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BOOK REVIEWS

Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart. Andrea O'Reilly. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004. xiv + 229 pp. $23.95 paper, $84.50 cloth.

It has become a truism of Toni Morrison scholarship to remark on Morrison's central concern with mothers and mothering. Indeed, the only term one is more likely to encounter in an essay on Morrison is "community." And that term, like Morrison's concept of mothering, is oft mispresented as connoting a positive concept. In fact, Morrison's communities, like her mothers, are frequently violent, predatory, and absolutely opposed to the charismatic individual—the Sula, the Sethe, or the Consolata—who refuses to conform. Morrison's mothers burn their children alive, smother them in cars, even slice their throats. Certainly it is hard to find comfort in these depictions of motherhood. But Andrea O'Reilly examines Morrison's complex presentations of, and theories about, motherhood with admirable rigor and a refusal to simplify, and the result is one of the most penetrating and insightful studies of Morrison yet to appear, a book that will prove invaluable to any scholar, teacher, or reader of Morrison.

O'Reilly insists that the proper approach to Morrison is "to read Morrison as a maternal theorist"(xi), that is, as an author who strives to philosophically conceive and imaginatively represent the ambiguities and irreducible complexities of being a mother in African America. O'Reilly's central claim is that Morrison rejects the definitions and roles of motherhood offered by the dominant American culture and instead "defines and positions maternal identity as a site of power for black women"(1). In opposition to traditional white feminist thought, which, in bell hooks's phrase, views motherhood as "the locus of women's oppression," O'Reilly argues that in African-American culture mothering occupies a place of both individual and cultural importance. Through such concepts as "othermothering" ("acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own") and "community mothering," derived from African practices, African-American culture has come to define motherhood as "the pinnacle of culture"(7-10). Consequently, the motherline of matrilineal descent becomes the essential bearer of culture and tradition, and the role of the mother in supporting social activism on her children's behalf and in providing the nurture of the home is central. For Morrison, these ideas are given sharper focus through her depictions of black mothers as figures of power: "Morrison takes traditional conceptions of black womanhood—what Morrison terms 'the ancient properties'—and traditional black values—what she calls the funk—and makes them central to her definition of motherhood as a site of power for black women"(20). This leads to her creation of powerful, self-asserting women such as Pilate, whose central task O'Reilly describes as "motherwork": the effort to nurture, protect, and train children so they grow up aware of their specifically African-American heritage and prepared to face the depredations and dangers of a hostile, racist world (26-29).

From these fundamental premises—set out in highly lucid argument, and supported by an impressive critical genealogy that considers most of the major positions on motherhood and feminism of the past three decades (O'Reilly's authority in this area is strong: she has authored or co-authored four books, and multiple essays, on theories of motherhood)—O'Reilly then moves to careful consideration of each of Morrison's novels. The close readings that O'Reilly produces depend upon the series of ideas that she develops in the long introductory chapter. It is one of the strengths of the book, to my mind, that it does not proceed chapter-by-chapter through Morrison's novels chronologically, as nearly every Morrison study to date has done. We are entering into a new stage in Morrison scholarship, and the book-by-book studies have served their purpose. What is needed now are books that employ critical tools and specific philosophical approaches, engaging the novels through these ideas as appropriate. Hence O'Reilly will discuss *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* in both the second chapter and the fifth; she will discuss *Beloved* in chapters three and five; and so on. Her chapters are determined by specific theoretical approaches: "disconnections from the motherline," "ruptures/disruptions of the motherline," "reconnections to the motherline," "maternal interventions," and "maternal healing." Engaging such concepts as slavery, migration, exile and deliverance, resistance, power, reconciliation, and redemption, the chapters develop highly penetrating readings of Morrison's entire corpus.

The close readings themselves are often marvelous—so convincing that one finds oneself nodding and saying, ah yes, that's surely what Morrison had in mind. For example, O'Reilly examines the scholarly positions on *Sula*, particularly the dominant responses to Hannah's comment—"'I love Sula. I just don't like her'"—as examples of "mother-blame." O'Reilly points out "how thoroughly child-centered the scholarship on *Sula* has been," leading critics to "attribute Sula's psychological disease to the way she was mothered"(58-9). But Sula's reaction to her mother's comment reflects her own inability to step outside of the dominant culture's definition of mother-love as "unconditional" and "sensitive." As a result, Sula—much like Jadine in *Tar Baby*—loses her connection to her motherline, both with Hannah and her grandmother Eva, and instead "fashions a female selfhood modeled on the values of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency"(61). While many readers have seen this as heroic, O'Reilly points out that this is not the narrative of African-American female identity that Morrison values. As Morrison herself explains, "critics devoted to the Western heroic tradition—the individual alone and triumphant—see Sula as survivor. In the Black community, she is lost"(62). In O'Reilly's analysis, both Sula and Jadine break from the motherline, with the concomitant result that they lose both their sense of their female traditions and their sense of their own selves.

O'Reilly's analysis moves from the individual sunderings from the motherline in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby* to the larger communal and historical ruptures chronicled in the larger-scope novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. These longer historical novels show how such issues as assimilation, migration, and of course slavery have separated whole generations from their connections to their ancient maternal properties. In *Song*, Ruth suffers the disruption of assimilation to the dominant male culture, whereas Hagar suffers from—oddly—the failure of the fathers in Hagar's life, for fathers too "are seen as an integral part of the larger nurturant community. Their role is that of a communal othermother"(83). This is a troubling moment in the argument. For Pilate, along with Baby Suggs and Consolata, embodies much of Morrison's ideal for the female self; if she cannot sufficiently mother a daughter, who can? This is surely part of Morrison's argument, that the historical disruptions of the motherline from without are too much even for such a magnificent figure to overcome. And O'Reilly pursues this argument well, showing that Morrison depicts "the significance of the motherline for female empowerment by describing the disempowerment that results from loss of the motherline"(91). But it's difficult not to wonder if, through

Pilate's insufficiency, Morrison opens the door to the view that what is most needed is both a father and a mother, that a single individual cannot embody both principles. Certainly Morrison, as a single mother of two sons, would not seem to endorse such a view; but the novels, in their consistent depictions of failed families and shattered children, at times hint that both father and mother are required for a fully realized individual to emerge.

These are the challenging issues raised by the novels, and O'Reilly, to her credit, hammers away at them in each chapter. The terms and ideas do get repetitive, but I don't see that as a weakness. Rather, O'Reilly has produced a series of highly charged theoretical concepts over which she has impressive control, and she maintains them throughout the study, showing how they bring the different novels into relief in ways that gradually produce a cumulative reading of Morrison's theories of mothering that is fascinating and highly insightful. The study is at its strongest in its frequent returns to *Beloved*—a book that challenges any theory of mothering, to be sure. O'Reilly argues that this novel represents the culmination of Morrison's efforts to show "how mothers themselves seek to sustain the motherline and empower their children through the maternal tasks of preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing"(117). This seems an odd argument to make about a novel in which the mother kills the daughter, particularly given O'Reilly's claim that "preservative love"—keeping the children *alive*—"is at the heart of black women's motherwork"(120). But of course Sethe's own view is that she keeps Beloved safe from a fate worse than death by preventing her return to Sweet Home. Thus "infanticide for Sethe [...] is an act of preservative love"(136). But O'Reilly also rightly resists the interpretation that suggests Sethe is therefore not to blame for what she has done. Rather, Sethe must suffer, and willingly does suffer, the consequences of her awful deed. As O'Reilly concludes, "Sethe's act of infanticide was, in the words of Toni Morrison, 'absolutely the right thing to do [...] but also the thing you have no right to do'"(138). O'Reilly recognizes the fundamental genius of that novel: that the question, was Sethe right or wrong?, ultimately is not answerable, for Morrison writes both answers into the book with equally compelling claims.

O'Reilly's discussions of *Paradise* are less successful, partly due, perhaps, to that novel's lack of major maternal figures. She grapples with *Jazz* more successfully, and offers an epilogue that briefly considers the recent *Love* in its relation to these ideas. Overall, O'Reilly reads Morrison's work as following a general pattern towards reconciliation between mothers and daughters, a reading that I find very compelling and one that mirrors my own sense of Morrison's overarching aesthetic and ethical direction.[1] Although at times the argument does tend towards troubling generalizations, it nevertheless sustains a high level of quality throughout. The resulting book is a penetrating study that gets at the very heart of Morrison's central concerns, a book that substantially repays careful reading.

NOTES

[1] See my "From the Sublime to the Beautiful: The Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison," in Marc Conner, Ed., *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* (UP Mississippi: 2000): 49-76.

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