

TO MAKE A HUMANIST BLACK

Toni Wofford's Howard Years

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“Quiet as it’s kept,” Toni Morrison, during her tenure as a senior editor at Random House, shepherded in the publication of over fifty books—among them books of poetry and fiction, autobiographies and memoirs, cookbooks and cultural texts. That her editorship beyond her work with *The Black Book*, which began in 1965, reached its apex in the 1970s, and ended in 1983, has gone largely uninvestigated is not especially surprising.¹ Typically, literary scholarship is guilty of focusing more on the author as producer of a text and then on the text as finished product than on the journey to publication or on the editors. But this tendency has serious limitations, since editors (and their work for and with publishers) ultimately control which texts see the light of print. In many ways, then, editors are at least one class of curators of culture.

As one such curator, Morrison helped shape the representation of African American culture in printed texts in the years immediately following the decline of the Black Arts Movement, mediated African American printed texts’ vacillating shifts from the margin to center (an important feat when we consider the radical interventions that nonblack sources make in attempts to influence black meaning-making processes and cultural productions), and served both as a bridge between the radicalism of the Black Arts Movement and the mainstreaming of the Black Aesthetic and as the conduit for this bridge. In short, careful examination of Morrison’s editorship facilitates the unraveling of the crucial, intently politicized elements of black intellectual

and cultural history of the 1960s and 1970s and reveals her influence in shaping blackness as it was represented in contemporary printed texts.

Morrison's articulation of blackness as a distinct cultural reality with which she readily identifies makes clear that her role in shaping representations of blackness was unabashedly methodical. When we consider the texts she published in the first few years after her move from the textbook division at L. W. Singer to adult trade at Random House, the potential significance of her editorship in this regard becomes more apparent. Among the texts she either acquired (courting and recruiting authors) or adopted (serving as the final editor of record of an author acquired by another editor) during the first five years of her editorship, for example, are Huey P. Newton's *To Die for the People* (1972), Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), Leslie Lacy and Edris Makward's *Contemporary African Literature* (1972), Boris L. Bittker's *The Case for Black Reparations* (1973), Leon Forrest's *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden* (1973), Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), Middleton A. Harris, Morris Levitt, and Roger Furman's *The Black Book* (1974), Muhammad Ali's *The Greatest* (1975), Chinweizu's *The West and the Rest of Us: White Slavers, Black Predators, and The African Elite* (1975), and Quincy Troupe and Rainer Schulte's *Giant Talk: An Anthology of Third World Writings* (1975).² As the range of the texts suggests, Morrison's conception of blackness (or, minimally, her perception of its useful representations) was broad. How she developed this conception of blackness, then, becomes a logical query, one that I contend can be addressed in revealing ways by considering her years as a student and then as a professor at Howard University.³

The milieu at Howard during the years Morrison was an undergraduate student there was multifarious indeed. A cursory review of the student newspaper, the *Hilltop*, provides insight to this truth and much more. The October 10, 1950, "Outlook" column, for instance, proclaimed that "the profundity of social awareness" could be evidenced everywhere: "The average freshman and upper classman can discuss the latest show on 'U' Street, the current trend in women's fashion or the [']craziest' record in the Snack Bar, but cannot hold a decent conversation on a topic so all-embracing as world affairs"; however, the same columnist notes:

There are numerous opportunities offered on . . . campus—through visiting lectures, through our courses, through our libraries, student council and many other sources—for the construction of that type of personality necessary to our being students, and more useful people in this chaotic world of 1950. After all, humanity has placed its hopes in our generation, so let's start preparing for that all important future right now. (n.p.)

In terms of its faculty, the university was more than sufficiently equipped to prepare its students for the “all important future.” Ever the traditionalists in terms of curriculum but no less interested in the ways an Africanist presence might inform or engage traditional disciplines, many members of the faculty were leading critics in their fields, even as they took nontraditional approaches to their disciplines to consider fully the implications of all things diasporic, even if the broader Howard curriculum did not fully reveal this interest. It was at Howard, for example, that William Leo Hansberry pioneered the study of African history in 1922 and where he continued to teach courses on African civilization until 1959; and it was at Howard that Sterling A. Brown pioneered the study of African American literature in the 1940s and taught the course *American Prose and Poetry of Negro Life* regularly while Morrison was a student there. Even the most cursory review of anthology editors or reviewers of African American literature reveals that an overwhelming majority of the seminal literary criticism in the field issued forth from Howard. And this tendency remained true at least until the mid-1950s. So just how much and in what ways did Howard contribute to the making of this humanist who would go on to be a senior editor at a major publishing company and, later, the first black woman to have her novel selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, the first black woman to be hired as an endowed professor at an Ivy League university, and the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature?

Chloe Anthony Wofford was a student at Howard from 1949 to 1953, during which time she assumed the nickname “Toni,” reportedly in response to repeated mispronunciations of her name. In addition to her academic pursuits in the departments of English and classics, she was a member of the Modern Dance Club, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, and the Howard Players, the university’s official drama troupe. Since it is her work in the theater that she speaks of most fondly when she talks about her Howard years, I am limiting my comments here to her experiences with the Howard Players and its correlate, the Washington Repertory Players.

The Howard Players has its origin in the university’s first drama club, which was started by students in 1907 and became an official university club in 1908, when, under the direction of Ernest Just (who was an English professor at the time), it became known as the “Howard University College Dramatic Club.” In 1921 the club was reorganized as the “Howard Players” by Alain Locke and T. Montgomery Gregory, under the auspices of the Department of Dramatic Art, which Gregory chaired. When Gregory left Howard in 1924, the players were left without a department home, though Professor Brown and other members of the English department ensured quality

productions by the now autonomous group, which became a charter member of the Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association in 1930 under Brown's direction. But it was not until 1947, two years before Morrison's arrival, that James W. Butcher Jr., Anne Cooke (Reid), and Owen Dodson established the Department of Drama, with Cooke as the chairperson. It was under the advisement of these three figures that the Howard Players emerged as one of the most renowned college theater troupes and that Toni Wofford excelled as an actress.

Her debut performance was in Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtures*.⁴ The playbill for the spring 1950 production of Ernest Toller's *No More Peace* lists Toni Wofford as one of five children. In the same season, the players produced an original play titled *Boys without Pennies*, by Theodore (Ted) Smith, a junior English major. While Wofford was not cast in any role in that play, she was listed as a member of the business and publicity committee.⁵ In 1952 she was cast as Elsie in William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* and as Cynthie, "a regular patron," in Robert Ardrey's *Jeb*. During the spring 1953 season, she received excellent reviews for her performance as Queen Elizabeth in the players' production of *Richard III*.⁶ In the same season, she worked, along with Mary Nelson, who played Queen Margaret in *Richard III*, on costumes for Federico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, which the players presented at the university's annual Festival of Fine Arts.⁷

The 1953 summer season, which took Morrison south and garnered most of the minimal commentary on her career in the theater, was actually a function of the Washington Repertory Players, not the Howard Players.⁸ Their tour stops included A&T College in Greensboro, Virginia State College, Kentucky State College, Tennessee State, Southern University, Alabama A&M, Hampton Institute, Wiley College, and Texas Southern University. The plays for the summer season were Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, with Morrison cast as the Daughter; Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, where Morrison was cast as Bianca for the lone performance of the play at Virginia State College; and Ferenc Molnár's *The Guardsman*, in which Morrison was cast as Liesl. Unlike *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Guardsman* saw a number of performances, and the "who's who" of characters cited on the playbill for the Southern University production of the play revealed the following:

Toni Wofford (Liesl) has just completed a major in English at Howard and is on her way to Cornell for further studies. She was highly praised last year for her discriminating playing of Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*. Shakespearean authorities said she was both accurate and inspired. With considerable versatility, she has also acted more modern parts in *Jeb* and *The Time of Your Life*.

At the end of the summer 1953 season, Morrison began graduate school at Cornell. After earning her master's degree in English in 1955, she rejoined the troupe and was cast as Louka in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. At the end of the season, she began what was to be a two-year tenure at Texas Southern University, before returning to Howard as a faculty member in the Department of English in 1957.

Unearthing Toni Wofford as performer and her Howard years' crucial role in the formative development of an aesthetic sensibility and this development's corresponding influence on her role as editor reveals her awareness of the ways in which culture can be (re)presented with variation. As Howard and Washington Repertory Players' advisers, Butcher, Cooke, Dodson, and Lovell are exemplars of the ability of Howard faculty of that age to navigate racial representations with uncanny nuance. Each adviser was deeply committed to black culture, and each understood the significance of institutionalizing black culture and representing it with sufficient breadth.⁹ At one point, Butcher directed drama activities at the University of Liberia and served as a consultant to the Liberian government, developing theater activities in the country. Cooke established the first black summer theater, which ran for forty-four consecutive seasons, and channeled her artistic energies into black colleges: Spelman, Morehouse, Hampton, and Howard. Dodson's work as a poet, novelist, and playwright speaks for itself as evidence of his commitment to black culture. And Lovell, who is perhaps best known for his seminal work on the African American spiritual (*Black Song: The Forge and the Flame; The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out*), was active in civil rights circles long before doing so was popular. He was, for instance, the secretary of the Marian Anderson Citizens' Committee, which protested the Daughters of the American Revolution's refusal to allow Anderson to sing at Constitution Hall in 1939.¹⁰

How aware would an astute Toni Wofford have been of the ability of Butcher, Cooke, Dodson, and Lovell to negotiate racial spaces, and just how might some of the implications of that awareness be manifest? What might she have learned from Dodson, whose artistry was largely unparalleled at the height of his career? How might Dodson's revision of Shakespeare to make it modern and his insistence that his actors offer fresh, new interpretations of traditional texts and dialogue have influenced Morrison's willingness and ability to envision and see the value of revisions of traditional mythologies and humanities themes? How did Cooke's insistence that each actor participate in total theater—setting, budget, publicity, makeup, and costumes—endow Morrison with an unusual sense of the act of creation? In what ways did Cooke's gift of perfect diction impress on Morrison an obsession with

sound in language? How did Lovell's awareness of the techniques of black music and its traditions influence her aesthetic sensibility? While we can never be certain about any of these things, when we consider that she traveled with Butcher, Cooke, and Lovell throughout the segregated Jim Crow south by car for an entire summer, it is more logical than not to argue that these experiences required her to grow increasingly aware of ways to fashioning a black cultural self.

After graduating from Cornell in 1955, she taught at Texas Southern for two years before returning to Howard as a faculty member in English, where she remained until 1964. Her students (among them Stokely Carmichael, a.k.a. Kwame Ture; Andrew Young; and Claude Brown), the junior faculty in English who made up her intellectual cohort (Clyde Taylor, Bernard Bell, and Eleanor W. Traylor, to name a few), and the activities with which she was involved (her work with Theatre Arts, the Howard Poets, and May Miller's literary salon in particular), in tandem with the sociopolitical climate, which played host to and birthed organizations like the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), must all be considered intently to imagine their probable influence.¹¹ As Ture (Carmichael) wrote in *Ready for Revolution*, during that time at Howard, one could find "everything and its opposite."¹² By this he meant that there were all kinds of people at Howard and that, conversely, one could find as easily the opposite of all these kinds. At least part of what Morrison took from this experience, I would argue, is an awareness of the politics and the significance of representations of blackness, an awareness she took with her to L. W. Singer, the publishing company that moved her to New York and initiated her career as an editor.

When Morrison moved to Syracuse in 1965 to become a textbook editor at Singer, a division of Random House, she did so with a firm sense of what she might be able to do there, of how she might influence contemporary black intellectual traditions and shape modern conversations about black life and culture. When she moved from Singer in Syracuse to Random House in New York City in 1968 and then from textbooks to trade books a few years later, her objective would not change, even if the conduit for achieving it did. In both instances, her cultural and aesthetic sensibilities influenced the texts she chose to edit and, correspondingly, how they represented blackness. While I acknowledge that her way of making meaning was perpetually evolving before we see what can be considered identifiably Morrison-esque, I also imagine that significant aspects of her ways of knowing and making meaning took shape during her Howard years as a student and then as a professor.

While some of her literary ancestors may have rejected what they may have seen as the limitations of racial identity and strived instead to be an

artist of Albert Murray-esque “OmniAmerica,” Toni Morrison embraces, if not demands, characterizations of her work as distinctly that of an African American. In “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” for example, she writes that she is interested in knowing the truth of her “own cultural sources” (386). In the same essay, she suggests that the “interior part of the growth of a writer . . . is connected not only to some purely local and localized sets of stimuli but also to memory” and its “milieu of buried stimuli” (385). She goes on to write: “When one looks at a very good painting the experience of looking is deeper than the data accumulated in viewing it” (387). The experience of looking at Morrison’s Howard years—to recover memory and its milieu of buried stimuli, and to reveal an important aspect of the interior part of her growth as curator of culture—gives us a glimpse of an excellent painting in its own right, indeed.

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Notes

1. Exceptions of note include brief mentions of her work as an editor in general biographical sketches, in interviews, and in Cheryl Wall’s “Recollections of Kin: *Beloved* and *The Black Book*,” in her *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*; and Wall’s “Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher,” in Justine Tally’s *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*.

2. To be certain, Morrison published a number of texts by nonblack authors and of limited interest to black people. I am concerned foremost here with her editorship of black texts, however.

3. In this essay, I limit my commentary to Morrison’s Howard years. My larger project, structured in part as a cultural biography, examines Morrison’s tenure at Random House and considers her intellectual development as a critical lens through which to read the period that constitutes her editorship.

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4. I must express my indebtedness to my colleague Joe Selmon, former chair of the Department of Theatre Arts at Howard, who shared with me the playbills from the Howard Players’ earliest productions through the years Morrison was a member of the troupe, and provided me with access to Anne Cooke’s notes and unpublished commentary about much of the players’ and the department’s notable history.

5. The particulars of Morrison’s theater activity in 1951 have proved most elusive. Neither of the two available playbills for the plays presented that year—Albert Camus’s *Cross Purpose* in the spring and J. B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls* in the fall—cites her involvement in any capacity. It may be the case that Morrison participated in plays for which no playbill has been located. It is clear, however, that she was active on campus that year, since she is cited in the student yearbook as the dean of probates for the 1951 Alpha chapter pledges of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.

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6. Morrison also starred in this role in the June 25, 1953, television performance of *Richard and the Three Queens*.

7. Notably, the program shows considerable interest in wide-ranging diasporic African artistic productions.

8. Dated March 27, 1953, the Washington Repertory Players' articles of partnership declare James W. Butcher, Anne M. Cooke, and John Lovell Jr., all Howard faculty, equal partners. The press release announcing the launching of the troupe cites "Toni Wofford, Howard Senior, who recently won plaudits from Shakespearean authorities for her playing of Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*," as one of its principal actors.

9. Notably, Butcher, Cooke, and Dodson were criticized when they selected DuBose Heyward's *Mamba's Daughter* and Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* as the two plays the Howard Players were to perform during their tour in Europe in 1949. The advisers' choice not to perform exclusively plays involving black life or plays written by black playwrights was a complicated one. Minimally, however, the choice reveals an attempt to avoid delimited representations of blackness.

10. Howard had sponsored Anderson's Washington recitals in 1936 and 1937, and the organizing committee had been denied requests to use Constitution Hall before they worked with the NAACP to protest publicly the refusal in 1939.

11. A number of Howard faculty, Morrison among them, formally and informally advised the group of Howard students (Walter De Legall, Alfred Fraser, Oswald Govan, Percy Johnston, Leroy Stone, and Joseph White) who dubbed themselves the "Howard poets." In an interview with Winston Napier, Govan remembers Morrison as a young faculty member who took them seriously, spent a great deal of time with them, and encouraged their efforts (58).

12. "Howard University: Everything and Its Opposite" is the title of chapter 6 of *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*.

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