

**TONI MORRISON AND LITERARY TRADITION:  
THE INVENTION OF AN AESTHETIC.  
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As a comprehensive overview of Toni Morrison's oeuvre from *The Bluest Eye* through her latest novel *Home*, Justine Baillie's new volume, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*, is the most mature, erudite overview of the work of the Nobel-prizewinner to date. In fact, even without any discussion of the author's incursions into stage productions, Baillie's critique comes closest to providing what I would call an "intellectual biography", i.e., an understanding of Morrison's aesthetic "in relation to the historical, political and cultural contexts in which it, and the traditions upon which she draws, have been created and developed" (1). Not only examining the author's work "within the framework of the vernacular and of her literary and political heritage" but also recurring to the "critical tools of western literary and philosophical enquiry", Baillie argues that Morrison's texts "constitute a radical incursion into American literature and politics" (7). Given the scope of what she sets out to do, it is commendable that for the most part Baillie has managed to produce consistently solid, well-researched analyses, distilled with commensurate background knowledge and understanding, and substantiated with extensive bibliography, all presented in a highly readable prose.

The focus on the philosophical tradition in which Morrison is grounded is expressly set out in the first chapter. Yet Baillie does not neglect the influence of minstrelsy on contemporary black authors, pausing to reflect on the notion of "transgression"

and its “ambivalent relationship with African-American art and culture” (24). This strong theoretical chapter, which provides the underpinnings for the later discussions of Morrison’s work, should be required reading for students of American literature who unfortunately are usually only introduced to a “white-washed” version of literary modernism in the US. Baillie examines the creation of a literary aesthetic that “exposes hegemonic and ideological uses of language and knowledge in the construction and obfuscation of American history” (1) through strategies that incorporate myth, folk culture, the oral tradition and black music.

Though Baillie is adept at incorporating a plethora of literary theorists (from Franz Fanon to Bakhtin, from Gates to Baker, from Kristeva to Butler, from Haraway to Gilroy, etc.) for this reader perhaps the most innovative analysis is the one based on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. She recurs repeatedly to aspects of their “materialist psychiatry” beginning with their understanding of a “minor literature” (“the collective enunciation of the margin” [5]), as one that subverts, challenges or undermines the dominant discourse through linguistic strategies, in much the same vein as Bakhtin’s use of “heteroglossia” or the “carnavalesque” or the language of the marketplace. Eschewing the traditional metaphor of the tree to describe relationships —linguistic, relational and political—, Deleuze and Guattari propose the “rhizome”, a concept which Baillie finds useful in interrogating Morrison’s subversive “deterritorialization” of the dominant language.

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After the initial discussion of the “Historical and Literary Context”, the following four chapters, consistently undergirded with pertinent critical theory, examine two or three of Morrison’s novels in chronological order, emphasizing both their grounding in contemporary politics and philosophy as well the author’s own developments in narrative technique. Hence *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is read against the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s while *Sula* explores the possibilities of self-creation/expression as a female within the limits of the black community, contesting both the stereotypes of Black Power politics and the color-blindness of the re-emerging Women’s Movement of the early 70s. Turning to questions of masculinity, *Song of Solomon* “is inflected with the complexities of African-American gender relations in the mid-1970s” (97), a time of increased and vocal acrimony between black male and female writers and critics. Together with Milkman’s quest for his heritage, his “frienemy” Guitar also complicates the vision of male fury in a time of difficult politics that gave rise to Black Power. *Tar Baby* builds on the feminist critique of machismo by both incorporating and then clouding the folk myth; in this novel it is “primarily class that problematizes the return to the ancestor and its sustaining properties” (128). Though Jadine may be a “cultural orphan”, life with Son offers no viable path for a well-educated (though Westernized) independent woman.

Chapter 4 sets out to consider Morrison's next three novels (*Beloved* [1987], *Jazz* [1992] and *Paradise* [1998]) as a trilogy, and while I certainly applaud the intent I was disappointed in the end result. "Repetition, Memory and the End of Race" winds up referring individually to each of the three novels, which are discussed more or less in isolation except for a rather feeble attempt to link the three via the "ghost" in each text as "a repository for trauma, memory and recovery" (138). While it is true that *Beloved* can be seen in psychoanalytical terms as a literary embodiment of Freud's *return of the repressed*, in *Jazz* the picture of Dorcas on the mantel may serve as a "ghostly presence", but she is not a "corporeal menace" (138). Nor are Consolata's male counterpart or Dovey's "friend" more than apparitions or dreams who, rather than menace the women with the past, attempt to liberate them for their future, successfully with respect to Consolata, but not for Dovey. As an individual section though, the discussion of *Beloved* is well-developed and fruitful despite a few errors.

The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for the scant five pages on *Jazz*, in which Baillie first allege that jazz is a metaphor not a narrative strategy, yet ends by speaking of "[Morrison's] evocations of the rhythms and repetitions of jazz..." (156). *Jazz* is certainly a metaphor, but I missed any engagement with the music as a metaphor for language and storytelling. I also found myself fundamentally disagreeing with the focus in *Paradise*; while the explorations of the novel within discussions of the diaspora are intriguing, to state that in this novel "deep, historical trauma has dissipated" (168) is simplistic. Moreover, Morrison's rewrite of the American obsession with the one-drop definition of "blackness" certainly does not herald "the end of race" politically but rather insists upon its absurdity. To my mind there are still lines of inquiry that could be explored in dealing with these novels as a trilogy. Morrison's emphasis on the significance of language, for example, goes unexplored: the sound before words in *Beloved*, the sound that begins *Jazz* and its relationship to the sign in the Nag Hammadi citation, and the acrimonious debate over the inscription on the Oven in *Paradise*.

Though "Reading and Writing" might be a productive approach to the latest three Morrison novels, this promising beginning seems to peter out in the subsequent analyses. For *Love*, also dispatched in just over four pages, rather than concentrating on the equivocal narration of the story, too much of its limited space is spent either relating the storyline or worrying about L and Celestial as "ancestor" figures. Although many critics have followed this line of argument, I cannot but believe that the author may well be playing with her readers: L, by her own account, poisons Cosy and forges his will. In Morrison's world, that poses a serious question: Who gave you the authority to murder a man and change his express desire to leave his inheritance to Celestial? What if Cosy *did* have a "sweet Cosy

child” with his lover? What if L is acting on selfish motives fired by her own jealousy? There are murky signs in the text that definitely cloud L’s intentions and her relationship with her former boss. The (also brief) section on *A Mercy* lacks the sophisticated interrogation we come to expect from the first two thirds of this volume. Though again making good use of Deleuze and Guattari concept of “smooth space” as opposed to “striated space”, Baillie curiously does not mention the opening “un-map” of the eastern seaboard, precisely an excellent example of a pre-striated America. Another limitation is that while the theoretical possibilities of postcolonialist and ecological theory are suggested, the relationship with the socio-political context is muted. With its emphasis on Old Testament names which throw us back into the ancient rupture between the Palestinians and the Israeli, the dispute over land and future heirs certainly qualify this novel as a post-9/11 text, not only in its evocation of the fiery ash falling from the sky, but also in its critique of the “economic meltdown” in the Age of Greed.

While the question of “home” and “homelessness” is linked more firmly to earlier texts, this discussion of *Home*, although more extensive, does not live up to the critic’s earlier and very talented analyses. Why Baillie considers this “novella” to be “written in allegorical form” is not elaborated upon, and the supposed lack of “intricate structural devices” ignores the creative dialogue established between the main character and the narrator. The slave narrative is mentioned but goes unquestioned as a strategy: how much “truth” can be contained even in a first-person narrative (of the mentally enslaved) when the “speaker” is *a priori* less than “Frank”?

For the most part Baillie uses Morrison’s interviews judiciously, although sometimes there is a tendency to take the author’s words at face value. Far too often in her interviews Morrison diverts attention from important undercurrents in her work, not wishing, like Bakhtin, to foreclose subsequent literary analyses. And unfortunately this volume ends rather abruptly: I miss concluding remarks both on the last chapter and even more particularly on the entire project. Nevertheless, this addition to the “Morrisonia” is extremely valuable, and rather than closing down the scholarly discussion among critics in some kind of “definitive” work, it opens up more pathways and strategies for further analyses, particularly with regard to the latest novels. A worthy addition to any library, personal and public, and a must-read for all Morrison scholars.

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