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Introduction: Symposium, Celebrating Toni Morrison's Achievement

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Celebrating Toni Morrison's Achievement

Black History Month Symposium February 1994

After my colleague, Michelle Loris, suggested that Mariann Russell, another colleague, and I form a panel to present papers at The Third Annual Women's Studies Conference (held at Southern Connecticut State University on October 2-3, 1993) and after she orchestrated this effort, it became clear to us that we shared a deep-rooted interest in the work by African-American women writers. At this particular conference, "Women Building Community: Crossing the Boundaries of Race, Religion, Class, Gender," and during our session on "African-American Women Writers," Mariann Russell read her groundbreaking review of *Balm in Gilead*, a biographical study by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and a reading that finds resonance in the final revision of my paper as it appears in this issue of the *Sacred Heart University Review*; Michelle Loris read her insightfully psychological-critical paper on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*; and I read the first version of my paper on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

By December 1993, when Toni Morrison had received the Nobel Prize in Literature, our enthusiasm, dedication, and admiration for this Nobel Laureate reached new depths and heights. Because individually we had taught several of Morrison's novels in our respective literature classes during the past few years, we decided to form yet another panel and to present papers in February 1994 at Sacred Heart University in celebration of Black History Month and of Toni Morrison's achievement. Mariann Russell focused on a review of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel; and I revised the paper on *Beloved*, Morrison's fourth novel, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Due to the snowstorms of the 1994 winter, our symposium was rescheduled, and as a result Michelle Loris' presentation had to be cancelled. Flora Goodloe, an English major and a senior at Sacred Heart University, then was

invited to read a paper on *Jazz*, Morrison's latest novel, that she had written for a class taught by Dr. Loris. Our event, sponsored by the English Department and the Office of Multicultural Affairs, finally took place on February 23, 1994. Also in February 1994, the NCTE Fifth National African-American Read-In Chain (always held on the east coast at 3:00 p.m. during the first Sunday in February), organized by Mariann Russell and sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and UJAMMA, was held in celebration of Toni Morrison's literary accomplishment. Publishing the essays by Dr. Loris, Dr. Russell, and myself in the *Sacred Heart University Review* continues our celebration of the superlative work of a major American novelist.

In her novels and other work, Morrison repeatedly affirms the magical power of words: their power to destroy or to create, to bring about war or peace. Speaking in Stockholm on December 7, 1993, as recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Morrison reaffirmed the power of words, stating, "We die. . . . That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (*New York Times*, December 8, 1993).

We hope that these essays on *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* give an indication of our admiration and respect for this major writer whose "supreme fiction" demonstrates the ability to face the chaos of our time and to transfigure it. In her novels, Toni Morrison invites the reader to partake in this transformation: the journey is necessary and painful, but it is also a journey toward healing and celebration. Toni Morrison confronts the beast and understands its manifold nature, but she does not watch it passively as it "Slouches towards Bethlehem" (William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming").

Angela DiPace Fritz