Interview with Toni Morrison

Cecil Brown

BROWN: How do you feel about *Beloved*'s being placed, as Stanley Crouch has done, in the tradition of the plantation novel?

MORRISON: That's what this is all about. Black writing has to carry that burden of other people's desires, not artistic desires but social desires; it's always perceived as working out somebody's else's agenda. No other literature has that weight.

Q: Gloria Steinem made it clear that Alice Walker's work was a departure from other black male writers. What do you think of that in terms of the prototype black author Richard Wright? Do you think Richard Wright was carrying the burden of that weight to do more for the reader than writing a novel?

TM: He had a very strong program. Powerful as he was—is—as a writer, nobody can surpass him in doing certain kinds of writing. He does action practically better than anybody; also, he is courageous—he was able to look into areas that nobody at that time was willing to look at. But I think he had a legitimate and necessary historical slash political outlook. And that surfaces in his text and that is a legitimate purpose.

The question now as it was then is: how do you make an art form that is both unquestionably beautiful and also political at the same time? [her son enters the room] But nobody can gainsay that book. Now, I guess he had terrible pictures of men in them, terrible pictures of women in them. If you are asking the characters to function as role models—if that [laughter] is what literature is for, I suppose a lot of people would find him offensive. Black women might find him offensive, vis-a-vis the character's relationship to the woman that he has to rape, mutilate, murder, etc. [deep breath]. We are accustomed as black women, anyway, to that kind of dismissal, even by black men, unless we were the tragic mulatto.

So what is different, I think, is that black women, who seem to be the only people writing who do not regard white men and white women—the white world—as the central stage in the text. White men write about white men, because that's who they are; white women are interested in white men because they are their

fathers, lovers and children, family; black men are interested in white men because that's the area in which they make the confrontation. Those are the people who have denounced them, confronted them, repressed them, and those are the white men who have in large part told them that they are lesser. Black men are serious about this confrontation. Black women don't seem to be interested in this confrontation.

The political situation changed from Wright's time to now. That is the difference now—why black women are not interested in the confrontation. In the 1960s, there were nearly no black women novelists published.

Paule Marshall was published in 1959, and she wasn't interested in the confrontation. Was Zora Neale Hurston? I don't know about this, I'm just wondering if there's a different interest. It is as though black women writers said, "Nobody's gonna tell our story." Nobody but us.

Q: But two things: First, Wright's novel was a depiction of Black life under a brutal system. It was similar to the Hobbesian Leviathan of the short-lived life, the sharecropper's life; the book gave to the whole world a view of black lower-class life. This set the standard in which black writers responded to the political and economic pressure on black life.

Second, since that time, during the sixties, the black writers of my generation responded again, but since that time, during the Seventies, during the Reagan administration, with the disappearance of radical groups like the Black Panthers, gave a different atmosphere, so that, not just women writers could emerge, but the nation itself turned to a more [Toni adds, "conservative and racists"] so that the concern of the woman writer comes to the fore more.

TM: As a kind of trader?

Q: As a buffer between the confrontation of the black male writer and the system?

TM: But that's not true—is it? I mean, has John A. Williams changed what he's writing?

Q: John A. Williams hasn't changed, but his last novel was not published by a big publisher.

TM: There are several ways to write. There're lots of ways to write. There's sabotage, agent-provocateur. There are lots of

ways to destabilize racism, and protest novels are only one way. Maybe they're the best way, and maybe they aren't. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in black readers and me. I think that when you constantly focus on the Nazi, you give him more power than he should have. That's what confrontation in art sometimes does. It's like asking a jazz musician to play his music so white people will like it, and I don't think that's what's going on with black women.

I think that black men have decided that black women writers are the enemy, and therefore we are doing something deceptive by writing less confrontational literature and getting more play out of it. Whereas they are the serious warriors, vis-a-vis, literature and they can't get published. And that is just not true. It's not true because they are published. Also, I think it's a mistake—maybe not a mistake—but I just find it interesting that—uh—the play that Moniyhan gave of the sinister black woman, which is a white man's idea, is being so beautifully absorbed and digested and surrendered to by a number of black men who are talking about it. The only solution is to do one's work the way you can. But the internecine fighting, I happened to know, is something that any magazine will pay for.

I used to get telephone calls about once a year, another one of those Tell-Us-About-The-Problems-Between-the-Black-Man-and-the-Black-Woman calls. Tell how terrible it is. Tell how you all can't get along. And for this you can get infinite amount of space, and you can also have a great talk show. Go on for hours and have a little series. It's inexhaustible. Why is the question about that, and not about what's really going on —black people talking to other black people and enlightening ourselves in an interior way?

Q: How does this question of dissension betweel black and white men come about? When Gloria Steinem introduced Alice Walker, she made it clear that there was a confrontation between black men's and black women's literature. Here, she said, is an area that black men had not covered. Black men didn't start that?

TM: I can't account for Gloria Steinem. She and Alice Walker are very close friends. She isn't the stamp of approval for me. She may be important to you and a whole lot of people. Gloria Steinem said A, B, C, or D [laughter]. I mean, she and Alice are good friends. They trust one another. Gloria Steinem feels

very strong about that. What her agenda is, whether she represents white women in general, I really don't know, and I don't really think she does, as a matter of fact. I don't really know. I'm reluctant to interfere in other people's perception vis-a-vis other people's support systems that black women and white women have forged, for whatever reasons, I can't get into it. Myself, I believe, have excluded my work from that area. But I am weary of that kind of endorsement. I think what they wanted at that time—they were very enthusiastic and fearful that Alice Walker's book would not get a lot of attention. They were right. It got bad reviews in the beginning and there was a consistent intention to dismiss the book on the part of publishing. That was real. I know that was real. And it was only through such people [as Gloria Steinem] that it got attention. They used to put flyers on the seats. Now somebody could say that their motives were suspect, you know. I don't know, I'm not willing to comment on that at all.

Because I've seen it the other way around—I've seen white guys thrilled to death with certain books. Claude Brown's book, which was published against the company. They didn't want to publish that book, and then it got this huge response, and there seems to be a large white male identification with that book. Now you could question that, if you want to. Now all these are extra-literary considerations. They have nothing to do with the value of the text, what Claude Brown's book said to me and you. He talked about the way it was received and why it was received that way. And that was the same for *Color Purple.* One of the best books I've ever published in my life was the book by Leon Forest and a wonderful critical acclaim from Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison. It never sold over two thousand copies. I want to know why black men didn't buy it. I published Henry Dumas to a great deal of reception, and that book never sold over three thousand copies, and now who am I going to blame for that? All the poets came to the parties, but who went to the bookstore, besides me? I mean I bought up all the last copies. Any number of black books by black men have come out and I haven't seen black men in the bookstore buying that book. If I had been able to count on ten, fifteen thousand black men to buy that book then I could take serious this stuff about why somebody gets on top. I can't take it serious, because where are the buyers. I love Henry Dumas, Eugene Redman loves him, everybody loves him, and I think he is one of the most extraor-

dinary voices in contemporary writing, but I sold not more than two thousand copies . . .

Q: He didn't fit into . . .

TM: It's not about he didn't fit in anything. Black people just didn't buy him. The company published him because I insisted. We printed the books, we put them out, they were not purchased. And we had the publicity, it was in the POST, the NY TIMES, stories on him, now who bought him? And this was in the 1970s. I published his stories, poems, a novel, in hardback and paper at the same time, so it would be cheaper. So I don't want to hear it. For even when these extraordinary books come out . . .

Q: Do you have many black male readers?

TM: I would imagine so, on the basis of correspondence and the audience and the people who come into the bookstore to ask me to sign them.

Q: Do you have a greater following among white female readers?

TM: I don't know. I can't tell. It seems that, with this book at least, in the academy, I think I have just as many black women who read as white, if not more, but it's proportionate, because there are just more white people in the university. So how can I tell?

Q: I want to turn now to your own novels, the names of your characters. You seem to pun on the names, some of which seem so improbable so that one is sometimes led to believe that the improbability of the names is a kind of pun on slavery itself. That one can never be sure of his own name.

TM: We are very interested in names. There was a whole world of people who call themselves X. I didn't invent that. The whole business of calling yourself X came out of some emotional relationship to a black person's name. There are still people who do it. So somebody is concerned about what a name means to a black person. Is this my name or not? There are spirituals that talk about names: "I ask Jesus if it would be alright if I change my name." Besides, we were named, we just didn't keep our names. In addition, I don't know any musician over fifty who worked with his name. Satchmo didn't, Count didn't, Duke didn't, Leadbelly didn't. It's only after WWII that people begin to use their own name.

Q: Where did they get their names then?

TM: I don't know, Cecil. You know more about it than I do? Where did Leadbelly get his name?

Q: Legend.

TM: What legend?

Q: People.

TM: Well, whatever it is. It's reflected in my book, I'm trying to reflect the milieu. When I was a little girl, all those friends of my father, I never knew their names. Their names were Rocky River, Cool Breeze, Johnnie Dell. I don't know to this day where they got them from, but they used them; they must have had a real name somewhere. But they get or receive names, nicknames. And they generally are names that identify some weakness, as though they are confronting it right away, but it's impossible—if you think about your own childhood you must have been aware—what those names—kinds really had. They don't want to call themselves William or some Wasp name. They might want to do it but you look at records you see all kinds of names. Slaves were called Cato. I don't use that. At least I use the names that black people are willing to accept for themselves.

Q: How important is the nickname in your fiction? Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye,* has no nickname; she has an infirmity in her foot . . .

TM: She wanted a nickname. A nickname is a personal thing, that intimate people can call you by, and strangers call you by your formal name. But having a nickname, or being the only one who didn't have a nickname, she felt alienated, that's all.

Q: When she worked for this white family, they nickname her Polly.

TM: That's right, she was thoroughly enchanted with that. She just gave it up, it was too hard for her. You understand that I don't—people assume so much editorializing in your text that they assume you are recommending things when you are merely describing—I don't want to run around giving people notes on about how to behave and what to do.

Q: Are you describing a particular part of black life by using names in this way?

TM: For the times, sure. Pauline, that's 1923, sure. There are some people in there named Margaret. Cholly's name is just a pronunciation of Charles. Freida and Claudia is a nice name. People are talking about the odd names in my fiction but 80% of the characters are named Joe. Twenty percent have odd names, which is disproportionate to real life in those days.

Q: Consider Macon Dead [hero of *Song of Solomon*]. The book turns on his name, which is "Dead." It shows . . .

TM: It shows a mistake . . . a clerical error . . . the carelessness of white people . . . and the indifference when they . . . they don't pay much attention to what the records are. My mother doesn't even have a birth certificate. My aunt has a birth certificate and her name is not even on it. It says, Negro Child, that's all.

Q: A critic has said that Macon Dead is supposed to be a pun on "Make Them [Black men] Dead." Is that true?

TM: [Big laughter] Maybe so. I didn't have that in mind, but I'll take it.

Q: Was there an unintentional or intentional parody in *Song of Solomon* of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*?

TM: It was not intentional. I try to stay out of Western mythology. When I use mythology in my text it's usually to show that something has gone wrong, not right. I tend to use everything from African or Afro-American sources. The flying is not about Icarus, it's about the African flying myth. When Milkman walks into that big house, what I have him relating it to is Hansel and Gretel. I have Hagar sometime referring to those beds as little Goldilocks' bed. So it's a signal for me that they are out . . . of their . . . of where they really should be . . . they are thinking of something wrong, they are outside of their history, so to speak. They are pulling from another place that's not going to feed them. The whole Goldilocks thing is an association with the relationship of those three women in that house, and it's supposed to jar. But the people who are connected to the Afro-American tradition or the African tradition are generally the ones who are the wholesome track.

So I use Western tradition in order to signal something being askew.

Q: You have a lot of myth-making names, like Milkman, which comes through a kind of legend?

TM: That's the way nicknames are received. [Black people] don't just hand it to you, they wait until you do something that they think represents something. Grownups give them to children, children give them to each other. Milkman got his based on somebody watching that which was going on [his mother suckling him while he was ten years old]. Interesting. In a sense it fingerprinted him. Until he matured, he was dependent on it. The women did everything for him, until he finally grew up.

Q: Is this in the tradition of Black American writing?

TM: I don't—I hope it is—I don't write that way. I don't look back and see what A, B, C, and D did, and decide that'll do it. I don't work that way. I know the tradition; it's some way that I cannot articulate.

Q: And you were not influenced by Zora Neale Hurston?

TM: I didn't read Zora Neale Hurston until after I'd written *Song of Solomon.*

Q: Really?

TM: Really. I read one short story.

Q: There is such a similarity in both of your works.

TM: In what way?

Q: The style, nicknaming, for example, as a theme . . .

TM: I'm glad because I have since read her and admire her.

Q: There seems to have been with the emergence of your style a return to a former style of writing, bypassing Richard Wright's style. Do you agree?

TM: There are a couple ways of doing it. I remember hearing people screaming, back in the sixties, that we need our own myths, we have to make our own myths, that was Baraka's cry. Well, I think indeed some of us have done that, but I didn't make any, I just tried to see what was already there, and to use that as a kind of well-spring for my own work. Instead of inventing myths, which is a certain body of work which black writers are in fact engaged in, I just didn't do that, I was just interested in finding what myths already existed. There already was a Margaret Garner, there already was a myth about flying Africans.

If you go to the George Sea Islands, you hear it all the time. It's all in the narratives of the slaves. The tar baby story is a black story that they invented, I didn't, I used it as a springboard out of which to say something which I thought had contemporary implications, but I didn't invent those stories and I have too much respect for black people's imagination to suppose I can invent something for them. We have always done it. It's just the way in which I can employ them. You know, it's not unusual. Joyce uses the Ulysses myth and people use other things. I just use the ones that already exist, and I appropriate them for texts and characters. When I was writing *Tarbaby,* I used the characters from the story, the Rabbit, the white farmer. The reason the white man is in there is because of the white farmer in the original tarbaby story. If he wasn't in the story, he wouldn't be in the novel. The same thing with *Song of Solomon.* I'd always heard that black people could fly before they came to this country, and the spirituals and gospels are full of flying, and I decided not to treat them as some Western form of escape, and something more positive than escape. Suppose they were about the whole business of how to handle one's self in a more dangerous element called air, learning how to trust, to risk, and knowing that much about one's self to be able to take off and to surrender one's self to the air, to surrender and control, both of those things. That's what that myth meant to me. So I never go outside of my sources never, never.

And I think that kind of writing is what I'm interested in. It's not to say that there are not other kinds of writing that are important or more important, but I can only do what I do. That's what fascinates me.

We have already invented so much art. It's just lying there to be picked up and used and shined and cleaned and there is so much of it that above the tip of the iceberg has been plundered by black writers, women or men, and there is so much territory to cover that it seems a pity that critics are describing what other writers ought to do. That is really painful to be told as a writer what to do by another black person.

The reason it's so painful is that I thought that the reason those children had their brains shot out in the street was that people could say what they wanted to say. And if it wasn't any good it would fall by the wayside. It would just deconstruct.

Q: Do you find this in the writing of Baldwin, Ellison, Wright?

TM: Ellison does it a bit, not in a large sense, but in terms of families. *Invisible Man* opens with the grandfather giving him life-lines, so to speak, a quotation that would guide him through his life. So he is relating to this more local myth. Baldwin just looks at the Western myths and deconstructs them. He looks at Chartres [in *Nobody Knows My Name*] and it's not Chartres any more. It's somebody else.

Q: Is this a new mode in writing?

TM: It's only mine. I don't think anybody else is much interested in it.

Q: In *Sula* there is kind of fairy tale fantasy and the structure of the book is like a fairy tale with a moral and all. Justice?

TM: Recognition? Yes, my books usually end on a note of epiphany in which somebody learns something about his or her situation as a result of having had the book, which is what novels do.

Q: Any relationship to the fairy structure?

TM: I hate to say that, because that suggests another tradition which I am not interested in—fairy tales—but I am interested in folklore, black folklore, and the end of *Sula* and most of my novels are very much like folktale endings. It's open-ended folkloric tales, sort of open-ended; they don't close and shut the door, which is like the Western tradition, where the moral is—click!—locked up. But in African folktale, the people often say, "You end it," "What do you think?" It's a more communal response.

Q: It invites the reader in?

TM: That's right. And that's what I structure them on, not on fairy tales, which usually have happy endings, optimistic ends, and everything is back replaced properly. I don't do that.

Q: Folk mythology, black folklore—is it conservative? Does it prevent the community from danger? Is it cautionary?

TM: Some of it's cautionary, some of it's prophetic. But the main point is that it's generally discredited—is what it is. And people think it's simple and simple-minded and not progressive. I think they see it that way because they don't look at it.

In most folklore, there is a lot of hidden gold, a code that may not be easily read; for that reason white people have discredited

it. We are a discredited people in their view. And black people discredit it too because they are more interested in what white people think. I have never bought that; it was never discredited to me.

Q: Does this suggest a new, fresh way to look at literary language?

TM: For me it does. Because the strategist I employ is fed by that place, the repetition, a certain structure, the sense of color, the absences, the spaces around the words—all of this is like a call and response thing to me.

Q: Do you think some black male critics have misinterpreted your work because they have a narrow view of our own folklore?

TM: I don't know what that is. There are certain desires in reviews that reflect what the reviewer wants the book to be. I have heard from certain white reviewers that the servant in *Tarbaby* would never do that, that he would never take over that house like that. Now this means they don't want him to. I've read reviews in which Paul D. [In *Beloved*] is regarded as too sweet, too nice. That's because they are used to the slobbering, unloving black man in fiction I guess. So that if you get a person who is strong and tender, they think that character is unreal because they don't know any black men that way, they don't know any strong black men who are not tender, not feminized, but tender, complex in that way.

There are similar desires I recognize in black reviewers, that's their agenda. So when I read reviews, I can tell. It's a risk to write a book because you can reveal all sorts of faults and things, you can be disliked, but also, the same risk is true in the reviewer's text. You can see that he wants it to be about something else. I used to get a lot of criticism because I didn't have any white people in my books. After *Sula,* all the women were mad at me because *Song of Solomon* was about men. And the white people said this book is faulted because there ain't no white people in it. Then my next book, *Tarbaby,* in which I put white people, for my reasons, not for theirs, they said, "Oh, she just put some white people in it!" So that's their agenda! I can't be worried about that! I don't write a novel like a stew, and add ingredients to please other people. It has to have its own integrity. Some work for some people and others don't. When I do five books, you know, some are liked by some people

and others by others . . . that's what I do. I read everybody's books, some I like, some I don't. And that's the way they relate to my work and that's how it ought to be. I decided that I wanted to have a career, which means that I want to write books that I want to write, and I have to be permitted to write books that some people don't like. A painter can paint pictures that somebody don't like, or a musical can do that. Somebody was telling me that they heard somebody at Suggs [music club in New York] and he was just terrible and the record was awful, and I said, "Are you gonna abandon him?"

Q: Realism doesn't play a part in your conception of the novel?

TM: Realism, yes, but not in that sense. There are a lot of ways to touch realism. It's not documentary, that's not my style, my style is very much in the line of . . . uh . . . [a long pause]. . . . it's aural [she spells a-u-r-a-l]. It's visual, it has a sound, that's what I work toward, is of place where the reader can come in, like a congregation, or like an audience at a musical concert, where they participate in it and I have to make it open enough so that they can. You can't be handing out these messages, black people don't buy that stuff, they buy it for a little while, but not for long. I don't know when I'm being hustled and being told this is this and this is that. I don't want to be that programmatic. I don't know about rich black people, but I know about poor black people because I'm [laughter] . . . I come from poor black people. . . . I was a poor black girl, and so we had to get very cunning in all this, right?

Q: Uh-huh!

TM: And it would require an awful lot of information. So we were not easily manipulated. So I don't want to patronize black readers. Because I'm one of them. I want to know as much about what I'm doing as a basketball player. He doesn't patronize anybody.

Q: Stanley Crouch's review saw your novel as belonging also to the genre of holocaust novel. To compete with who-suffered-most—blacks or Jews? Comment?

TM: It's a misunderstanding, but it's more pernicious than that. The game of who suffered most? I'm not playing that game. That's a media argument. It's almost about quantity. One dead child is enough for me. One little child in *The Bluest Eye* who didn't make it. That's plenty for me. I didn't want to write about

slavery because I didn't think I had the staying power. I didn't believe I could stay in that world for three or five years, however long it took. But I think the publications which are interested in that are the ones that Mr. Crouch works for. They are interested in it.

Q: Skip Gates also measures your success in terms of quality [*New York Times Book Review*] when he says Toni Morrison has written five novels—four more than Richard Wright.

TM: He could have introduced other authors, James Baldwin, for example. Or, Ralph Ellison, who wrote one magnificent novel. He shouldn't even be required to write another one, if he doesn't want to. It should be about quality and not quantity. That's what I hate about those arguments about how many. It's the quality of the book that I want to fail at or triumph at, but I'm not going to withhold writing books for anybody's purposes [laughter].

Q: Are white female readers more conducive to this magic-realism writing than black male readers?

TM: I don't know. I seem to have a lot of black male readers very devoted to my work. Enormous, from what I can tell. People who don't like your work, they don't write you letters. But the people you see, generally, like my work. When somebody doesn't like my work, they just don't want to be bothered with me. I'm that way too. Politically, I'll write a politician a letter in a minute, if I don't like him. But if I don't like a person's book, I don't tell him so; so I just dismiss it. I generally only see people who are curious about my work.

But about the gender conflict among black writers, men and women, as I told you before: I guess I should take it very serious since it seems to come up a lot. But I'm not sure that conflict is not being manipulated from somewhere else, outside. We [black men and black women] are subject to manipulation, particularly since we are all subject to time and space on the air. And certain kinds of things make good copy. It would make good copy if black women writers began to talk about each other, but we just don't do it at all.

Q: Why don't you?

TM: Because most of us—at least the six or seven I know—are unwilling to participate in a capitalistic search-and-destroy mission that white people frequently get black people into. And

I refuse to stay on that level. They think in terms of ladders: number one, number two, number three . . . a rank and hierarchy. It looks like a palette to me, and all of them are doing something important. I do this little bit over here, and that person is doing that over there. But I am very different from other black women writers and they are very different from me. It seems to me if you could compare Duke Ellington to Louis Armstrong or Carmen MaCrae to Mahalia Jackson, it's all black in a different style, different solutions.

Q: Why do they do it to black male writers?

TM: They do it themselves. Black men. . . . they are males . . . they like to win. They want to know who is on top. They want to be recognized by white men as the best. I can't understand why. They ain't talking to each other, they ain't talking to me. So who are they talking to? Those pieces that rank our books are not instructional. They are not going to change the way I write because of somebody's review. It has no relevance in terms of my work. It has some relevance to talking to some white people and some black men and saying "See, what's happening to me and to us." It's like that line I was telling you about the wife getting a letter from a woman that says, "Lady, your husband has been cheating on us!" [Laughter]

I have not seen and cannot think of any black female writer who is interested in being taken up by the white male power structure. I don't know one, not one. And I know them. Because I know the sacrifices they have made and turned down, in order to get their work done. And it has been to their advantage to do it for publicity. I have not done it.

Q: James Baldwin never did it either. Now has Ralph Ellision.

TM: No, they never did it. And I don't think it's fair to say that black women writers who are getting a lot of publicity are doing it. They are not. That's a cheap shot. Gayle Jones doesn't do it, Gloria Naylor doesn't do it. Paule Marshall doesn't do it.

Q: Michelle Wallace?

TM: Has she written any fiction? She is a journalist and journalism is persuasive. It sets up different criteria. What does Gwendolyn Brooks care about the white male? And I know Alice Walker doesn't do it, as far as white men are concerned, but you are suggesting that she plays to white women? And I cannot

answer that, I don't believe it, and the evidence that you have is that Gloria Steinem has been very serious about promoting her. They were colleagues because Alice was her consulting editor on *Ms.* magazine. What magazine was in the position to do that? *Essence* didn't do it.

Q: Do you see this as a media hype?

TM: That's right. It's a media hype. *Ebony* didn't do it. It's sort of sweet that anybody did it.

Q: In *Song of Solomon,* Guitar says "everybody wants the life of the black man," and in *Tarbaby* this same kind of speech is given by Jadine, that everybody in the world is concerned about the black man. What is your feeling about the position of the black man?

TM: I think [laughs] there's a lot of energy that white people devote to black men. Guitar says, "White women love him. White men love him and so on" because they are always busy doing something about him. They want to kill him or sleep with him, or something. He really is very seriously in the world. Sometimes he wants to be left alone, right? I mean, who needs the Klan, right? But I think imaginatively black men have captured the imagination of the world. The fact that they don't know it themselves is kind of odd, but they have captured the imagination of the world. Everybody is worried about him.

Q: Where does that come from?

TM: Because they are fabulous! They're fabulous! There ain't nothing like them on the earth! Nothing!

Q: But why do we have such a bad time?

TM: Because of that. You don't know how fabulous you are. It's like the adage goes, "If you knew you are you would get up off your knees!" [laughter]

Q: When I read *Tarbaby,* I felt proud of being a black man.

TM: Of course.

Q: I couldn't see how anybody could say this was a woman's book and men should not read it. I felt it could have been written by a man.

TM: It wasn't gender oriented. Oh, I like that. It was hard for me to assume that I could write about men. But I felt good about

the job of writing about black men that reflected in a way some of what I feel about them, or what I believe about them. And I even think that some of my black male characters—they may not be little models of behavior—but that ain't the point. They are just more interesting than anybody else. I've never met one that bored me to death and I can't say that about white men. They are just fascinating people. So I can't write about them and make them little good-goodies, just because it would be nice to have a little man in a suit that is upward mobile. I love Ajax! [*Beloved*] And Milkman! [*Song of Solomon*] And Guitar! [*Song of Solomon*] I love that man more than anything. I was sorry about his little number! Son [*Tarbaby*] I thought was heaven, absolute heaven!

Q: How did you create somebody like Son—a black man who comes out of the sea?

TM: I know black men like that! I know people like that. My father was like that! My uncle was like that! Friends who are like that. And I don't have those who are not like that. If they are not like that, I don't have them. But I've known them. I have had really wonderful relationships with men—the best! And once you've been there, you don't want to truck with that other stuff [laughter]. You read my play *Dreaming Emmett.*

I must think their imagination alone is fantastic! Incredible! I don't know why they are always around here drooling. But there is nothing like black men on the globe!

Q: As the possibility for fiction or life?

TM: I mean life! All you have to do is open a door that much [she holds up her fingers] and let them in and they're gone! And you can see why white people are scared of them—they ought to be! I would be if I was a white man, I'd be scared to death!

Suppose those men were saying something important, suppose if we [black men and women writers] got together, wouldn't that be something? I don't want to go to any more Tony Brown things about the black man and the black woman. That's just something for white people to toss around and say, "Uh-huh!" I don't feel any animosity toward black men, but I know it exists because people tell me it exists, so I guess it exists. But I don't feel it. I don't feel it with my own sons. They like me. They have their little man thing but I don't bother them; they can do what they want to do. I don't want my sons to be

like those people. The only unfortunate relationship I ever had with a black man was their father. But I can't blame him for not liking me. I don't like it, but what can I tell you [laughter]. But he ain't the devil. He wasn't even from this country. There was some other kind of woman he wanted to be bothered with, it wasn't me [laughter]. He didn't want nobody like me running around with a big mouth. He wanted a little quiet girl, who will just shut up and do what he say. That makes sense, that's alright. It was inconvenient and problematic and painful, but I can't say he is a monster.

Q: There is no castrating woman in your prose. I didn't find it.

TM: You won't find it in Toni Cade either. Her male characters are fabulous. Those men are delicious. So I get disturbed when I see black men cut themselves down to size for some coat which some white man has cut for them. That's what I get upset about. That ain't the coat he is supposed to wear, he may not even wear a coat. But when you see them they eat up the whole place.

Q: So this question—this issue—has gotten to be a very trivialized one. You have moved beyond that.

TM: I'm not in that one. NO I'm not going to be in that one.

Q: Do reviewers and interviewers talk to you about this in your work?

TM: No.

Q: Why not?

TM: They always talked to me about easy stuff. They don't ever talk to me about what I really think most of them come with a preconceived idea. But most of them don't ask me questions like the ones you have put to me that would lead me to say personally what my own version is about my regard, my fascination artistically, and my awe, as well as love for black people. That stuff is not to be played with. This is serious business. And I'm not going to make choices between my sons and my brothers and some white folk. That ain't no choice. I'm not in that gender fight.

Q: When you create a strong black male character, do you think you create a threat in your reader?

TM: Yes, that's right. I create a threat, and then some readers began to ask about what their roles were. They say, "How come all your black males leave home? How come they don't stay home and take care of their children?" Black and white readers ask me this. I say, "Well, what characters?" They say, "Ajax, for example." I say, "Well, he can leave home. Ulysses left home, and you all said he was a hero. But when a black character leaves home you say he is irresponsible. He might be on an adventure." I think that's one of the best things black men ever did was leave home, because they could because they knew somebody was going to take care of business. And that's alright with me. I don't have problems with that. They are always trying to force my black male characters into some kind of nuclear white family with the father, the mother and the children, something they don't even like. The Africans had nine homes, they kept their land that way, they would have a farm two hundred miles away with a woman and some children, many wives and another farm over there. And they could take care of thousands of miles of territory. But when you come in there and make them monogamous, they took their land because they didn't have anybody over there guarding it.

Now, I'm not saying that polygamy is the solution. All I'm saying is what the practical consequence of this is. What are they talking about, anyway? They are trying to confine Ajax to his little nuclear house. They won't even pay a mother on welfare unless she ain't got no man in the house. So I'm not befuddled by all that.

Q: What about white writers like John Updike and Norman Mailer and sexism?

TM: They don't even ask them that kind of question. They don't care. They don't say, what about this character, he didn't meet his sociological obligations, you know, if they get divorced and do mean things. Think about violence in the white media. Everybody remembers Jimmy Cagney smashing that grapefruit in that woman's face. Did anybody have a debate on television about white males being violent to their women? No! [laughter]. I've been looking at that all my life. When a black man does it in a little book called *The Color Purple,* the whites say, "Ohh!" She must be saying that all black men. . . . Look at Mickey Spillane. Look at all those white men running around

beating up women in their books, or having contempt for them! Look, they talk about Norman Mailer now, but all those years nobody said a word!

Q: So sometimes they use a sociological criterion for the black writer and the literary criterion for the white writer?

TM: Yes, and that's because the black man is still on their mind. Whatever I have to say about you, or whatever you have to say about me—black man and black women—they are going to weight it with some extra-literary criterion. I'm trying to deal with the exhilaration and the complexity of black men—black men are very complex (not that women are not, I find women equally complex), but you have to weight that through. Black men, the least of them, are more complex than any man I've ever met.

And that is what I want to show. That doesn't mean that they are going to always be following some program set out by whatever the movement is at that moment. There is lots to complain about, I suppose, but I'm not so much interested in the man in the white hat as opposed to the man in the black hat. That's why I like Leon Forrest's and Henry Dumas's books so much, for in their works you get that sense of who these male characters are. I want to do my male and female characters that way, because art is like that. I'm not going to make my characters smaller than life because it's desirable and fashionable.

Q: What about your drama *Dreaming Emmett*? Do you use the same technique of subtlety to draw his character?

TM: That kid tore the place up. The whole play was about what was on his mind.