

## Editor's Preface

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Why a special issue here in Taiwan on an African American writer like Toni Morrison? In a recent study conducted by Yuan-wen Chi, Toni Morrison ranks as the most-studied African American writer in Taiwan, with as many as 134 entries, while Alice Walker and James Baldwin, who rank second and third, lag far behind, with only 24 and 13 entries respectively (紀, 2006: 287). Morrison's growing popularity can be attributed in part to the fact that she is the first African American writer to garner the Nobel Prize for literature. Other factors include her persistent attempts to recuperate—in fiction—African American history and culture, her innovative narrative technique, her captivating style and poetic language, as well as the depth and breadth of her subject matter.<sup>1</sup> As an Oprah Book Club best-seller, Princeton chair professor and Nobel laureate for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison has indeed become “a veritable industry” (McKay & Earle, 1997: ix). The Swedish Academy, in a press release issued on October 7, 1993, hailed Toni Morrison as “a literary artist of the first rank,”

who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.

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<sup>1</sup> In his survey, Chi maintains a similar view about the factors for Morrison's amazing popularity among scholars and graduate students in Taiwan (2006: 289, 293).

Her oeuvre is unusually finely wrought and cohesive, yet at the same time rich in variation. One can delight in her unique narrative technique, varying from book to book and developed independently, even though its roots stem from Faulkner and American writers from further south. The lasting impression is nevertheless sympathy, humanity, of the kind which is always based on profound humour.

She delves into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race. And she addresses us with the lustre of poetry.

In view of the fact that Morrison has come to be recognized as “one of the most significant contemporary American novelists and literary/cultural critics” (McKay, 1997: 4) and “the most famous and the most successful of [African American] authors” (Gutmann, 2000: 2), the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, held, on December 17-18, 2004 (two months before Morrison’s 74th birthday), a domestic conference on this “writer of international stature” (Sumana, 1998: 7).<sup>2</sup> The first four articles included in this special issue were revised and/or developed out of this conference. An earlier version of Ho’s article on Morrison’s *Love* was first presented at the Colloquium for African American Research (C.A.A.R.) 2005 Conference held in Tours, France on April 21 to 24, 2005.

Composed of four sections, the article by Ya-huei Lin explores how Toni Morrison re(-)views the molding impacts of the past in *Sula*, which is, according to Lin, deeply engaged with the history of the present. Lin’s exploration appropriates ideas from Michel Foucault, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Sidney Mintz, and Walter Benjamin. Section One deals with the issue of racism, its

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<sup>2</sup> A related event of no small significance on the island is the consecutive publications of the Chinese translations by the Commercial Press in Taipei of Morrison’s trilogy of love—*Beloved* (April 2003), *Jazz* (June 2003), and *Paradise* (October 2004). Incidentally, the Chinese translation of Morrison’s *Love* was first published in October 2005.

infiltration into “the socio-economic infrastructure of the alleged free society.” In the second section, Lin focuses on the black people’s deferred dream of equality, the problem of black unemployment and the inequality of job opportunity. Section Three discusses the vicious circle of violence incurred by the change of the hilly land in Medallion and its subsequent desolation and alienation. Subtitled “*Danse Macabre*,” the final section looks upon Shadrack’s coinage of National Suicide Day as “a predictable ‘monad’ in the temporal continuum of unpredictable black life” while comparing the Bottom people’s disastrous parade to the late-medieval allegory of *Danse Macabre*.

In “The Double Consciousness of Cultural Pariahs,” Shao Yu-chuan wishes to formulate a more sophisticated understanding of black identity and of the relationship between the subject and ideology by reading Morrison’s reflection of the pathology of cultural pariahs in *Tar Baby* in light of the psychoanalytic concepts of fantasy and trauma. The first part explores the alienation of black subjects in the white world via Frantz Fanon’s analysis of Negro psychopathy and the psychoanalytic concept of alienation. In the second part, Shao focuses on the complexity of the “double vision” as embedded in the Du Boisian double consciousness of the protagonists, particularly in terms of its pathological and ethical dimensions. In her discussion of black trauma in the last part of her article, Shao argues that the double consciousness of blacks as cultural pariahs signifies the libidinal economy of the black subject doubly burdened with the task of confronting the seduction of white culture and the legacy of black trauma as well as that of confronting the reality of black identity.

In “Re-Membering the Song of My Self,” Wei-ching Lai employs identity formation theories propounded by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and others to analyze how an African American self is constructed in Morrison’s *Jazz*. Divided into three sections, the article argues that *Jazz* revitalizes the black vernacular tradition of “jazz” literature. In the first section, Lai discusses how critics in the postmodern era tackle the issues of identities before she proceeds

to adopt Hall's theories of identity to examine Violet's and Joe Trace's self formation. While maintaining in Section Two that popular music can be viewed as a platform for the listeners and performers to construct cultural identity, Lai also suggests that Violet's assimilation into the urban black community be correlated with her adaptation to the jazz music. The final section focuses on how the principal characters in *Jazz* establish a "unified" sense of self by re-membling their past experience while contending that the novel's ambiguous, self-deconstructing narrator exhibits a defiant spirit of jazz.

"Not Safe for the Nursery?: Toni Morrison's Storybooks for Children," by Chia-yen Ku, is a pioneering piece on five of the Nobel laureate's storybooks: *The Big Box* (1999), *The Book of Mean People* (2003), *The Ant or the Grasshopper* (2003), *The Lion or the Mouse* (2004), and *Poppy or the Snake* (2004). To "see what expectations parents, teachers, librarians, reviewers hold for children's books," Ku begins by discussing adult feedbacks on these storybooks and the power relations involved. According to Ku, the Morrison team has a dual purpose in mind when they produce children's literature: to challenge the existing institution and to encourage a collaborative reading experience that will empower both the adult and the child. In comparing traditional children's literature with Aesopian literature, Ku has shed light on how and why the Morrison team appropriates strategies of Aesopian language in their cross-audience writing. While the first two books entail collaborative efforts between the adult and the child to get the meaning across, the other three books, Ku maintains, seek to create textual flexibility and to encourage the reader to retell his/her version of Aesop's fables. Ku concludes that these subversive texts give voice to the child, the weak, and the colonized, and that the reader, in reading between the lines, and between word and image, may come up with different levels of interpretation.

If Chia-yen Ku offers us a valuable perspective in reading Morrison's less-discussed storybooks, Wen-ching Ho looks closely

at the narrative function and meaning of a mysteriously named character-cum-narrator in Morrison's 2003 novel *Love*. In addition to adopting some of Wayne C. Booth's ideas about narration, he also draws on Morrison's "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" and her new "Foreword" to *Love* as well as on what Faulkner has said about his own narrative strategy in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which shares some of *Love*'s narrative techniques. He argues that as a character L is an object of Bill Cosey's affection, and that understanding L is key to understanding the novel, because she, as the narrative conduit, is a vital component of its plot development, narrative structure, and perspective. As a character, L plays several pivotal roles in the Cosey family. As an insider-narrator, L provides the missing link to information unavailable to other characters. Moreover, she takes on the function of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. In giving voice to "Love" as the "I" narrator-cum-character, Ho concludes, Morrison has constructed a distinctively African American form of narration, which in turn links the content back to the narrative.

While Ku's article centers on the five storybooks Morrison co-authored with her son Slade, each of the four articles deals primarily with one Morrison novel—from *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *Jazz* to her most recent work *Love*. Another distinctive feature lies in their widely different approaches to the explication of some shared concerns. For example, while Shao and Lai both investigate the issue of identity formation, the former's approach is psychoanalytic and the latter's postmodernist. Like Shao, Lin also treats the motif of dream; however, her approach is basically Foucauldian. Just as Lai stresses that the ambiguous narrator of *Jazz* mirrors the defiant spirit of jazz, so Ho in his attempt to make sense of the enigmatic L in *Love* perceives the narrator as the very voice of love in all its ramifications. All in all, the special issue reflects a highly selective latest sample of Taiwan's Morrison studies. It is our hope that the Taiwanese sample will generate a new dialogue, new insights, and inspire new perspectives in the study of the global Toni Morrison.

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