



The Bloomsbury Handbook to  
**TONI MORRISON**

Edited by Kelly L. Reames & Linda Wagner-Martin

BLOOMSBURY

THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK TO  
TONI MORRISON

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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# Toni Morrison's Female Epistemology: Post-Nationalism, Diaspora, and Postcolonial Futures in *Tar Baby*, *Mouth Full of Blood*, and *Paradise*

JUSTINE BAILLIE

Toni Morrison has been considered primarily as a writer concerned to recover the ancestor in charting specifically African American histories, and yet contemporary theorizations of diaspora, cosmopolitanism, and transnationalism may now be employed to illuminate her work as both novelist and as public intellectual. For example, we can approach her fourth novel *Tar Baby* (1981) as being Morrison's presentation of a female protagonist, Jadine Childs, an emblematic transnational figure, one who eventually returns to Paris, the site of diasporic transnationalism, to engage at last with her diasporic, female identity.<sup>1</sup> It is in *Tar Baby*, set in the period in which it was written, that Morrison anticipates twenty-first-century debates around identity and what it means to be a Black, educated, and mobile woman. In this regard, Morrison's reflections in her essays and addresses on feminism, education, and postcolonialism, brought together in *Mouth Full of Blood* (2019), also help enable nuanced readings of *Tar Baby* and offer new possibilities for diasporic futures. In this chapter, I am concerned, firstly, with Morrison's engagement with Black

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<sup>1</sup>Toni Morrison, herself, in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" emphasizes the significance of the ancestor in the African American writing tradition. Ancestors are "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" and without whom we are "lost" (62-3). Readings of *Tar Baby*, that valorize the ancestor, tradition, and the folk, include Keith Byerman, claiming that the novel marks a positive "immersion into the black folk world" (84), Judylyn Ryan arguing that "the novel convincingly discredits Jadine's agenda ... because it is undergirded by a materialist and self-alienating consciousness which recommends selling one's cultural inheritance" (83). Marilyn Sanders Mobley notes that Jadine's "sense of self is based on a denial of her own cultural heritage" (135). J. Brooks Bouson writes that "part of the text's mission is to undermine Jadine's elitist attitudes and put her in vital contact with her African-American roots" (118). Criticism more sympathetic toward Jadine includes Elliot Butler-Evans acknowledging "the need for Black women to construct their own identities without having to submit to a dominant myth of racial authenticity" (157). Pelagia Goulimari recognizes Jadine's "rejection" of an "essence of black womanhood predicated on sexuality and fertility" (77) and regards Son as espousing a "black essentialism" (74).

nationalism in the post-civil rights era of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as represented in the gendered "contentions" (*Tar Baby*, Epigraph) between Jadine, the assimilationist Black model and Son, the Black nationalist. I also consider Morrison's nonfiction, as collated in *Mouth Full of Blood*, and the ways in which Morrison mediates marginalized, peripheral knowledge into an effective and counter epistemology to challenge established hegemonic knowledge claims and nationalisms. I conclude by arguing that Morrison's critique of Black nationalism, first evident in *Tar Baby*, becomes the main concern of her *fin de siècle* novel, *Paradise* (1998).

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine's resistance to female ancestral tradition leaves Morrison's character open to criticism as an inauthentic individualist committed to a career in the vanguard of consumer capitalism, a career she pursues at the expense of her community and its history. Thus, early readings of *Tar Baby* generally viewed the novel as constituting Morrison's own critique of her protagonist; yet such interpretations may now be inflected with understanding of the diverse positionalities of diasporic experience as expressed in contemporary debates about authenticity, tradition, transnationalism, and the relationship between the individual and community. As Yogita Goyal put it in 2006: "Viewing Morrison through diaspora theory does not simply involve reading her work retroactively, but recognizing that her turn to the black diaspora in *Tar Baby* accompanies growing interest in diaspora and helps us define its conceptual coordinates more effectively" (395). Reading *Tar Baby* in this way, Jadine's rejection of Son's monocultural perspective, as expressed through his valorization of the ancestral past and his idealizations of Black womanhood, allows us to signal Jadine's own mobile, diasporic indeterminacy as being anti-essentialist and cosmopolitan. It is toward the end of the novel that Jadine, having been shaken from her complacent position of privileged entitlement by Son's arrival on the Isle des Chevaliers, contemplates her heritage, not when in America, or in the Caribbean, but while in Paris, where she had earlier been "derailed" by an African woman in yellow, a figure representative of authentic blackness (*Tar Baby* 42-4). For Faith Avery, Jadine's "return to Europe suggests a cultural re-approachment that is not available to her in the United States or the transitive space of the Isle des Chevaliers" (7).

*Tar Baby* is also an island narrative, a biopolitical text in which nature is feminized by the presence of the wild and ancient swamp women who threaten to drag Jadine back to her ancestral past, and who also serve, metaphorically, as indicative of how man's exploitation and rationalization of the natural world have distorted the ecosystem of the Caribbean. Once a flowing river, the swamp has now become a repository for the psychosis brought to the island by imperial and colonial expansion: "Poor insulated, brokenhearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Vieilles. And witch's tit it was; a shrivelled fog bound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near" (8). Here, Morrison evokes a connection between environmental destruction and the receding authority of those women in possession of "ancient properties" (308) women to whom she in fact dedicates *Tar Baby*. To respect such properties as being expressive of a historical, originary trauma and its manifestations in diasporic experience, but without becoming entrapped or overdetermined by them, is the tension that runs throughout Morrison's reclamation of the *Tar Baby* story by which she is, in her own words, in her essay, "The Writer Before the Page," "recollecting the told story. Refusing to read a modern or westernized version of it" (268).<sup>2</sup> Jadine's individualistic quest

<sup>2</sup>Craig Werner notes that Morrison "apprehends myth both as a tool of Euro-American power and as a reservoir of historical knowledge capable of resisting that power" (151). For a wider discussion of Morrison's use of folklore, see Trudier Harris (1991).



means she is indifferent to such properties and to any insight they may bequeath and, thereby, impervious to the imperious culture of Valerian Street's household and its command over the Isle des Chevaliers. Indeed, she returns to the island in the hope of dispelling the disturbance brought by her encounter, as a successful model living in Paris, with the African woman in a supermarket in the nineteenth arrondissement, only to be confronted, once on the island, by the same sticky substance—her "skin like tar" (*Tar Baby* 42)—the woman represents. Dressed in canary yellow and with tribal markings scored into her cheeks, she appears again and again in Jadine's consciousness, possessed of transcendent beauty and grace that speak, as she disappears from Jadine's view, of "a moment before the cataclysm, when all loveliness and life and breath in the world was about to disappear" (43). Morrison reclaims and inverts the tar baby myth by turning the negative image of the tar baby as a racial slur into one in which tar becomes invested with sacred and positive racial qualities, albeit essentialized in ways that threaten Jadine's modern constructions and affirmations of herself. Jadine resists contact with her racial past as she is fearful of sticking to it, of losing "the person she had worked hard to become" (264). Trapped in tar, Jadine resists the permanent embrace of the ancestors, represented this time by the tree women of the swamp on the Isle de Chevaliers:

This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant—mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (184)

### AUTHENTICITY

In the nineteenth arrondissement, before her flight to the Caribbean, Jadine assumes a mask of authenticity when choosing her dinner party recipe ingredients in a district of Paris heavily populated by subjects of the African diaspora.<sup>3</sup> Her reaction to the woman in yellow is so extreme precisely because, when shopping in the nineteenth arrondissement, Jadine believes she is being authentic, her ingredients the last word in world cuisine, but which are in fact culled from recipes in glossy magazines (*Tar Baby* 41). Her performance is suddenly exposed by the woman in yellow, leaving Jadine with the suspicion that she is "inauthentic" (45). This is a consequence of her position as an international model in a world becoming increasingly globalized and in which diverse diasporic identities, by the early 1980s, already existed in close enough proximity to threaten either the retreat into essentialized cultural identities, or its opposite, the assimilation of the diasporic subject into western metropolitan centers. Jadine believes her choice is a binary one, limited to either "blackening up or universalizing out" (62); she cannot, of course, benefit from the insight afforded by those postcolonial theorizations of authenticity, difference, and subjectivity that emerged in the 1990s. For Homi Bhabha, for example, a meaningful, politically engaged, postcolonial subjectivity

<sup>3</sup>In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" Morrison writes, "The Tar Baby tale seemed to me to be about masks ... For Son, the most effective mask is none. For the others the construction is careful and delicately borne, but the masks they make have a life of their own and collide with those they come in contact with" (193).

can be initiated by thinking “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and [focusing] on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1), and he goes on to emphasize that the “presentation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (2). Unable to revel in her hybridity, nor assume a politicized consciousness that would position her as existing within Bhabha’s space of “in-betweeness,” Jadine instead remains an orphan, forever inauthentic, or so she herself believes, once her self-constructions had dissolved before the “powerful” (*Tar Baby* 42) eyes of the African woman in the supermarket.

Shopping for ingredients, Jadine appropriates the cultural heritage of diasporic others for her dinner party menu, and, indeed, the African woman is, fleetingly, another of Jadine’s appropriations, just one more element in her Parisian fantasy of authenticity; the woman in yellow, however, deflects Jadine’s gaze with the resistant “force” (*Tar Baby* 44) of her own stare, assured of her “unphotographable” beauty and confidence as “mother/sister/she,” a “woman’s woman” possessed of “ancient properties” that threaten to overwhelm Jadine (41–4). As the woman in yellow resists appropriation, it is Jadine herself, the exoticized “copper Venus” (115), the literal and metaphorical orphan, without either a secure sense of self or the sustenance of maternal tradition, who must, therefore, reinvent herself. This Parisian encounter is the catalyst for Jadine’s existential crisis, the point of fracture in her existence as a postmodern, postcolonial subject, the life before and life after the episode. Jadine must now confront life after the “cataclysm” (43), as she becomes newly conscious of her racial heritage as a Black woman and must now understand the present as that which the past has bequeathed, history accounted for in a revelatory moment in time for Jadine as an orphan of the diaspora. As the “loveliness” (43) of her old world evaporates, so too do the certainties and affirmations of her private education and life of privilege as she senses the weight of the past as embodied by the ancestral-like figure of the woman in yellow.

The complexities of ancestral return are evoked by Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (2007) in which she describes her journey along Ghana’s slave route as a “returnee” African American woman in search of an ancestral past and identity:

Circling back to times past, revisiting the routes that might have led to alternative presents, salvaging the dreams unrealized and defeated, crossing over to parallel lives. The hope is that *return* could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss re-makes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home. (100, emphasis in original)

Jadine remakes herself repeatedly throughout *Tar Baby* and, on visiting Son’s hometown in the American South, she learns that to return will not in itself resolve the dilemmas of identity with which she struggles. Again, as Hartman puts it, “To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past” (85). For Ondine, who has raised her niece, Jadine’s motherlessness does not mean she cannot be a “daughter,” and yet, knowing how to be a daughter is a necessary precondition for learning how to be a “real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women” (*Tar Baby* 283). Crucially, “A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (283).

Jadine returns to the island, however, not to find herself, but for a vacation, to consider her career, and to decide whether she should marry the besotted white European man, Ryk. She will only *play* the role of daughter to Sydney and Ondine and that of companion to Margaret, Valerian's wife, but Son's arrival disrupts her plans and unsettles her self-image. Morrison asks of the reader to consider whether we accept Ondine's privileging of the maternal as the route to self-knowledge, endorse Son's valorizations of the ancestor Thérèse as the essence of Black authenticity, or validate Jadine's mobility and economic independence, her transnational adventure by which she spans continents and transcends nationhood. Speaking just before the publication of *Tar Baby* to the young female students of Barnard College, in an address, "Cinderella's Stepsisters," Morrison recognizes female ambition as empowering but suggests that "we pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition. You are moving in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to free somebody else. You are moving toward self-fulfillment, and the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that there is something just as important as you are" (111–12).

Morrison leaves Jadine without such a nurturing sensibility, but perhaps moving toward a freedom that is not dependent upon economic and professional stability, but rather an unsteady, risky freedom achieved through self-knowledge. As Morrison tells her female audience: "In your rainbow journey towards a realization of personal goals, don't make choices based only on your security and your safety" ("Cinderella's Stepsisters" 112). Returning finally to Paris, Jadine recalibrates, accepts risk, and may yet find her way to such a consciousness (*Tar Baby* 292). Morrison makes clear in her lecture, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," that *Tar Baby* is about safety, about risk, and its gains and losses; "Safety itself is the desire of each person in the novel. Locating it, creating it, losing it" ("Unspeakable" 193). Indeed, the novel begins with Son's misplaced sense of security, "He believed he was safe" (*Tar Baby* 1), an opening line that evokes the indeterminacy and ambivalence underlying *Tar Baby*, a device by which Morrison exposes the contingency of diasporic existence. By the end of *Tar Baby*, both Jadine and Son embrace risk and uncertainty, in their own ways, and it is risk itself that Morrison endorses, not the wildness of the briar patch nor the flight to cosmopolitan Paris, neither character fixed in history or geography and their proscriptions. Morrison conveys new possibilities for African Americans negotiating identity and freedom in ways no longer exclusively inscribed by the traumas of slavery, the essentializations of *Négritude* and pan-Africanism, or the collective solidarity of the civil rights movement. New possibilities arise for the mobile cosmopolitan subject, and the novel ends with Jadine contemplating her reinvention, not within the feminized currents of the sea, in which Son himself is reborn, but instead flying through the air aboard a flight bound for Paris where she will, after all, "tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her. No more shoulders and limitless chests. No more dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing—the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for" (292; emphases in original).

### THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Paris, as a city of "diasporic convergence" (Braddock and Eburne 2) is the appropriate site for a reinvention that necessitates Jadine's conscious reengagement with that represented by the woman in yellow—namely, Africa as the source from which the complexities of diasporic being

originate. The imperial and colonial incursions of France into both Africa and the Caribbean, and consequent circulations of diasporic generations, has seen Paris evolve as the capital of the Black Atlantic: "From the Haitian revolution to the war for Algerian independence, the role of Paris as the metropolitan seat of colonial power has been necessarily complemented, and contested, by the forms of agitation and dissent that have circulated through it" (3). Jadine knows her options in America are proscribed by race, limited to marriage, modeling, or school teaching, whereas Europe offers her a "fourth choice" (*Tar Baby* 226). What this choice may be remains open for Jadine, her future as yet undetermined in all its possible multiplicities, except that of its transnationality. It does, however, entail her confrontation with the artifice of her Parisian existence, and, by extension, her encounter with the "black as tar" woman is revelatory as to the artifice of Paris itself, a city built on colonial adventure, consumer capitalism, and exoticizations of the Black female body in its literature and figurative art. What at first appears as a Baudelairian encounter with the "passerby" in Paris, in its apparently transitory passivity, becomes instead the catalyst for Jadine's confrontation of herself. Jadine cannot move on as Parisian *flâneur* and simply forget the fleeting encounter; rather, she becomes mired in the "ancient properties" that radically destabilize her sense of self. Tyler Stovall, while mindful of the complexities of the African American presence in Paris, nevertheless concludes, in *Paris Noir*, that migration to the French capital has proffered African Americans both escape from, and critique of, American racial structures:

The idea of Paris as a city that receives blacks with dignity and respect should be considered not just a statement of objective reality (although much evidence supports it), but equally as a conceptual strategy for criticizing continued discrimination in the United States. Color-blind Paris is a city of the mind, a legendary place of refuge whose boundaries correspond only in part to those of earthly urbanity. As long as racial hierarchies remain central to life in America, the importance of the black expatriate experience as a symbolic escape from, and critique of, racism will endure. (Stovall 300)<sup>4</sup>

Jadine, viewed from a transnational perspective, now comes into focus as a figure of the Black Atlantic, situated by Morrison in a cultural, historical, and geographical arena necessarily heterogeneous in its accommodation of difference. Paul Gilroy's 1993 conceptualization of the diaspora in *The Black Atlantic* has become the touchstone for any contemplation of transatlantic cultural production. Gilroy's work marks a turn in postcolonial studies to thinking in terms of diasporas and, by extension, toward theorizations of "cosmopolitanism" and the "transnation." The flexibility of Gilroy's model of diaspora as emanating from slavery helps us to relate to the conceptual and philosophical foundations of Morrison's work in general, as she articulates the diversity of diasporic experience through an increasingly transnational, globalized, poetics. *Tar Baby* represents a transitional point in Morrison's work after which, in *Beloved* (1987), she turns to nineteenth-century slavery to explore the hold a traumatic past has on the present and how such trauma may be worked through for the negotiation of the future. The past, and especially slavery, permeates all Morrison's novels but, in *Tar Baby*, truth is obfuscated by a mythical quest for an

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<sup>4</sup>In "The Woman in Yellow in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," Angela Shaw-Thornburg concludes that "Jadine's decision to return to Paris can be read as a decision to begin exploring the 'new properties' of an African-American identity shaped by encounters with other people of African descent" (56).

undefined racial authenticity, and the novel can be seen as Morrison's clearing of the terrain of racial identity before her direct, visceral engagement with slavery as undertaken in *Beloved*.

In what Gilroy calls an evolving "non-traditional tradition" (*Black Atlantic* 101), Black Atlantic writers and artists explore the ambivalence of Black subjectivity. They provide a transnational and intercultural perspective through creative expressions that reflect the fluidity of diasporic existence and the consciousness arising from such experience. Gilroy appropriates Walter Benjamin's dialectics of past and present (xii), expressed in Benjamin's sailing imagery: "Being a dialectician means having the wind of history in one's sails. The sails are the concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one's disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them" (Benjamin 473, cited in *Black Atlantic*, epigraph). Gilroy's purpose is to locate the ship as the focal point for his analysis of the transnational, transcultural creative expressions of the Black Atlantic, expressions that constitute a counterculture to modernity, its linear time, and the dualism that informs the Enlightenment's separation of politics and ethics. Artists and intellectuals working within this aesthetic employ memory and alternative histories to disrupt the linearity of history as unbroken progression. Existing within modernity itself, its expressive culture originating in the slave system so integral to the development of the West, the Black Atlantic nevertheless transcends modernity in its delineations of history, memory, and time and is, to return to Benjamin, the corrective that resets the sails of history. In its "hybridity," the "intermixture of ideas" (*Black Atlantic* xi) that finds expression in both Western and non-Western artistic and philosophical traditions, the Black Atlantic is inherently anti-nationalist and provides a utopian model in its creative articulations of trauma, memory, and survival. The dislocation engendered by the Middle Passage can thus be reformulated; the sea, borderless, flowing, and unidirectional, serves as a metaphor for the wide-ranging and multiple explorations of emerging subjectivities. For Gilroy, *Beloved* reformulates the relationship between "rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless, and bestial African slaves" (220), a reformulation of the African American experience as being what Gilroy calls the "slave sublime" (220).

Discussing *Tar Baby*, in "The Writer Before the Page," Morrison explains how she reaches back in the novel to the creation myth, to the paradise lost. She talks about how she wanted to evoke the "earth that came out of the sea and its conquest by modern man" ("Writer" 269). Son reaches the Isle des Chevaliers by way of the ocean as a disruptive, destabilizing presence, "the man born out of the womb of the sea accompanied by ammonia odors of birth" (269). He is borne by a mythic female presence, guided through the water in a feminized current, "like the hand of an insistent woman," a rootless, "undocumented" (*Tar Baby* 167) itinerant who yet, ironically, has fixed notions about identity, tradition, and women as the bearers of culture. It is instead Jadine, prosaically associated with commercial air travel, and not with water—itsself an inversion of stereotypical gendered associations on Morrison's part—who represents diasporic identity, not as "some invariant essence" but rather as a dynamic expression of diasporic existence. As Gilroy writes in his later work, *Between Camps* (2000),

It is ceaselessly reprocessed. It is maintained and modified in what becomes a determinedly non-traditional tradition, for this is not tradition as closed or simple repetition. Invariably promiscuous, diaspora and the politics of commemoration it specifies challenge us to apprehend mutable forms that can redefine the idea of culture through a reconciliation with movement and complex, dynamic variation. (129–30)

For Gilroy, there is no authentic identity to which one can return—the transnationalism of the Black Atlantic does not denote an essentialized route back to Africa in search of racial origin, but is instead multidirectional, often atemporal, in its literary, metaphorical, and physical journeying. This allows for the Middle Passage to be remembered in new, creative evocations that help ameliorate trauma through liberatory reclamations of recovery and healing, rather than in the static remembrance of an originary loss. Morrison's own reclamations of the Middle Passage, across her work generally, are feminized. *Sula*, in *Sula* (1973), for example, is linked to water and fluidity, and *Beloved* in *Beloved* reimagines the Middle Passage in a stream of fractured memory. The sea is also significant in *Love* (2003)—Celestial's dive into the water constitutes her assured, free reclamation of the sea, and in *A Mercy* (2008), shipwrecked Sorrow's identity originates from water and is imbued with fluidities of race and gender.

Morrison brings together the ship at sea, art, memory, and history in her reading of French artist Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting, *Raft of the Medusa*. In her 2006 address at the Louvre, "The Foreigner's Home," Morrison reads the painting as a "moment" (23, translations by Justine Baillie) between borders, a French naval ship, wrecked between imperial France and colonial Africa, Géricault's raft of survivors in peril, but where hierarchies of rank and racial inscription dissolve in the face of shared mortality. From her globalized, transnational perspective, art now exceeds the boundaries of its frame (22) as new meaning emerges from Morrison's excavation at the Louvre into what she has called elsewhere "the cellar of time" ("Future of Time" 122) and by which Géricault's realist documentation of the historical event reverberates throughout time to speak profoundly to present-day patterns of migration, exile, belonging, and exclusion ("Foreigner's Home" 24). In Paris, Morrison's curatorship is an appropriation of Western art that invests the exhibits she selects with new transnational and postcolonial meaning that enrich the art of the Louvre, itself another site replete with narratives of conquest. Morrison's rereading can be contrasted with her knowing characterization, twenty-five years earlier, of Jadine as a naïve student of art history, one who has internalized Western notions of creativity and originality to the point of being embarrassed by Black artistic expression: "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of *his* genius, not the mask-makers" (*Tar Baby* 72; emphases in original). As an art history student of the Sorbonne, Jadine appears to have learned nothing that speaks to her own heritage and its appropriation at the heart of European culture. In an essay on Gertrude Stein and modernism, Morrison discusses how modernist visual art is dependent upon racial categories for its radical non-realist mode, expressive of the fragmentation and fissuring of the modern experience: "The imaginative terrain upon which this journey took place was and is in a very large measure the presence of the racial 'Other'" ("Gertrude Stein" 208).

In its borderlessness, the sea offers possibilities for the diasporic individual that are unbound by nationhood and externally imposed definitions of identity in relation to family, gender, and community. Jadine, then, may be seen as a nascent member of the transnation, a figure who, in choosing Paris, identifies, in Bill Ashcroft's postcolonial theorization, "with no 'nation', ethnic group, cultural or immigrant group completely, if at all" (Ashcroft, "Globalisation" 18). For Ashcroft, "The transnation exists within, beyond, and between nations. It is a collectivity comprised of communities who may be drawn in one way or another to the myth of a particular nation state, but who draw away perpetually into the liberating region of representational undecideability" ("Globalisation" 22). He writes elsewhere that it is a space "in which national and cultural affiliations are superseded, in which binaries of centre and periphery, national self

and other, are dissolved" (Ashcroft, "Borders" 11). Liberation for Jadine means not being defined by her European lover's racialized exoticization of her body, Ondine's maternal expectations, or Son's prescriptions of Black womanhood. Jadine muses, "I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me" (*Tar Baby* 45). In financing her private education, Sidney and Ondine facilitate Jadine's cosmopolitanism as a privileged traveler of the diaspora with choices, including being unfettered by nationality, race, community, or family. Yogita Goyal refers to Jadine's rejections of rootedness as constituting "a gendered critique of black nationalism," one that is "legible within the logic of postessentialist diaspora identities" (Goyal 396). Ironically, Sydney and Ondine's labors have enabled an individualistic modern woman whose European education has meant her alienation from the racial past, community, and family. With some bitterness Ondine speaks of Jadine the orphan, "Another one not from my womb, and I stand on my feet thirty years so she wouldn't have to" (*Tar Baby* 285). Ondine understands how Jadine's advantages have been won at the expense of her own servitude, how Jadine's freedoms enable her to enjoy "a whole bunch of stuff they can do that we never knew nothing about" (285). In effect, Ondine situates her niece within what we today may call the "new" or "post" Black category (Touré), one in which positionality can reside "beyond belongingness and, in many respects, embrace a condition of illegibility" (Murray 35). This impulse, however, contains the potential for reduction to an individualistic expression of identity—Jadine's "just me"—that bypasses the collective past and depoliticizes its struggles. There is the danger that this impulse is merely "indicative of a contemporary perception that the collective strategic essentialism of earlier expressions of black empowerment is no longer necessary" (Baillie 290) when, in fact, the twenty-first century, so far at least, has revealed an imperative for renewed collective resistance to the brutality inflicted upon the Black body.

### MORRISON'S POSTCOLONIAL FUTURES

It is productive to turn our attention to Morrison's nonfiction, a substantial body of work recently collected in *Mouth Full of Blood* (2019), as her essays and addresses are testimony to her long-standing vigilance concerning matters of politics, race, and gender. To read Morrison's nonfiction in parallel with her novels reveals an ongoing dialogue between her fiction and her reflections on feminism, subjectivity, and the practice of writing itself. For example, as we have seen, in "Cinderella's Stepsisters," Morrison provides instruction on how to bear the responsibilities of being a young, educated woman in ways that illuminate our reading of Jadine's individualistic impulse in *Tar Baby*. In later nonfiction, Morrison's scope has global dimensions, as she highlights the urgency of millennial crises and discusses the dangers of nationalism, warnings that build upon her critique of Black nationalism in *Tar Baby*. In "Racism and Fascism" (1995), she anticipates the neoliberal present and its links to racism and fascism in a discussion of the criminalization of the other within the borders of the nation-state and the increasingly apparent propensity for the repetition of racist and fascist practices of the past. For Morrison, racism, fascism, and misogyny are the interrelated consequences of patriarchal nationalisms that continue to operate, albeit in new guises: "Criminalize the enemy. Then prepare, budget for, and rationalize the building of holding arenas for the enemy—especially its males and absolutely its children" ("Racism and Fascism" 15). The reestablishment and normalization of the detention camp is a contemporary echo of colonial and totalitarian practice, and, notably, Morrison discusses the American prison system as a modern

version of institutional slavery that exploits the labor of a disproportionate number of African Americans ("Slavebody" 77).

For Morrison, the narratives by which such practices are justified must be challenged by the academy generally, artists, human rights organizations, and women. On women, she has much to say in *Mouth Full of Blood*, on their creativity and scholarship, and on the complicity of some women in the building of patriarchal structures ("Cinderella's Stepsisters" 111). Women are central to Morrison's articulation of the future, and she invokes the importance the civil rights movement had for feminism in America during the 1960s and the 1970s ("Women, Race" 87). Meaningful and progressive agency means the dismantling of the divisions between women that threaten their future, the deconstruction of the language of male supremacy that shares much with racialized language, and, importantly, recognition of the inequalities of social class that perpetuate the reactionary present (86–94). In her 1989 address, titled "Women, Race, and Memory," Morrison speaks of finding liberating promise in the work of women artists and scholars as expressions that do not merely replicate the strictures of patriarchal subjugation:

It may be the first hint of a possible victory in being viewed and respected as human beings without being male-like or male dominated. Where self-sabotage is harder to maintain; where the worship of masculinity as a concept dies; where intelligent compassion for women unlike ourselves can surface; where racism and class inequity do not help the vision or the research; where, in fact, the work itself, the very process of doing it, makes sororicide as well as fratricide repulsive. (94)

The deployment of controlled, mature language is paramount for the challenge to the neoliberal discourse underpinning the contemporary landscape, "the regime, the authority of the electronically visual, the seduction of 'virtual'" (Morrison, "Literature and Public Life" 100). Any redemptive or "alleviated" future ("Literature and Public Life" 100), Morrison argues, will mean the generation of new language that refuses to replay over and again the old themes—individualism, racial constructions, misogyny, insider/outsider dichotomies—and the rejection of the "passionate juvenilia" of exclusionary, reactionary discourse ("Wartalk" 24). The racialized language of what Morrison called, in her titular keynote at the Race Matters Conference, Princeton, "a racial house" ("Race Matters" 132), must be deciphered in ways that do not replicate entrenched structures but rather provide an inclusive arena for the purposeful deconstruction of language deployed in the name of violence and control ("Nobel Lecture" 103–5). Belonging entails the creation of an "intellectual" and "spiritual home" ("Race Matters" 133), a space of creativity as the response to globalism and displacement, one that equates with Ashcroft's conceptualization of the transnation in its transcendence of national and racial borders.

### MORRISON AND "HOME"

In her opening address to the Race Matters Conference in 1994 at Princeton University, Morrison talked about how she wishes to contest, and at the same time "domesticate," the architecture of racialized discourse. Morrison conceptualizes a "race-specific yet non-racist home" ("Race Matters" 133), one that embraces borderlessness as it "imagines safety without walls" (139). Morrison recognizes current literary and academic discourses on race, including her own, as discourses about home and homelessness; as "creative responses to exile, the devastations, pleasures, and



imperatives of homelessness as it is manifested in discussions on globalism, diaspora, migrations, hybridity, contingency, interventions, assimilations, exclusions" (133). Morrison's notion of home is therefore diasporic; a place in which race matters, but also a place that must be constructed beyond racialized discourse. Importantly, this includes resisting nationalism and spurious notions of identity:

Nationhood—the very definition of citizenship—is marked by exile, refugees, guest arbiter, immigrants, migrations, the displaced, the fleeing, and the under siege. Hunger for home is entombed among the central metaphors in the discourse on globalism, transnationalism, nationalism, the break-up of nations, and the fictions of sovereignty. Yet these dreams of home are frequently as raced themselves as the originating racial house that has defined them. When they are not raced, they are, as I suggested earlier, landscape, never inscape; utopia, never home. (138)

The arguments Morrison makes in "Race Matters" resonate, in other ways, in her millennium novel *Paradise* in which she attempts a reformulation of race for the twenty-first century through the construction of de-raced language to resist those dominant forms of "language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (*Playing in the Dark* xii–xiii). Famously, the novel begins with the sentence, "They shoot the white girl first" (*Paradise* 3)—we never learn which of the girls is the white girl and are thus compelled to confront the ways in which race is socially constructed as well as consider its accompanying hierarchies.

In "Race Matters" Morrison recognizes the "hopeful language" of Martin Luther King as part of an unrealistic project to construct "a world free of racial hierarchy" as such a world could only be visualized by King and his followers "if accompanied by the Messiah" (131). In *Paradise*, however, Morrison revives and revises King's Christian humanism through her characterization of the Reverend Richard Misner, a progressive, liberal minister who recognizes the dangers of Ruby's racial exclusivity and its links with nationalist thinking. Misner's understanding of "true home" (*Paradise* 213) clearly incorporates his Christianity as a spiritual space, one not constructed on domination or fear, but transglobal and transhistorical in its metaphorical reach to the pre-lapsarian origins of humanity.

Misner's image of "home" preempts the conceptualization of paradise/home with which Morrison ends the novel. But crucially, Misner's vision is an attempt to reverse Western history, whereas the paradise attained at the end of the novel is a futuristic one in which the confrontation of history is a necessary precondition for its existence. Paradise is not a place marking the end of history or a place looking backward to an imaginary wholeness before history, "a protected preserve, rather like a wilderness park ... a failed and always failing dream," (Morrison, "Race Matters" 131–2) but one that, once cleared of "racist detritus" (137), has liberatory potential for the future of history in Morrison's attempt to "destabilize the racial gaze altogether" (137).

In Morrison's paradise, the ways in which to be Black, to be human, are multiplied, and possibilities of peace and security exist beyond intolerance. Morrison's vision is indeterminate, one which relies, in its resistance to closure, upon the reader's engagement and interpretation. It could be regarded as utopian, a useful novelistic, aesthetic conceit allowing the writer the luxury of two endings. A politicized reading is, however, much more productive in its emphasis upon a diasporic space traversing race, class, and sexuality—the transnation. The Convent women's reincarnation

and repossession of their own past lives, after their massacre, leads them to the “paradise” of Morrison’s title, and yet this paradise is not a secluded and idyllic island; rather, it includes worldly detritus that is somehow imbued with a certain shimmering beauty: “Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle tops sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf” (*Paradise* 318). To exist in paradise is not to simply escape from the twentieth-century world and its realities of oppression, violence, and inequality that are sustained by the language and culture of the “race house.” Rather, to be in paradise means to have attained the knowledge to recognize, “domesticate,” and transcend the malignant ideologies of Western power. Paradise is realizable when responsibility for language and culture is seized, not only in oppositional ways, but also in genuinely new, vital, and imaginative ways that bypass the malady of culture. Paradise is not a fantastical, other worldly, or heavenly existence but, as aesthetically rendered by Morrison—for whom narrative is “radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (“Nobel Lecture” 108)—it offers possibilities for ways of being in the real world that recognize oppression yet provide the cognitive and imaginative tools for its transcendence.

For Morrison, the issue is one of how to define identity and achieve civic and social equality without duplicating modernity’s hierarchies of race, gender, and class. This effort is especially significant in her late work—in the context of global, genocidal mechanisms of nationalism and fundamentalism that imply new forms of exclusion as the promise of transnational flows of markets, technologies, and labor dissipated post-9/11. For Morrison, categories of religion, nation-state, and race can no longer affect the construction of meaningful identities or lasting political and social change.

Morrison has consistently worked to recover that which would otherwise be lost or remain unspoken from the traumatic past. The official historical record, “manifest destiny,” “progress,” and the American literary canon itself, are all problematized by such excavations of recovery. It is from within transnational cultural expression that Morrison finds hope, in its “informed vision based on harrowing experience that nevertheless gestures toward a redemptive future” (“Future of Time” 126). Such imaginings of a future to be sustained beyond the nation-state are now found in post-realist, post-national expressions that are themselves responses to nation building and its failure to accommodate the trauma instigated in the very act of constructing national identity. The nation-state, in its monumental and ceremonial inscriptions of its own narrative can, for Morrison, only repeat the past. History is closed here, to be opened only by literature emanating from an understanding of history that is “race inflected, colonialized, displaced, hunted” (126).

Literature is crucial for resisting the appropriation of language, temporality, space, identity, and belonging. Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri are among authors cited by Morrison as sources of literature as remembrance and empathy, as reading constitutes “a social act” that helps create the foundations for informed and meaningful citizenship of the world (“Literature and Public Life” 100).<sup>5</sup> Literary creation and its reception can alleviate the pessimism of much contemporary meditation on time and its future and resist the “rush into the past” (“War on Error” 30) that

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<sup>5</sup>Ben Okri, the postcolonial writer referred to by Morrison, writing in the context of the global climate crisis, proposes an “existential creativity,” which entails developing “a new art to waken people both to the enormity of what is looming and the fact that we can still do something about it” (4).

such an unimaginable horizon has encouraged. For Morrison, time does have a future worthy of imagination:

Perhaps it is the reality of a future as durable and far-reaching as the past, a future that will be shaped by those who have been pressed to the margins, by those who have been dismissed as irrelevant surplus, by those who have been cloaked with the demon's cape; perhaps it is the contemplation of that future that has occasioned the tremble of latter-day prophets afraid that the current disequilibria is a stirring, not an erasure. That not only is history not dead, but that it is about to take its first unfettered breath. ("Future of Time" 126)

Morrison insists upon the promotion of beauty and art as the best response to the imposition of borders, labels, or categories as mechanisms for rule and control. This means using difference not as a weapon of subjugation, or as the mirrored response to oppression that can only replicate it, but rather as the source of transnational possibilities embedded in an "alternate language [that] does not arise from the tiresome, wasteful art of war, but rather from the demanding, brilliant art of peace" ("Wartalk" 25). It is impossible to speak well with "a mouth full of blood" ("The Dead of September 11" 3), and so Morrison strives for composed reflection on diasporic, migratory experience from its early incarnation as the slave ship to its contemporary manifestation as the boat of refugees on the perilous sea.

It is the sea, in all its ambiguities as the site of danger, rescue, and nourishment that informs our readings of the indeterminate endings of both *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*. In *Tar Baby*, we have Son returned to the Isle de Chevaliers by the maternal, "nursing sound of the sea" (309) to join the ancestral, mythic realm of the blind horseman; the alternative ending available is a realist one, in which Jadine is airborne, en route to Europe.<sup>6</sup> *Paradise* ends with the possibility that the women of the Convent have been massacred in the realist world of Ruby; or, they are returned to the sea, in another island narrative that has them awaiting rescue by "another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble" (*Paradise* 318), another evocation of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and Morrison's inversion of the Middle Passage, her Afrofuturist ending in which rescue of the diasporic refugee is enabled by the ancestor Piedade. It is in such "rhythms of water" ("Literature and Public Life" 318) that liberation may be found if history's repetitious delineations of borders, nationhood, and race are deciphered to enable the construction of alternative and reachable postcolonial futures.

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<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting here how it is not until her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), that Morrison brings another ambitious female protagonist, and purveyor of the beauty myth, Bride, to a full recognition of the female ancestor and her ancient powers. In *Tar Baby* however, Morrison leaves Jadine's dilemma unresolved, her concern being to present a modern woman struggling with authenticity in a cosmopolitan space, whose response is an ambiguous and complex one that does not essentialize blackness but, rather, recognizes its transnational manifestations in ways that, furthermore, serve to undercut the patriarchal impulse behind nationalist ideologies.

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**KELLY L. REAMES** is Professor of English at Western Kentucky University, USA.

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