they quit." That's just memory of the way we spoke. The only way you can hear it now is in song.

DENARD: As in "Please Don't Quit Me Baby"

MORRISON: Or "Hit Me, But Don't Quit Me." (Laughter) Can you imagine?

DENARD: Exploring the specificity of the words like that, that have been forgotten or gone out of use, is a good space for the criticism of your work.

MORRISON: I work at that, you know. To get the language that is particular, very particular. And I know I use words that contemporary authors or critics may not know, but I can't help that. It's hard to hear different varieties of English now because everybody talks like people on television. Even when you go to interview people, they sound like some version of themselves—the language becomes mass produced—their choice of words, all the clichés, and so on.

DENARD: What about what we might call 'southern ethics,' manners, expectations? You deal with this with some of your women characters—in *Sula*, although not in a southern setting, but more specifically in *Tar Baby*, where you have Jadine violate these ethics in a southern community.

MORRISON: Well there are some very interesting things happening with Black women and they are risky and experimental and were not all of four or five stereotypes. I've always thought that if Black women don't know it, it's not known really in the collective because they've had to know. They've experimented in existential ways, in collective ways, in urban sophisticated ways, in Pilate-Dead ways—they're always out there trying to figure out how to get it done—how to walk on water. And sometimes they're successful, sometimes they're not—more often not because that's the nature of being out front—that somebody's going to knock you down—and I don't want to say or even imply that these ventures of theirs necessarily have heavy consequences. But any explorer—spiritual explorer, geographic explorer, or somebody trying something different—is going to put oneself in danger. *Sula* is in danger, *Jadine* is in danger. It's a different kind of danger from, say, the one that *Eva* is in, but they're all in danger. They are the people with the least power in the body politic and at the same time with the most influence, and they are always searching for small escapes. There's a certain type of Black female adventurer that has nothing to do with going to war—or the big male type adventures. In order to function at the front lines you have to break rules, cross boundaries. Being a working, single parent without the protection of an extended family would require a shift in ethics. So would being a career woman on one's own in a foreign country.

DENARD: In the case of *Jadine* where she rejects those expectations of her, what could we say? In order to do the adventurous thing you have to give up something else, which you talk about with *Sula*—the Bessie Smiths, the blues-singing kind of woman who has to leave the community. How do you mediate those expectations of other generations or your small community as you go out on your adventure? Are there some adventures that are so necessary that we should no longer be held accountable to the expectations of the communities from which we come?

MORRISON: We are all accountable. *Jadine* is definitely accountable. What I'm trying to suggest is that she can be judged the way *Ondine* judges her. She tells her, "You have to learn how to be this person, and I failed you if you don't know it." While at the same time, an ideal person would have put those two expectations together, but I don't know who those people are. I don't know people who can be a success in the fashion world in Paris and come back and be comfortable in their small community. I'm sure they exist. But the point of

the book is to show how painful and difficult that is. You separate these entities so that you can look at them, then the reader has to figure out how he or she would mediate. It's not for me to solve that problem.

DENARD: But there is the implication that they need to be mediated.

MORRISON: Oh yes. You know I get a lot of flack about Jadine—why I seem to sympathize with Son, or how I did her a disservice. The point of writing the novel is to do everybody justice. But, she's apolitical, and she's very much in love with him; still she doesn't want to be like Ondine. She doesn't want to be a servant. She doesn't want to be dependent on a man.

DENARD: And even with the validity of that independence, she still has to negotiate.

MORRISON: Of course. She knows that.

DENARD: And she's already tried to negotiate the two worlds and the different expectations by going back to visit her aunt and uncle.

MORRISON: You're on the side of the women of Eloë. Some readers are furious with those Eloë women. That's what I meant when I said these readers think I have done her a disservice. They think that she should get out of there as fast as she can, and "what kind of man is he hanging her out the window; she should leave him alone." Because they are clip-clopping in New York, they don't want to be bothered with the rules of the women of Eloë. They really don't. They're into Louis Vuitton, and business, and security. You know, and I can't judge them, I can't condemn those women—well I can, but that's not my work.

DENARD: You do get the sense that Jadine is at least wrestling with this issue—that she is not callous.

MORRISON: Neither one of them is. They know what to do when it comes to love; they don't know what to do when it comes to cultural compromise. She's going back to zero, she says, when she goes back to Paris. "Let me start all over again." And he is trying to make a choice. I don't know where he's going—off to the mystic past or back to that house with Sidney. The nature of the metaphorical language suggests that he allows himself to stay in history—embalmed in history. But they can't make a life together until they straighten out these problems.

DENARD: As they work them out, however, neither of them is in Eloë.

MORRISON: No, no one is in Eloe.

DENARD: I want to go back to a point we talked about earlier—and that is the difference in writing *in* the South versus *about* the South—or an experiential South versus a reflective South. One of the interesting things about your work, and to some degree the works of other northern Black writers whose characters have moved North—John Wideman in *Damballah*, Rita Dove in *Thomas and Beluah*—are their reflective quality. How important do you think distance and memory are for being able to articulate—particularly an affective memory of the South?

MORRISON: I think distance is important even if you're in it. You need the distance in order to see. Whether you're not there or living in it, you establish a certain kind of distance anyway. I guess there are some people who have to be in it and write about it. But for me, I always find it necessary to have a kind of third eye about things so that you aren't overwhelmed by the details, so that you can control them. And also, it really is about vision. I do see places better when I'm not there. I don't always know what I'm seeing if I'm in a place. You're doing things and thinking things, but not selecting things. But when I leave it, it's clearer to me. Because what surfaces are some things I did not know that I was noticing at the time.

DENARD: That is the value, to me, of your novels, as a writer whose characters are from the South but not in the South. In a sustained way, in nearly every novel, there is some character who is remembering the South. So one gets this articulation through memory that one would not get otherwise. Do you think that Blacks who are still in the South, who never left, are as self-conscious about the South as a cultural homeplace as Blacks who left and went North and had to invoke their memories of it? Migrants often have a way of embellishing things and making us see our surroundings in ways that I don't think we would have without their reflective, outsider's vision. It seems to be the peculiar vision of those who left, and I wonder if that generation prior to integration—who did not leave and who were not part of the post-integration generation—ever focused reflectively in this way?

MORRISON: They probably didn't. They knew city ways versus country ways. The city was understood in those days as being always wicked; the city is always considered wicked no matter where you are, but also very modern. Now it is understood as very retrograde, because we have accepted a contemporary media version of what's in an inner city. It can be wholly false, however.

DENARD: I also wonder whether there are some Blacks in the North, some transplanted southerners, unlike your characters and unlike many of the migrants who wrote letters to their relatives in the South, who both seem to have

understood the tension or at least were able to articulate it, who are still wrestling with the tension of being a southern small-town person living in the urban north. They don't know the source of their tension, or perhaps they just can't name it?

MORRISON: Yes, but maybe less now. Some people pay lip service to it. And age makes a difference, too. But it's very scary for a lot of Black people—women in particular who want a career, marriage, children, who want everything we've always wanted, and sometimes they feel great pressure to leave home to get these things. There are more Sulas out there—but they may not be as mean as she is.

DENARD: What do you think that suggests for the future—where women are not so conscious of the past and not as reflective?

MORRISON: I don't know; I'm not sure. I have mixed feelings about it. I just like for women to do interesting stuff. I think the trajectory of Black women has been very different from the freed White women—in interesting ways. But more important than those differences, are the similarities and I like it although I know the risks; I know they're going to be very lonely. I know they're going to die like Sula, maybe not that young, but that's what happens.

DENARD: I know that there are many older couples who move back to the South when they retire. It's as though they've just been trying to live long enough to retire and go back.

MORRISON: Oh sure. Oh I would. If I were from the South, I'd go back.

DENARD: Why?

MORRISON: Oh it's nicer, it's cheaper than most places.

DENARD: Tell me about the new novel. This time you have people leaving the South traveling to the West. How does the South manifest itself in *Paradise*?

MORRISON: Well I'm not yet sure. They're moving from Louisiana to Oklahoma. Oklahoma is different; so much sky and the land is flat. I read a lot of newspapers about the people who went to Oklahoma. About soliciting people to settle Black towns all over Kansas and Oklahoma, particularly Oklahoma. And I got interested in one little sentence, which was in a column in one of the Black newspapers, encouraging people to move, work your own land, etc.; and it had an ad that said "Come prepared or not at all." It encouraged people to come with a year or two or three of supplies or money, so that if things didn't go right they would be able to take care of themselves. And the newspaper

articles indicated how many people came with fifteen thousand dollars and so on, but there was a little paragraph about two caravans of Black people who got to Boley or Langston, or one of those towns, and were turned away because they did not come prepared; they didn't have anything. So I thought about what it must feel like to make that trek, and be turned away by some Black people—maybe for good reasons but nevertheless turned away by Black people—because they were too ragged and too poor to come into their town and homestead. So I've taken that route—these people just go somewhere else. They're determined to make it, and they do. But it makes them very isolationist. They don't hurt anybody except themselves. It's a closed town. The novel is somewhat about that 'run' into Oklahoma, but it's very "inter." It's about conflicts within the race. Outside is whatever is out there. But this is a big story—I mean it's got a lot of people in it—but it's a very interior terrain. What that one town becomes after very revolutionary and hardworking activity to build it with no help. They're very separatist people.

DENARD: It sounds as though there are two moments that seem "unlike" the culture—first Blacks being turned away by Blacks, then that turning away, breeding more independence—more turning away.

MORRISON: That's right. But we have some of those communities here Separatist movements of people who wanted a whole state for themselves or wanted to return to Africa. Oklahoma was one of those states. But these people don't cultivate any romance about Africa. I also wanted to explore unpopular ideas about the difference between liberation and conservation. The liberation movement, the movement to free oneself to be completely independent—as a community not as an individual—is marvelous. But how one moves from liberation to conservation is what I explore. How you can make a liberatory gesture and how it can make you end up as the world's most static conservative. These are also very religious people. They do not want to hear anything from the outside. The outside is hell, is Babylon to them. They don't want anything stirring up, they don't want any civil rights, they don't want any of that.

DENARD: Would you say that this is a 90's book—a book we need for now. *Beloved*, for example, was about slavery but written in 1987, and it spoke to some really present issues. Many readers realized in reading *Beloved* that some ghosts of the past had not been put to rest, had not been faced, and in many ways the book was redemptive for the present generation. What will we meditate on in *Paradise*, or are you ready to say yet?

MORRISON: Well, a number of things. It stops in 1975. There is conflict between the sort of the 60's and 70's mentality, and an older mentality. These days we say everybody loved Martin Luther King, but they didn't. Right now.

other things have happened; he has survived as a man with a powerful message and a powerful mind. While he was around, however, there were a lot of people who thought he was a demagogue. The students from SNCC took issue with him. I'm not trying to destroy what has survived, but it's no good to paper over these kind of Du Bois versus Washington splits. They just reconfigure themselves in other ways, and they're much more complicated now. And I just want to talk about the inevitability of—well I want to suggest something about negotiation that is applicable for the 90s. There are a lot of neo-cons, a lot of activists, a lot of pacifists, people for integration, people against integration, who are still out there. These are still current issues, and people change their minds on them a lot. And part of that is seeded in, or many of these ideas are seeded in, *Paradise*.

DENARD: How does religion function in *Paradise*?

MORRISON: There are lots of conflicts in the book, and religion is one. Not religious believers versus non-believers so much as what turns out to be conflict between politics and faith. What does a young minister go through who is very political with other ministers who are not? The point is faith without politics or politics without faith. They oppose one another—sometimes arguing—sometimes they're just wary of the person who is introducing new ideas. Thurgood Marshall went to Norman, Oklahoma to do this case for the NAACP in 1947. They were building separate rooms for the law students, for the Black graduate students who could not go to the University of Oklahoma. The law said separate but equal, and they were going to build a whole new section of the law school for Blacks. You know people have forgotten. I don't think this generation knows at all what was going on in 1947 as far as Civil Rights are concerned. They think it all began in the 60s. It's interesting to me to re-examine that period—50s, 60s, and 70s era. Black people made a lot of money in this period right after the war. Yet, that was the moment of Emmett Till in 1955. When Blacks do well, Whites get very nervous.

DENARD: We don't hear of the successes as much. We hear mostly the anger. So we can't appropriate anything but the anger.

MORRISON: So it's hard going really. There's a lot of research involved. And I haven't done it all. I've done some of the research enough to move through a draft of the narrative, and I've been to Oklahoma, but the part I'm moving toward in the novel is very different. You can see the sky from here, over to there, so Oklahomans have a very fecund imagination.

DENARD: That's going to be very different for you. You've had sycamore trees, champion daisy trees, hills, robins—all very lush settings in the earlier novels.

MORRISON: Yes, very different. I've found a lot of subtle variety, but there is that unrelenting sky. It's a great place for religion, too. There are churches everywhere. You know you have liquor stores in Washington and banks in New York—a bank on every corner in New York. Well in Oklahoma there are churches—two or three in a block, or just a large parking lot in the middle of nowhere and a nice church that people will go long distances to attend. In the little town of the novel there are three churches: a Methodist, a Baptist, and a Pentecostal.

DENARD: Is it based on Boley?

MORRISON: No, it's not Boley. It's a new town. The old town they remember was a 1908-1950 town. But that one has collapsed. And these are just some veterans who have gone off to do it again.

DENARD: Well, I have just two more questions and one of them has to do with the place of the South in our understanding of the African diaspora. When you reviewed Albert Murray's *South to a Very Old Place* in 1972, you first complimented him that he had found new avenues for exploring the Black sense of belonging to the South—talking to Blacks and southern White liberals like C. Vann Woodward, Robert Penn Warren, Hodding Carter—but you also criticized the book because Murray stopped the connection to the South in the "American South"—in his case, in Mobile Alabama. You suggested in the end of that review that Blacks will never understand their history if they think that it begins and ends in Mobile, Alabama—that there is a place older and 'souther' in Black American history than Mobile. Given that the South does operate in some way in your novels as home, although it is in fact not the first or the oldest home for African-Americans as your review points out, how would you describe the place of the South in the African Diaspora? What does it mean, should it mean, to us as African Americans?

MORRISON: Well for us it's home, I guess, in the sense that it was the first stop when we left the ancient home—and sure there was the Santa Domingo and Caribbean thing—but it was. . . . You see my struggle with the South is to keep it from being just the old place, and what I was trying to say, even in that review, is that what Black people did in this country was brand new. Even if they did it a long time ago. These people were very inventive, very creative, and that was a very modern situation. It was, philosophically, probably the earliest 19th-century modernist existence. And out of thrown things they invented everything: a music that is the world's music, a style, a manner of speaking, a relationship with each other, and more importantly, psychological ways to deal with it. And no one gives us credit for the intelligence it takes to be forced into another culture, be oppressed, and make a third thing. Other cultures who get moved like that die or integrate: or because they're White, they don't even

integrate, they disappear into the dominant culture. That never happened to us; I think we would have wanted it because it was better than being isolated and so on. But in view of that, in spite of that, they made something else. For me, jazz was the moment when Blacks took the country over in terms of its tone—not its money, not its business—but it was all in its blood by then, it was all there. So what happened to African Americans is not what happened to Africans in Africa—more like what happened to Africans in South Africa, but not even that because that was their home. But this is a whole new experience—and it is a modern experience. So that there is some modernity and some grasp on the future that the South holds more than any other place. Although I understand the nostalgia about it being everybody's past, and the good old days, and ma and pa and grandpa and so on. But for me the actual thing that was going on was this wholly modern thing.

DENARD: So it was a starting point, the site of modernity for the Africans who came as slaves. I don't think many people have thought about it in quite that way. That has been an essential question for me. What is the larger more philosophical, metaphorical way even—to think about the South and its meaning to African Americans than just as "down home?"

MORRISON: Yes, there is some way to make it down home but to also make it this jet—it was a rocket too. You have to get rid of the look, the look of it—I don't mean the Atlanta look. I mean the look of the South in the eyes and minds of certain folks is mansions and little houses, a slower pace, and all of that, and I think that's true in parts of Africa, as well as in the art.

DENARD: Do you think the South is where we claim our Americanness? Is the South the native ground beginning for us in the same sense of where we began the modern experiment?

MORRISON: It's where the modern experiment begins, oh yes, there's no question about that. But I don't think people understand that though. I think when Black people think about the South, they think of it as down home.

DENARD: Where what is modern is not happening.

MORRISON: (Laughter) Yes, we started there, but we left to go where it is happening.

DENARD: But starting there is very important, given what we were dealing with when we arrived.

MORRISON: Yes. My mother always said something, and I'm sure it's not true, but I haven't figured it out yet. She said "No Black leader would ever appear who wasn't from the South." And I said, "I beg your pardon." And she said, "Who?". I couldn't think of any people. No northern Black had produced

one Black leader—that activism and modernity begins in the South. Whatever happens to it ultimately originates there.

DENARD: One of the things that has been so fruitful for me as a Black southerner in this exploration has been the possibility that finally we can claim the South on our own terms. Historically, it has been filled with the metaphors of the Confederacy, and the signs of the White South. Whites have always been in the subject position when it comes to the South.

MORRISON: Well Whites have been thinking about it exclusively as their history. There was no history for Whites in the South other than the South. Although some promoted and romanticized their connection to Scotland or whatever. For Black people it was their past but not their history. Their history was someplace else. What they did with their past is to create something brand new. I think the South is now, finally, getting close to the edge of the modern world because Black people are there. Once White people gave up the legal claim to the things they were doing—killing Blacks, bullying them, and pushing White supremacy, ideologically and personally—they stopped to see what was in their best interest. Then and only then, did it become a modern part of the world.

DENARD: What difference do you think it would make if we knew the cultural and philosophical meaning of the South collectively? Do you think we'd all move back to the South or would we all claim Americanness and stop gestures of separatism?

MORRISON: We wouldn't have to think about it in those tired old ways—as your greens are better than any other greens—or like my mother and father. My father wouldn't have to go back there every year in order to refresh his soul. My mother wouldn't have to stay away because something was scaring her even though she was talking about it as though it were paradise.

DENARD: And that's what happens in *Beloved* and *Jazz*. The characters don't go back; Milkman goes back, but Violet and Joe Trace finally are able to negotiate it right there in Harlem. And Sethe and Paul D say in *Beloved* that we have more past than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow.

MORRISON: And their daughter is going to Oberlin College. Denver, the last person you'd think would ever leave the house.

DENARD: The clearest indication that the next generation will be alright.

MORRISON: I hope that's right.

MYTH, METAPHOR, AND MEMORY IN TONI MORRISON'S RECONSTRUCTED SOUTH

It's time to start all over make a new beginning
... We need to make new symbols Make new signs
Make a new language With these we'll redefine
the world And start all over ...
—Tracy Chapman

What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?
—Violet Trace

Definitions belong to the definers ...
—*Beloved*

Sula, Toni Morrison's second novel, begins with a myth—or, as the residents of Medallion call it, “a nigger joke”—that explains how Black people ended up “in the Bottom.” The story goes this way:

A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy—the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, “Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile.”

“But it's high up in the hills,” said the slave.

“High up from us,” said the master, “but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is.”

So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. He preferred it to the valley. And it was done. The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter. (*Sula* 4)

As a “joke,” this legend relays the historical specifics of one slave's dispossession; as a myth, however, it inscribes emblematically the historical explanation for real-life socio-economic outcomes of American Blacks after the Civil War. Real life ex-slaves and their descendants, like *Sula*'s slave, were also “swindled” out of their fair share of the promised land by Anglo-America's politics, greed and “semantic trickery.” Denied the rights and privileges of authentic “American identity,” post-Bellum Blacks were encouraged to yearn

for something other than power and the "rich and fertile" land Whites coveted and possessed. Discourses of slavery and Reconstruction mythifying the North (and Heaven) as the land of promise and equality for African Americans encouraged Blacks to defer their desires to some other place and some other time. Consequently, as identity is derived from land—even land with a "rocky" past—African American national identity was also, like the promise of land, deferred and circumscribed by these social and historical myths.

In addition to its allegorical significance, the Bottom myth reveals the convoluted ways in which narrative use and interpretation are bound by (among other factors) culture—depicted in this scenario simply as "race." That Medallionites, Black and White, consider the story to be a "joke" suggests not only that they interpret social reality differently but also that they interpret and employ (historic) narratives for different ends. Of the "nigger joke" Morrison writes,

It was the kind of joke white folks tell when the mill closes down and they're looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn't come, or comes for weeks, and they're looking for a little comfort somehow (*Sula* 4-5).

This myth then deconstructs traditional narratives of history that, by design, inscribe and legitimize the Anglo-American's hegemony and perspective. Black Bottomites actuate a discourse of resistance that uses the historic narrative to subvert and transcend their cultural domination—cultural domination that the mainstream's historic narratives are conceived to impose. For them, the "joke"—a culturally specific interpretation of circumstance that allows them not only to use humor to withstand "whitepeople" and misfortune but also to achieve some measure of respite from the base condition to which they have been relegated—is really a joke on their oppressors. In other words, they signify on the white folks' invented "joke" by employing their own semantic trickery that assuages their imposed feelings of inferiority while encoding themselves as culturally viable people, rather than as the downtrodden victims of racism and its discourses. This form of signifying, a folk tradition in African American culture, resonates throughout Morrison's *oeuvre*.

Morrison's fictions use a form of semantic trickery to constitute a discourse of resistance. In the novels, she uses fictive narratives to transfigure the old South—the bedrock of Black dehumanization, degradation, and sorrow—into an archetypal Black homeland, a cultural womb that lays a mother's claim to history's orphaned, defamed, and disclaimed African children. Son Green's memories of Eloe, Florida and its embracing hospitality best signify the kind of South-as-home Morrison's fictions employ. He recalls "a short street of yellow houses with white doors which women opened wide and called out, 'Come on in here, you honey you,' their laughter sprawling like a quilt over the command" (*Tar Baby* 6). Thus, memories of the South in the novels

are interchangeable with those of the African American's ancestral home. The South Morrison conceives is "new," in that it encodes the vital roles Black people have played in creating the American story—the roles mainstream discourses have ignored or misrepresented, as she contends in her literary criticism *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. By employing this signification either to describe or to imply a Southern socio-cultural reality peopled, constructed, and maintained by and for African Americans, Morrison places Black people at the center of America's historical record of the South.

By positioning the Black South that she invents as the central cultural foundation for and geographic backdrop to her fictions, Morrison subverts the authority of history's master narrative by asserting African-American subjectivity. The narratives encode an important paradigm shift, as the Bottom myth affirms. They seem to renegotiate the boundaries of time and place in accounting for the African's American identity. The novels are based upon (but do not recount) a history that inches forward in time to the point just beyond the African's traumatic rupture with Africa caused by the Middle Passage.¹ For Africans, as for other American immigrants, landing in America marks the beginning of a new identity and the ending of an old one. Thus, by regarding America (particularly the South) rather than Africa as the "home" in this land for Black people—that is, their "homeland"—they automatically become rightful heirs to America's legacy in the same way other immigrants, including indentured servants, have done. It is important to note that the first attempts to settle this country were located in the area that would later be known as the South. And, that American settlement—its nation building—was made possible, to no small degree, by the work of African slaves. As a consequence, therefore, America is now, as the novels imply, the indisputable "home" of Americanized Africans—a nation they helped to build with their blood, sweat, and tears. Morrison's fictional historiographies reflect this inclusive paradigm shift.

This paper examines how Morrison uses fictional narratives to inscribe the cultural meaning that Blacks themselves gave to their American experience—a discursive necessity she examines in *Playing in the Dark*. Following the lead of the old, blind, wise-woman in Morrison's Nobel acceptance speech, this interrogation "shift[s] attention away from assertions of power" to examine "the instruments through which that power is exercised" (12)—narratives which tell another version of the American story. I offer that Morrison, employing language's "nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties" (15), reinvents the American South to supplant racist discourses of Black exclusion. The "new South" she encodes provides a context for a discourse of inclusion—a discourse that signifies on the African American's cultural investments in and contributions to this country—that acknowledges Black national identity. Ultimately, her novels play their own "joke," as this cultural critique will reveal,

on the agents of Anglo-America's discursive hegemony who presume words and their definitions—specifically words like “home,” “homeland,” “the South,” and “America”—belong to them, the definers.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison critiques mainstream fictions that systematically erase and distort the African American's presence in and contributions to “the American saga.” Her novels subvert the cultural authority of canonical dissimulations by reconstructing the received meaning of the American South as myth, metaphor, and memory. Master narratives that mythify the Anglo-American's investments in building this country fail to acknowledge similar African American contributions. These master narratives present Black people (and various racial and cultural others) as virtual “aliens in residence.” Even though the African's roots were planted in this land during the sixteenth century, canonical discourses contend that African Americans were (and continue to be) merely “present” while “Americans” brought forth a new nation, tamed a “wilderness,” and perfected “civilization.” Morrison redresses Black exclusion from the national memory by divulging an American “history” the mainstream *disremembers*. Her novels can be read as fictive cultural documentaries that recall and record America's past using African American historiography—cultural “truths” heretofore encoded and preserved orally in personal and communal recollections, rememories, fables, folktales, music, gossip, humor, and lore. Morrison's novels—narratives that place the Black past at the center of the American chronicle—supplement or perhaps negate those mainstream histories and fictions that marginalize, trivialize or exclude the African American from their accounts.

In order to place Black people at the conceptual center of stories about the American past, they must be depicted as subjects, that is, as generative and creative change-agents, rather than as objects, or victims of hegemonic agency and control, as master narratives have traditionally portrayed them. Even when the mainstream's narratives feature Black people, the characters are rarely constructed (or understood) apart from their subordinate relationship to Anglo-Americans. Their subject status is subverted, then, insofar as mainstream histories and fictions gainsay and conceal Black agency and industry in American myths.

For example, canonical histories rarely acknowledge that before the “American Adam” began to carve a new “Eden” out of the “wilderness” Europeans “discovered,” Black people had already explored and settled this land. Primary historical documents show that Blacks, willingly and unwillingly, numbered among the first discoverers, explorers, and settlers of this then unchartered territory. Black sailors, for instance, accompanied New World explorers Columbus in 1492², Balboa in 1513³, and Cortez in 1519⁴, on their expeditions. In 1619, a year before this country's celebrated Pilgrim forefathers landed at Plymouth Rock, twenty Negro indentured servants landed at Jamestown, Virginia. When their terms of service ended, they were released and allowed to

purchase land like any other European settler⁵. Earlier still, in 1526, less well known Spanish explorer Lucas Vasquez de Ayllén, used the labor of one hundred African slaves to establish a settlement of five hundred Spaniards in what would later become South Carolina⁶. When the Blacks rebelled, killing many of their masters, the remaining 150 Whites retreated to Haiti, leaving the slaves behind. The Blacks were absorbed into tribes of indigenous peoples in the interior, making them and their children more authentically "American," it would seem, than the settlers who would later adopt the moniker. In short, Americans of African descent—be they enslaved, indentured, or free—have been an integral but neglected part of the "American genesis."

Enslavement, Morrison warns, is not the only way to deprive Black people of their cultural reality, identity or history. She demonstrates in *Playing in the Dark*⁷ that America's master narratives have historically purloined Black cultural reality—past and present—by ignoring, misrepresenting, or worse, misunderstanding the African American they seek to describe. Their misconceptions may, in fact, be "disconceptions" since canonical discourses—both fictive and non-fictive—do not recognize African Americans as equally human or capable. Having at one point decreed Blacks to be "the white man's burden" because they were only three-fifths human, America's master narratives are unlikely even now to see or record the African American favorably or objectively. Master narratives are designed to establish and to maintain a hegemonic hierarchy that, tautologically, legitimizes its own power to define, in this case, who is "American" (who is "human") and who is not. In other words, these hegemonic narratives are devised to deny Blacks (and "cultural others") the very privileges and powers they insure Whites.

It should come as no surprise then that traditional history disavows that slaves and the descendants of slaves have contributed significantly to the making of American culture. In this way, the Mainstream demonstrates its ethnocentrism: Black "feats" are not important, only White ones are. Mainstream accounts of African Americans (particularly those in the South) focus their narrative sights on racist oppression and the interracial enmity, dissidence, and strife Blacks experienced during Slavery, Reconstruction, the War years, and the Civil Rights Era. These social and historical descriptions do not seem to consider that African Americans also had personal and interior lives or communal concerns, responsibilities, and relationships that existed apart from white people and white domination. Morrison's "myths" correct this misinterpretive vision. Claiming to employ objectivity as a critical lens, master narratives obscure historic "truth" by evoking the reader's affect. In asking us to substitute pity for homage or, in some instances, contempt for understanding, they objectify and trivialize America's Black past. Generally, master narratives mythify African Americans as hapless pawns in or victims of Anglo-America's industry, while summarily ignoring their personal contributions to and investments in these outcomes.

