

STEFANIE MUELLER, *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 270 pp.

In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman offers an insightful rumination on the ongoing structural and personal effects of slavery in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade. As she notes: “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it” (133).<sup>1</sup> While Hartman has pushed generic boundaries for her considerations of racialized inequality, creating part autobiographical travelogue, part historiographical essay, part transnational sociological study, Toni Morrison has repeatedly and famously formalized her explorations of the legacies of slavery by turning to the genre of the novel. In order to analyze ways in which the Nobel laureate narrativizes the ongoing meaning of the apparatus of enslavement, Stefanie Mueller employs a sociological framework, approaching the following three novels: *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008).

The title of the monograph reviewed here takes its cue from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s *Logic of Practice* (1990)—in which he locates “the active presence of the whole past” in the concept of habitus (qtd. in Mueller 34). It is this concept that facilitates Mueller’s examination of the relationship between past and present, which she combines with another, long-established sociological interest in analyzing how individuals are implicated in larger social structures. In her introductory chapter titled “Thinking Relationally,” which lays the theoretical groundwork of the monograph, Mueller surveys the sociological concepts relevant to her readings of Morrison’s novels. The most central one is Bourdieu’s habitus—“the interiorization of the exterior” (30), or “embodied history” (44n35)—located at the interface between field and practice, which it generates and which does indeed change the field” (31n22). According to Bourdieu, individuals internalize exterior/social and prior/historical structures (of inequality) and reproduce them in their minds and actions. Habitus is thus both “opus operatum” and “modus operandi” (qtd. in Mueller 33), i.e. effect of

structural relations of a field as well as generative cause of practices.

The first of four chapters offering close readings of Morrison’s novels opens with a narratological analysis of different strategies of focalization in *Paradise*, employed to signal the fragile dynamics of collectivization among the female characters who, as those familiar with the text will recall, assemble in an isolated place Morrison calls the Convent, set apart from an all-black town named Ruby. Mueller conceptualizes the dynamics at play between Ruby and the Convent and the functions of the line drawn between these two places with recourse to Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson’s model as developed in their sociological study *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965). Her special focus lies on examining how the storytelling of a shared history facilitates the establishment of internal cohesion in and external exclusion from the town of Ruby as well as on exposing the growing internal conflicts and disintegration of the community in the course of the novel, leading to the massacre of the women in the Convent. Mueller concludes the chapter by pointing out that “Morrison depicts the original power imbalances and the politics of difference that go along with [the figuration of slavery] as encoded in the collective and individual practices of her characters and thereby as undermining the African American community itself” (94).

Opening the next chapter on *Love* also with a narratological analysis of focalizing techniques and use of tense, Mueller stresses the oral quality of this novel to discuss its use of what she calls “memory narratives” (106), by which she refers to Morrison’s narrative mode of mobilizing knowledge of the past to show that it remains relevant in the characters’ present—“rememory” (212). Through narrative acts of remembering, Morrison collapses a past spanning the Jim Crow era and the first decades of desegregation into the present of the 1990s, depicting “the condition of the African American community as one of dangerous fragmentation” (129). As Mueller elaborates, “the novel’s historical subject is [...] the lack of solidarity within the black community” (147). This is also the case in *Paradise*, but as Mueller maintains, *Love* explores in more detail how “the dominated” (157) take part in reproducing the gendered and raced power relations to which they are subjected.

Mueller’s interest in investigating the relationship between past and present seems

<sup>1</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2007), Print.

particularly justified in the following chapter on *A Mercy*, thanks to the time in which the novel is set, the late seventeenth century. It is also the strongest chapter of the monograph. What makes *A Mercy* an important literary exploration of structural inequality is the fact that it takes place, as Mueller notes, “at a time when slavery was not yet paired with racism and [...] also the first of Morrison’s novels that is explicitly set during slavery” (159). Mueller once again first reviews narrative discourse to then place the novel in the larger framework of what scholars like Bernard W. Bell and Ashraf Rushdy have called the neo-slave narrative, which allows Mueller to provide her readers with a succinct reading of the novel’s negotiation of literacy and kinship relations, as well as of the nexus between law, religion, and capitalism in the early North American colonies. The novel has a prominent place in the overall outline of the study because it “interrogates the genesis” (208) of the particular social structures that will be generative for ways in which black subjects will be positioned at later points in history, for instance in the future(s) depicted in the novels analyzed in the previous chapters.

Before Mueller rounds up her book with an “Epilogue,” she inserts a cursory reading of *Beloved*, underlining the significance of the concepts of habitus and symbolic power for a critical reading of “the reproduction of the re-

lations of domination” (227). The conclusion reviews Morrison’s career, reading it as the trajectory of an outstanding African American author whose oeuvre crosses over into the sphere of the “consecrated avant-garde” (255).

It is not only a worthwhile but necessary undertaking to continually rethink how literary writing can and should be conceptualized in an analytical framework provided by sociology, and Mueller’s book offers a welcome contribution in this respect. While reading the monograph, a set of general questions came to the reviewer’s mind: in what ways do Morrison’s novels and, by extension, her interviews and essays open up specific perspectives on inequalities which in turn contribute to and modify sociological theorizing; what kind of sociological epistemology, in other words, do Morrison’s works themselves constitute; how can her oeuvre be read for its analytical value, as sociology in its own right? Mueller’s monograph must be credited for prompting such questions. As she notes, Bourdieu himself claimed that a novel potentially “supplies all the tools necessary for its own sociological analysis” (qtd. in Mueller 231). For readers interested in relating Bourdieu’s sociological approach to literature—and vice versa—Mueller’s study provides a well-versed reference point.

Carsten Junker (Leipzig)