THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Toni Morrison, Editor: A Collective Interview with Dana A. Williams

BRENT HAYES EDWARDS, FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN, ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS, A. J. VERDELLE, AND AUTUMN WOMACK

Dana A. Williams's long-awaited book *Toni at Random* is a revelatory portrait of the novelist from an unusual vantage point: her innovative and influential work as an editor at Random House from 1971 to 1983. Morrison famously pulled off an unprecedented juggling act, holding a full-time editorial career as one of the very few African American faces in senior roles in the trade publishing world while somehow finding time to complete *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981), as her own reputation as a novelist grew. The book raises fascinating questions not only about Morrison's singular path but about the complex relationship between editorial practice and writerly practice in general, and about the position of African American literature in the US publishing landscape. As a book mainly concerned with the 1970s, *Toni at Random* can also be read as an intriguing if oblique reflection on the afterlives of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and the extensive efforts at institution building that had emerged in the previous decade, not only in the Black studies and African American studies programs that were founded in colleges and universities around the country but also in Black independent and small-press publishing.

While drawing back the curtain to offer fascinating details about Morrison's work with some of the more celebrated authors she handled (including Muhammad Ali, Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Barbara Chase-Riboud), *Toni at Random*

Biographical notes about the contributors appear at the end of the interview.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America
PMLA 141·1 (2026), doi:10.1632/S0030812926101679

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contains a number of surprises that will force even readers familiar with the broad-stroke outlines of this aspect of Morrison's career to rethink our assumptions. Partly because of the colossal importance of her own fiction and partly because of her close association with writers such as Bambara, Jones, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton, Morrison is rightfully viewed—along with other novelists and poets such as Audre Lorde and Alice Walker (who, it is worth recalling, was a contributing editor at *Ms.* magazine through much of the 1970s) and scholars, critics, and anthologists such as Barbara Christian, Akasha Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, Eleanor W. Traylor, Patricia Bell Scott, and Mary Helen Washington—as a pivotal figure in the emergence and canonization of a generation of African American women writers.[1] But Williams reminds us that Jones was the first female writer whose work Morrison acquired, after the two women were put in contact by the poet Michael Harper in October 1973: "Before publishing *Corregidora*, all the novels Morrison had brought out—Bryan Woolley's *Some Sweet Day*, Michael Moorcock's *Breakfast in the Ruins*, John McClusky's *Look What They Done to My Song*, and Leon Forrest's *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden*—were by men" (192). *Toni at Random* documents Morrison's crucial role working with a range of male writers, not only of fiction (she later published important works by Henry Dumas and Wesley Brown, among others) but also of scholarship (Chinweizu, Ivan Van Sertima, Boris Bittker, Melville Herskovits), autobiographies, self-help books and political essays (Ali, Bill Cosby, Huey P. Newton), anthologies (Quincy Troupe), and popular history (Middleton "Spike" Harris, James Haskins, James Alan McPherson, Miller Williams).

The sheer breadth of Morrison's work is also surprising. From the inception of her time at Random House, she insisted on working in multiple genres, publishing not just novels but also literary anthologies, short stories, poetry, autobiography, and a striking mix of nonfiction, including a medical handbook, a cookbook, and a legal textbook (see Williams 131). The diasporic range of Morrison's output is striking, too, starting with the very first book she published in 1972, an anthology edited by Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy titled *Contemporary African Literature*. As Williams writes, "the impact of the anthology as her first publication as editor was tremendous. *Contemporary African Literature* quietly announced Morrison's editorial aesthetic to bring to as large an audience as possible explorations of interior Black life with minimal interest in talking to or being consumed by an imagined white reader" (320). Although Williams concentrates on Morrison's role with Black writing in particular, some of the books she published in other domains are noteworthy, too, such as William Hinton's 1983 *Shenfan: The Continuing Revolution in a Chinese Village*, a portrait of peasant life during the Cultural Revolution framed as a sequel to Hinton's classic 1966 *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*.

Rather than a conventional interview with Williams, what follows is something of an editorial experiment. I invited Farah Jasmine Griffin, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, A. J. Verdelle, and Autumn Womack, four brilliant scholars with deep investments in Black biography as well as an intimate familiarity with Morrison's work in particular, to contribute comments and questions. I orchestrated their contributions into a set of prompts and asked Williams to respond to or elaborate on our interwoven observations in any way she saw fit. The result is a virtual collective interview, which strives to emulate the rich polyphony of perspective and literary history compiled in Williams's remarkable study.

Brent Hayes Edwards

Autumn Womack: Dana, your archive here is incredibly expansive. The Random House files alone are huge, but, as you show, it's also largely a business archive filled with call logs, financial statements, and marketing plans. I would love to hear you talk through what it was like working in the archive. How did you read the material, and how might your reading of the material have changed over the years? For example, one of the parts of the book that I love is the way you distill a narrative

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from something like marketing copy or a sales report. How did you decide how to tell the story? How did the archive's own organizing logic inform the book's shape and structure? This is really a question about the story that editorial work tells, and what it means to edit that story into a story that can sustain a book.

Dana A. Williams: The Random House archive is 702 linear feet. That's 1694 boxes. When I began working on this project, my only focused experience as a researcher in the archive was with the James W. Butcher, Jr., collection at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. The Butcher collection is 4.8 feet, by comparison. I thought searching for any mention of the actress "Chloe Wofford" in years of clippings documenting the Howard Players (the drama troupe Butcher co-directed for years) was challenging. It turns out, that archive was manageable. Navigating the Random House archives required a very different skill. I started with the editorial files, which at least narrowed the number of boxes to 115—49 boxes covering the years 1968 to 1977 and 66 covering the years 1968 to 1983. Today, the collection is well indexed, which will make it so much easier for researchers. But in the early 2000s, when I made my first trips to the reading room, there was no index. I had to look through each folder, at each page. From there, it was a matter of following breadcrumbs, and there were many. If Morrison recruited an author, all the correspondence would be in her files. But if she inherited an author from another editor, which was the case with Lucille Clifton, I then had to go to that editor's files to see what backstory might be there. I also wanted to see what was in the Clifton archives, which meant sifting through a differently organized collection at another library. If I wanted to look at Morrison's notes on a manuscript, I'd have to look in the manuscripts series (as opposed to the editorial files series). If there was a permissions question I couldn't find an answer to in the editorial files, I would go to the rights and permissions subseries. The same is true for publicity and photographs. There were so many moving parts. I love a good puzzle as much as the next person (reading political thrillers and nonviolent mysteries is my guilty pleasure), so I enjoyed piecing things together. It was as daunting, however, as it was fulfilling. Most times, I found what I was looking for. Sometimes I didn't. Sometimes what I thought I knew matched up with notes I had from conversations with Morrison or one of her authors; sometimes it didn't. It's the beauty and the burden of the archive. So, I leaned in to the beauty of it and committed to telling the story the archive suggested it wanted told. The more artifacts I had, the harder it got to choose. There was always a fine line between sharing everything I was learning (like where she had lunch with an author and what the receipt says they ate) and staying within the page restrictions I knew I had.

I also had the benefit, early on, of conversations I had with Morrison. If a particular story stuck out to her (like her staying with Barbara Chase-Riboud in France to work on *From Memphis & Peking*), I tried to find everything I could to color that story. Conversely, when I found the letter from Chase-Riboud about not wanting her picture on the cover of the book and shared it with Morrison, she let out a hearty laugh about it and doubled down on her description of Chase-Riboud's "insanity" being interesting. Most insanity was boring, Morrison joked. At least Chase-Riboud's was fascinating.

Twenty years is a long time to work in an archive off and on. My last few trips were quite different from the early ones. Early on, I approached the archive with open curiosity—looking for a through line. The closer I got to completion, the more focused I could be—fact-checking and verifying.

Brent Hayes Edwards: Beyond the methodological issues raised by Autumn's question—the implications of approaching a critical literary study of this sort through what is ultimately a corporate repository—I also found myself enthralled by what might be called the ancillary genres that emerge in your handling of Morrison's editorial files at Random House. I have a running joke with a close colleague and friend that, whatever my scholarship adds up to, my real intellectual achievement is a body of work that will never see the light of day: the dozens of confidential manuscript reviews and tenure evaluations I've written over the years, on which

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I've spent as much time and effort as anything I've done. Reading *Toni at Random*, it occurred to me that Morrison gradually became a master of a similar sort of pseudogenre that is by definition not for publication: the in-house "editorial fact sheet," a summary of a book manuscript that an editor prepares for internal planning for marketing and promotion, which (as you point out) is often the main place where editors are able to make an argument for a book to their colleagues (some stunning examples of Morrison's fact sheets are quoted on pages 46–47, 87–88, 93, 102, 117, 125, 150–51, 160, 197, 204, 209, 271–72, 290, 300, and 316).

Dana A. Williams: This is so true. I hope my insistence on rendering some of that visible comes across artistically and not forcibly. What I was thinking was, "Oh, I'm finding a way to tell this." But I wanted it to come across to the reader as, "What a perfect illustration." Here, I tried to channel my inner (aspirational) Toni Morrison and keep the seams from showing. I was as impressed by how deftly she handled difficult situations with polite snark as I was by how involved she was with the books she edited long after the manuscript was final. Her interoffice memos to the design team about the dust jackets for some books come to mind, for instance. Watching revisions she made for an editorial fact sheet—which is how the editor communicates the metadata, marketing, and sales information for a book—was fascinating. The right description could make or break a book. Deciding who she would ask to write blurbs for each book and how she appealed to that writer's ego to get them to agree to do it (and on time)—that's more invisible labor that I wanted to unmask.

And I wanted to look at every sheet of paper to find it. You might find buried in a folder a list Morrison made of Black bookstores and Black radio stations all over the country that she wanted the sales and publicity teams to be aware of and to use. That's work no one except Black readers and listeners could appreciate, but even they would not know she did it. It's not lost on me, and probably not on readers, that I spent very little time talking about her line edits on manuscripts. That's for two reasons. First, when it's there, it wasn't the most interesting thing about her work with the writer. Her written comments, which she tended to do in broad strokes as letters and not on the manuscript, were far more useful to understand her editorial vision for a book. Second, the harder work involved the tasks that go unremarked on, that no one really thinks about. The manuscript reviews for which we get no credit as academics are the perfect example, Brent. We do it because we want good books in the world. But wouldn't it be nice if everyone understood and appreciated the role we often play ghostwriting—letters of recommendation, feedback on seminar papers, tenure and promotion reviews—and the intellectual work we do that doesn't have our names on it?

A. J. Verdelle: Taking a step back, I'd add that *Toni at Random* is an opportunity to reconsider exactly what archives are, in the broadest sense. The book compels us to think about the politics of collecting and about the differences between an author's personal papers, on the one hand, and the business records of a publishing conglomerate, on the other. How did your work on the book expand or transform your understanding of archives in general? Were there aspects of archival research that you came to approach differently over the course of working on the book?

Dana A. Williams: The upside of working primarily in the Random House archives is that the company seems to have kept everything—from prices for advertising in major venues to legal reviews of a manuscript to expense reports. Still, there are politics of collecting, indeed. Morrison worked from home part-time for many years, especially while she was working on a manuscript of her own for an extended period. So, there were things I found in her personal archive that maybe should have found their way back to Random House but didn't. I'd wonder if that was intentional or coincidental. Of course, despite the many things she agreed to include in her personal collection there are, no doubt, things she withheld. As a researcher, you're always wondering about the decisions for inclusion and omission. You're also looking for the other side of the story. So, I tried to visit as many

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

personal collections of the writers as I could, to see what might be missing. The Toni Cade Bambara collection at Spelman was among my favorites. I hear often that "The Two Tonis" chapter is a reader's favorite. That's because Morrison and I talked at length about Bambara. Bambara was my totem if I needed to get her to talk more. It worked every time. Ask a Toni Cade question, and Ms. Morrison's eyes lit up, and the metaphorical sea parted. The richness of their friendship, as far as correspondence, was on display more in Bambara's collection than in the editorial files, which were laced with fun but were by and large about the business of book making. So, any dancing that chapter does is because I learned that one collection never tells the full story. When you can put relevant ones in conversation with one another, you can move between a waltz, the hustle, cha-cha slide, and go-go effortlessly. My point is some research is for color, while other research is for fact-finding. Alexis (Pauline Gumbs) first introduced me to the small role Morrison played in Kizzy Enterprises, a publishing outfit that Black women writers including Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and June Jordan hoped to launch. Before talking to Morrison about it, I made it a point to visit the Jordan archives, for instance. The more experienced I became as a researcher working in an archive, the more I approached the archive as a living thing that needed to be in conversation with a memory instead of a dead thing with artifacts.

Farah Jasmine Griffin: During the time you were researching this book, you were fortunate to have known Morrison and to have spoken with her many times. Given this unprecedented access to your subject, were there still discoveries that surprised you in your archival research or interviews?

Dana A. Williams: Having her support was "sheer good fortune," as she writes in the dedication to *Sula*. One discovery, if I can call it that, is that she was quietly editing me from the beginning of this project. It started out as a book about the fiction she edited—putting that fiction in conversation with her fiction. The more we talked, the more she talked about books other than the fiction. It took me some time to realize that the project was not a traditional scholarly monograph but a literary biography of sorts. What I appreciate is the fact that she didn't push that angle. She let me come to it by guiding me there gently with stories that piqued my curiosity.

I was surprised by how strategic she was at every turn. She was a de facto agent for Gayl Jones, for instance, which allowed Jones to keep the percentage of her meager advance instead of sharing it with an agent. When it was clear that she could not negotiate a fair contract for Jones, however, she guided her to an agent who could. She left nothing to chance. That was surprising. I knew better than to think that things just happened. But I did not know just how deliberate she was about every small thing.

Brent Hayes Edwards: I found that I was continually surprised throughout the book by Morrison's clearheaded commitment to the enterprise of commercial publishing. It is no secret that Random House is a trade publisher where aesthetic decisions are driven, shaped, and at times warped by the profit margin. Given the political emphasis on autonomous Black communal life that runs so deeply through her work, I think I expected somehow that there would be a current of unease or even a subversive impulse underlying her time in the corporate world. Despite the ways that, as Laura McGrath has noted, "race has been thoroughly incorporated by the market" in the trade industry in recent years (772), it remains the case that—as the editor Erroll McDonald, one of Morrison's successors at Random House, once wryly phrased it— "publishing is notoriously undiversified, the exception of course being mail-room and messenger staffs" (qtd. in Finnerty; see also Alter and Harris, "Publishers Struggle" and "Publishing Falls"). Of course Morrison was well aware of her isolation as one of the very few African American editors in the business.

You open the first chapter by recounting Morrison's participation in the 1976 Second National Conference of Afro-American Writers at Howard University, where she states, "I think that the survival of Black publishing, which to me is a sort of way of

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

saying the survival of Black writing, will depend on the same things that the survival of Black anything depends on, which is the energies of Black people—sheer energy, inventiveness and innovation, tenacity, the ability to hang on, and a contempt for those huge, monolithic institutions and agencies which do obstruct us" (qtd. in Williams 4). Random House has to be counted as one of those "huge, monolithic institutions" she has in mind, I would say, given the degree to which publishing was in the 1970s and remains today a white industry in which "books about race" are produced for "the presumptively white reading audience around which the market is constructed" (McGrath 772; see also Nishikawa).

Despite her own words at Howard, however, Morrison comes across as unconflicted about working in the belly of the beast. When Chase-Riboud is reluctant to participate in the marketing campaign for her 1974 book of poetry *From Memphis & Peking*, Morrison responds with an exasperated letter where she underlines to her recalcitrant author in no uncertain terms that Random House "is a commercial house historically unenchanted with 500 slim volumes of profound poetry that languish in stockrooms" (qtd. in Williams 136). Morrison does not pause at the seeming irony of her position. And at the same time, she is developing close relationships with a number of Black writers who are working mainly in independent publishing.

Dana A. Williams: Morrison saw Random House change over the years. The firm never lost sight of the publish-for-profit motive. But she did feel as if the days of publishing great books because they were well done were coming to an end, even at Random House, which was one of the last holdouts. And she was disenchanted by that change. One strategy was to make sure that she always had at least one book on her list that was likely to sell well so that she could also have a book that might be a critical success even if it underperformed financially.

I was waiting, too, to discover the covert operation to undermine capitalism or to diversify the industry. But that just wasn't her approach to the industry, for whatever reason. Working in the industry at a mainstream house was a means to an end, and that end was to bring remarkable books to readers. The larger sociopolitical end would have to be achieved elsewhere and by someone else.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: Picking up on that last point, I loved learning more about Morrison's strategic relationship to feminist publishing during her editorship at Random House. What are your thoughts about how independent Black feminist publishing initiatives impacted Morrison's decision-making and her relationships with writers like Bambara, Jordan, Clifton, and Angela Davis? I'm thinking especially of Davis's practice of publishing pamphlets, including with Kitchen Table Press, on topics that she also published about at Random House (see MacPhee). Full disclosure, I am wearing a Kitchen Table Press sweatshirt as I write this!

Dana A. Williams: Long live Kitchen Table Press! I think that's an important point—that while she was not radical about undermining the "notoriously undiversified" industry that was her bread and butter for years, she encouraged people who were committed to diversifying publishing and made it a point to facilitate those paths when possible. She was also clear that one of the ways she could get larger advances for the writers she edited—and, let's be honest, the writers needed the advances of a mainstream house—was by arguing that audiences were hungry for more opportunities to read and support the writers who had relationships with Black feminist outlets: publishing and otherwise. Bambara's stories had been published in women's magazines here and there but never collected. Morrison was intent on using her platform to curate Bambara's disparate reading audiences into a larger one that translated into book sales.

It's not pure altruism though. Bambara's edited essay collection *The Black Woman* was a great success by all standards. Courting Bambara to Random House as a fiction writer (and not as an editor) also meant that Bambara would not publish with a feminist press or an independent Black publisher.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Farah Jasmine Griffin: One of the great insights of your book is Morrison's awareness of the many existing Black networks—networks of readers and communities, organizations, publics, and so on—that would support and publicize her books and authors (I am thinking here of the difference between her experiences working with Clifton, on the one hand, and with Chase-Riboud, on the other). Many of these extended from the days of segregation and were strengthened by Black Arts institution building.

Dana A. Williams: Yes, some books and writers lent themselves more to those networks than others. She knew all the places where Black people who might be called "literati" hung out, which meant that she also knew them and the people they knew and the places they hung out. There was no formal network of Black institutions. There still isn't. But there was absolutely always the informal network. Segregation made it necessary. The Black Arts Movement made it beautiful. One of my favorite lines from Clifton is in a letter to Morrison about Bambara—"she must really love us" (qtd. in Williams 90). Clifton could recognize that in Bambara because Clifton loved us! Promoting Clifton as a Black writer was easy and necessary. No way around it. Chase-Riboud loved us universally, I think. Clifton and Bambara loved us particularly. I love that for us.

Brent Hayes Edwards: Another way to put it would be to say that even as *Toni at Random* is clearly a study centered on the singular figure of Morrison, one of the not-so-secret lessons of the book is that you keep showing us that Morrison is produced and nurtured by those multiple networks. She is never alone. As she was well aware, her position at Random House became available in part because of the departure of Charles F. Harris, the pioneering African American editor who worked at Random House from 1967 to November 1971, when he left to found Howard University Press (see Harris; Williams 28). Morrison most notably inherited the Muhammad Ali autobiography *The Greatest* from Harris, who had acquired the book years earlier in a remarkable coup (Williams 221–26). Likewise at the end of Morrison's tenure at the press, after working on multiple books with Leon Forrest, she handed off the author to her protégé McDonald, who was hired as an editor at Random House just as Morrison was leaving to focus on her own fiction. Morrison reassured Forrest that "I believe the editor who will handle the book is really first rate. . . . I believe I told you about him some time ago—with a lot of enthusiasm in my voice because I was so happy a brilliant young black editor had been hired here" (qtd. in Williams 128). Reading at the margins of the book, one realizes that Morrison's career as editor was populated by a continual stream of fellow travelers in the literary world, figures such as Hattie Gossett, Lynn Nesbit, Ted Solotaroff, Michael Harper, and Quincy Troupe, who helped connect her to potential authors and allies both inside and outside the industry.

Farah Jasmine Griffin: Yes, definitely. Reflecting now on the history you document in this book, Dana, do you think such networks exist today?

Dana A. Williams: I know they do. I met Tracy Sherrod, who acquired the book when she was still an editor at Amistad, because she used to come to Howard to talk to students interested in publishing. We haven't had a formal publishing institute at Howard (or for Black people interested in the industry) since Harris left Howard. But Sherrod has stood in that gap. Regina Brooks, a Black agent, put me in touch with the extraordinary Marie Brown, the only other Black woman editor I know of whose editorship rivals that of Morrison as her peer. Yahdon Israel, an editor at Simon and Schuster, has championed *Toni at Random* like the book is his baby. My first in-person conversation with Abby West, the editor who brought the book home, was at the fiftieth anniversary of the Phillis Wheatley Festival at Jackson State University. Much like the original festival that Margaret Walker organized to gather Black writers in celebration of Wheatley as a literary foremother for Black women writers, the anniversary festival was a veritable who's who in Black letters. My point is that the networks exist, even if they sometimes double as hush harbors.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Autumn Womack: The book raises questions about the relationship between editorial labor and politics, and what counts as "political." Black editorial work, we know, has always doubled as political work. In *Toni at Random*, we certainly see how Morrison entered political debates by publishing titles that stretched the boundaries of what counts as "Black" literature (for instance, by Forrest or Chase-Riboud) or by curating a public archive of Black historical life (*The Black Book*), to name just a few of the practices. But the book also raises questions about the other kinds of political labor that editorial work produces, demands, and calls for, while necessarily shifting the kinds of labor that count as political. So much of Morrison's "politics" gets practiced totally outside the purview of the public, and most of the time her writers don't even see it (I'm thinking here of the moment when Jordan gets frustrated because she doesn't know how much maneuvering and strategizing Morrison is doing on her behalf [Williams 152–56]). This is different from much of the editorial politics that gets practiced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in places like the Black press or independent small presses. This is less of a question and more of an invitation to think, vis-à-vis Morrison, about the terms of a Black editorial politics.

Dana A. Williams: I empathized with Morrison as I read some of the letters. She lost friends because they didn't always know what she had to endure. She had known and been friends with the *Black World* editor Carole Parks for years when Parks accused Morrison of trying to take credit for the "discovery" of Henry Dumas, a Black writer whose work was first published in *Negro Digest / Black World*. As excited as people were about the promotional work that attended the publication of *The Black Book*, they were also concerned that Morrison was facilitating Random House's exploitation of Black culture for profit. The reason Morrison fought so hard for *The Black Book*, for instance, is because the white sales team members would claim that there were no Black books that they could sell to Black people and white people. So, she was fighting inside and outside Random House. Sadly, I imagine that's the case even today among Black editors. Navigating Black editorial politics is like walking a tightrope wearing Crocs.

A. J. Verdelle: In promoting and discussing the book, you must run into people who have had varying levels of engagement with Morrison. Many of Morrison's readers express the wish that they had gotten to know her, or had the chance to interact with her. She had a reputation for being "tough," and perhaps you have heard this in your discussions. I have also heard that you consider Morrison a genius. (I think I've heard you say that explicitly.) As you reflect back on your research for the book, do you agree with that characterization of Morrison as "tough," and how do you see Morrison's toughness as relating to her genius, if at all? In other words, do you think her genius and her perceived "churlishness" (which was the word she tended to use herself) are intertwined? Do you think toughness, limit setting, and contrariness go with the territory of her genius and level of achievement?

Dana A. Williams: I'm borrowing phrases again, A. J. She was "just outrageously brilliant." That's how Morrison described Bambara (Williams 110), and now I'm turning that back to Morrison. She was that for sure. I do think she communicates genius, in terms of her intellectual giftedness. I think her creative prowess is a function of her intellect. So, I won't separate them.

I do think she's tough on the reader. You have to work to reap the benefits of a Morrison novel. Otherwise, you're likely to be a frustrated reader. But I'm OK with that, because I don't mind working for insight. The essays make it clear that you can get some of that insight without working as hard, but then the essays aren't as beautiful. When Sixo describes what Patsy, the Thirty-Mile Woman, does for him—"She gather me, man"—that's the function of a serious mind at work, a mind as concerned with aesthetics and craft as with sentiment (Morrison, *Beloved* 272).

I appreciate the contrariness. What else but a contrary impulse points us in the direction of truth, even from the grave? When I taught "Racism and

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fascism," a few weeks ago, I had to remind myself that those were remarks she gave in March 1995 at Howard for a Charter Day address, not in 2026.

Autumn Womack: Reading the book, I found myself wondering about the relationship between Morrison's editorial aesthetic and her literary aesthetic, especially since the height of her editorial career coincides with the rise of her novelistic one. In Morrison's early interviews, we see an effort to pin down her intellectual formation and to situate her either within a legible Black literary tradition (Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright) or within a British or American modernist legacy (William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf). In most cases, Morrison refuses the very premise of the question. But I'm wondering if we might think of editorial work as a kind of intellectual formation, and how, more than anything else, the authors that she was editing transformed how she understood, and ultimately reimagined, narrative and the novel. This might also be a larger question about editorial aesthetics and intellectual formation in Black literary practice more broadly, since it is difficult to find a Black writer who did not also do editorial work (even if the great majority have tended to work in newspaper and journal publishing rather than in the commercial book world).

Brent Hayes Edwards: I was thinking about the same question from another angle. McDonald recalls that when the legendary editor Jacob Epstein hired him at Random House, Epstein told him that "if you stay in this industry, you can be a graduate student forever—you can learn things, immerse yourself in subject matters that you never imagined you'd be interested in, and develop a store of knowledge that few other jobs would afford you" (McDonald 00:15:40–16:04). In thinking about the ways editorial work can be understood as a realm of intellectual formation, it seems like the key example in Morrison's career is *The Black Book*, given the well-known link between that extraordinary compendium and Morrison's novel *Beloved* (see Wall, ch. 4). But even if it does not set out explicitly to track this interplay, *Toni at Random* could be described in part as a subtle study of the ways that, as you put it, Dana, "as was frequently the case, ideas [Morrison] pursued in her fiction made their way into her work as an editor" and vice versa (69).

Dana A. Williams: I do think she was influenced more by the writers she edited than by any other writers. Part of it may be that she spent more time with those manuscripts—thinking about them and how they work and could work better. Another part of it is that every book she actively acquired (as opposed to being assigned) was aesthetically in tune with her vision of the possibilities for fiction. I often see new connections between her novels and the books she edited when I revisit the novels now.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs: I really enjoyed learning more about the intimacy of Morrison's editing process with Black women, especially Davis, Bambara, and Chase-Riboud. I love knowing that living in each other's homes and interfacing with each other's family was part of the collaborative process. I also learned from Cheryll Y. Greene that Morrison let Bambara use her home as a space to greet family and friends and say good-bye during her final days. I would love to hear any thoughts you have about how home, family, and editorial collaboration impact Black women's literary lives.

Dana A. Williams: Friendships, real friendships, can never be overrated. And friendship for Morrison meant sharing her home, her family, and her mind. Davis lived with her for a short time, not just out of convenience but because Davis needed to feel at home. When Davis was going to Atlanta for a visit, Morrison suggested she stay with Bambara. There was a protectiveness and an ethic of care that facilitated editorial collaborations because trust was at the core. I don't know that Davis's autobiography would have been the same without Morrison. I'll put it another way: we would have gotten a different autobiography if Davis had had a different editor. We see Davis's literary life the way we do in *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* because of that collaboration you speak of.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Autumn Womack: Early in the chapter that focuses on Morrison's editorial relationship with Jones, you include a moment from an interview in which Morrison is reflecting on her initial encounter with the first draft of *Corregidora*. She's absolutely astounded by the work, writing in a 1975 article about Jones for *Mademoiselle* that "she had written a story that thought the unthinkable" (qtd. in Williams 191). This phrasing, "thought the unthinkable," immediately made me think of the title of her 1988 Tanner Lecture, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," and then, of course, of her 1992 book *Playing in the Dark*. One of the things that Morrison insists on in *Playing in the Dark* is that she is reading like a writer (as opposed to a literary critic). As I was rereading *Playing in the Dark*, it occurred to me that she is also reading like an editor. In mining the Africanist presence in American literature, she is interested in moments when plot gets away from the author or when characters' choices become completely unconvincing, when the failure of (white) imagination leads to a failed literary project. In *Toni at Random* you elaborate on the ways that Morrison's editorial relationship with Bambara transformed how she wrote, but it also seems as if editing changed the way she understood the very act of reading, and what it means to read ethically and responsibly. This is less a question and more just an invitation to reflect on the slippage between not just editor and writer, and reader and writer, but editor and reader.

Dana A. Williams: Yes, a slippage she was very comfortable with. I'd add teacher and critic into that mix.

Brent Hayes Edwards: For me this question brings to mind Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's much discussed definition of translation as "the most intimate act of reading" (315). If translation can be said to involve reading at that extreme, subtle intensity, it is no less an act of writing, as a second-order practice that involves the transformative recomposition of a source text. There is a relation between editing and translating in this sense, both involving complex combinations of reading and writing, although editorial work might be described as a collaborative intervention within the first-order writing process itself.

Surely editing, however it is undertaken, involves an openness to intimate engagement that is not unrelated to Spivak's observation about translation. As McDonald puts it, "the editing of a book is the evolution of a personal relationship with an author. It's a very personal endeavor, because both of you are interested in what you're working on, to achieve its highest integrity—and neither one of you might be aware of what that is. So as you learn from each other the editing begins to take shape" (01:12:30–13:10). This is to suggest that it is not quite that the editor helps authors realize their visions, but more that those visions emerge only through the unpredictable and improvised interaction between editor and writer, what takes shape as they learn to learn from each other.

The editor who worked the most with Morrison on her own fiction, Robert Gottlieb, describes it as a sort of fundamentally sympathetic relationship based in shared practice. He noted in retrospect that what made his work with Morrison so successful was the fact that they "read the same way: so that when I make a suggestion she instantly knows why, whether it's about a sentence or involves a major structural issue: For instance, I thought that one of her later books needed a greatly expanded final third; she saw why and solved the problem swiftly, perfectly, and untemperamentally" (126). In other words, a collaborative writerly practice is forged out of a shared readerly sensibility.

What I find intriguing and in some ways confounding about Morrison's career as an editor is the seeming disjunction between the way a writer works and the way an editor works. The scholar Hayley O'Malley, who is working on an exciting book project about the engagement of writers including Morrison and Bambara with film, introduced me to a thought-provoking conversation between Morrison and Clyde Taylor at a film conference in 1988 where Morrison talks about the differences between working in the two mediums, noting pointedly that what she loves, in the end—what makes her a novelist rather than a filmmaker or a playwright—is what she calls the "sovereignty" and

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"privacy" of writing novels, using only the "twenty-six letters of an alphabet, some punctuation and a language that can accommodate it" to create a world (Morrison, "Summary"). From this perspective, there is an interesting tension between the sensibility of the fiction writer, so jealous of her sovereignty, so committed to going it alone, and the editor, lending expertise and creativity to a collaborative endeavor that will ultimately circulate under another author's name. And yet somehow Morrison finds fertile paths between the two sorts of practice.

Dana A. Williams: I think you captured it quite nicely. I asked her often to describe what her editorial vision was or what defined a Morrison-edited novel. She insisted that every book called for something different. Every writer had their own needs. What she was always after, however, in each instance was to do for the book or the writer something no other editor could do. There's a sovereignty and privacy to that, too.

Note

1. See Lorde; Walker, *I love myself* and *In Search*; Christian; Hull et al.; Traylor; Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans* and *Midnight Birds*.

Works Cited

Alter, Alexandra, and Elizabeth A. Harris. "Publishers Struggle on Diversity Progress." *The New York Times*, 29 Feb. 2024, p. C1.

———. "Publishing Falls Short on Hiring Diversity." *The New York Times*, 22 Aug. 2024, p. C1.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976*. Greenwood, 1980.

Finnerty, Amy. "Outnumbered: Standing Out at Work." *The New York Times Magazine*, 16 July 2000, p. 63.

Gottlieb, Robert. *Avid Reader: A Life*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Harris, Charles F. Interview. Conducted by Shawn Wilson, 2 Aug. 2005, tape 7. *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive*, www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/charles-f-harris-40.

Hull, Gloria T., et al., editors. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Feminist Press, 1982.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

MacPhee, Josh. "Angela Davis, Part II." *Just Seeds*, 6 Feb. 2012, justseeds.org/jbbtc-96-angela-davis-pt-2/.

McDonald, Erroll, panelist. "Publishing-in-Transit: Erroll McDonald." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 20 Oct. 2022, brooklynrail.org/event/2022/10/20/publishing-in-transit-erroll-mcdonald/.

McGrath, Laura B. "'Books about Race': Commercial Publishing and Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century." *New Literary History*, vol. 53, no. 4, autumn 2022 / vol. 54, no. 1, winter 2023, pp. 771–94.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

———. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1992.

———. *Sula*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

———. "Summary and Conclusions—Clyde Taylor and Toni Morrison." Birth of Black Cinema Symposium Transcript, Toni Morrison Papers, C1491, Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton U Library, Schweitzer Chair, 1987–89, box 173, folder 15.

———. "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, winter 1989, pp. 1–34.

Nishikawa, Kinohi. "Driven by the Market: African American Literature after Urban Fiction." *American Literary History*, vol. 33, no. 2, summer 2021, pp. 320–49.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." 1992. *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 3rd ed., Routledge, 2012, pp. 312–30.

Traylor, Eleanor W. "Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara." *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Doubleday, 1984, pp. 58–70.

Walker, Alice, editor. *I love myself when I am laughing . . . and then again when I am looking mean and impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Feminist Press, 1979.

———. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

Wall, Cheryl A. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. U of North Carolina P, 2005.

Washington, Mary Helen, editor. *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*. Anchor Books, 1975.

———, editor. *Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers*. Anchor Books, 1980.

Williams, Dana A. *Toni at Random: The Iconic Writer's Legendary Editorship*. Amistad, 2025.

DANA A. WILLIAMS is professor of African American literature in the Department of English and dean of the graduate school at Howard University. In addition to *Toni at Random*, her books include *In the Light of Likeness—Transformed: The Literary Art of Leon Forrest* (Ohio State UP, 2005), *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays* (Ohio State UP, 2009), and *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). She is a past president of both the Modern Language Association and the College Language Association, and she serves as the editor of the *CLA Journal*.

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN is university professor at Columbia University, where she also served as the inaugural chair of the

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press

African American and African Diaspora studies department. She is the author or editor of eight books including *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics during World War II* (Basic Books, 2013) and *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature* (W. W. Norton, 2021).

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS is the author of several acclaimed books, most recently *Survival Is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*, which won the Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction and the ZORA award in nonfiction from the Hurston Wright Legacy Foundation and was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in Biography. Her next book of poetry and essays, *Primary: After and with Alma Thomas*, will be published by Yale University Press in September 2026.

A. J. VERDELLE is associate professor and coordinator of creative writing in the Department of English at Morgan State University. She is the author of the novel *The Good Negress* (Algonquin, 1995) and *Miss Chloe: A Memoir of a Literary Friendship with Toni Morrison* (HarperCollins, 2022).

AUTUMN WOMACK is associate professor of African American studies and English at Princeton University. She is the author of *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930* (U of Chicago P, 2022), which was awarded the MLA's William Sanders Scarborough Prize in 2022. In 2023, Womack led the curatorial team for the critically acclaimed archival exhibition, *Toni Morrison: Sites of Memory*. Womack's forthcoming book, *The Wanderer*, is an investigation of Morrison's creative process and practice through an exploration of her archive.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101679 Published online by Cambridge University Press