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"GIT WAY INSIDE US, KEEP US STRONG": TONI MORRISON AND THE ART OF CRITICAL PRODUCTION Lucille P. Fultz. *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003. xiv +141 pp.

Andrea O'Reilly. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. State U of New York P, 2004. xiv + 229 pp.

Sterling Brown's poem "Ma Rainey" provides an appropriate title-phrase for this book review in its evocation to the popular blues singer. Between the publications of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Love* (2003), Toni Morrison seems to have achieved her commitment to finding "a mode to do what the music did" for African Americans "in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization" (Taylor-Guthrie 121), for she has fulfilled the role of the black musician in clarifying issues, reclaiming subjective experience, and providing ways to make a way out of no way for African Americans living in a "wholly racialized society" (Morrison, *Playing* 1). Furthermore, Morrison's openness to discussing her art has been part of her cultural work for the last three decades.¹ When Professor Morrison indicated in her remarks at the Fourth Biennial Toni Morrison Society Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio (July 2005), that she can now "get off the dime" because the critical reception to African-American literature is so much better than "it used to be" four decades ago, she gave some indication of both her commitment to the critical enterprise on African-American artists and her assessment of it. Two of the works she may have had in mind, in fact, are Lucille P. Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing With Difference* and Andrea O'Reilly's *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, both of which were recognized at the Conference.

Toni Morrison: Playing With Difference won the best book award at the Fourth Biennial Toni Morrison Society Conference, and deservedly so. Fultz traces the intertextualities among Morrison's novels by examining how the later ones "repeat, revise, and even contradict" narrative motifs in the earlier ones (4), and she examines several reasons why this is so. Like Philip Page's *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*, Fultz's work considers Morrison's characters to be grappling "with the contingencies of a divided and divisive world" (27); additionally, Fultz examines how the author's own divided and divisive world has influenced her writing over the course of more than thirty years.² Most significantly, Fultz has developed an incisive study of the changes in Morrison's configurations of race and gender from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*. Quoting from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" ("Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again"). Fultz argues that Morrison has undergone such an "Emersonian political shift" (2).

Fultz also demonstrates that the revisions and contradictions within Morrison's oeuvre serve her interest in involving the readers in the making of her books. Morrison has stated that her "language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience. It doesn't matter what

happens" (Interview 164). And what *Playing with Difference* takes up in this regard is an analysis of Morrison's fiction in terms of the dialectics it "stages": dialectics of voice, point of view, and sensibility that provide alternate responses to similar situations (Fultz 12-13). Furthermore, in arguing that Morrison stages these dialectics, Fultz's work is sensitive to Morrison's propensity for ambiguity and resistance to closure.³ For example, Morrison remarks in "Behind the Making of *The BlackBookA*" that she wanted to put out "a genuine Black history book" that "has no order" but "does have coherence and sinew": "it can be browsed through from the back forwards or from the middle out, either way" (Morrison, "Making" 89). Morrison's playing with difference as her works shift perspectives on race and gender is both a reflection of her growth and flexibility as a writer and her vigilance in resisting structures of knowledge that consistency and closure entail.

A significant contribution that Fultz's work makes to the already large body of critical material on race in Toni Morrison's literature is its consideration of how the author plays with race as a major strategy in dismantling it.⁴ In the 1980s, Morrison was beginning to pose a "seriously playful" challenge to readers with such texts as *Tar Baby*, "Recitatif," and *Beloved*, all of which "craft race narratives and artfully deconstruct them" (Fultz 22). Fultz sees in these works that race is "no longer an underlying issue; it is central to Morrison's aesthetics" and "now implicates the reader far more directly in the narrative outcomes" (45). From this perspective, the opening line of *Paradise*, "They shoot the white girl first," implies that the race of this woman is relevant only "in the context of the racial politics of the men who shoot her" (Fultz 78), a politics that is furthermore bound in gender assumptions.

The third chapter of *Playing With Difference* concerns characters in the novels whose experiences of difference produce trauma (46). Here, in fact, is a refutation of most of the critical readings of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, as Fultz asserts that Pecola is making "conscious and unwavering attempts" at self-creation that will bring her love and friendship (56-60). Reading Pecola's madness as a "counternarrative" to the discourses under which she has been inscribed by others, Fultz does not see her as giving in, giving up, or selling out: "If we read her narrative as a subtext of desire and subversion, a resistance to those who have objectified her and a desire to become the beloved blue-eyed child her community privileges and adores, we can then grant her the humanity she so desperately craves" (60). Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey on the Rock, suggests that "black music moves from grief to grievance," precisely what Fultz is identifying in Morrison's "narrating the pain of difference." Finally, Fultz demonstrates in her analysis of *Paradise* that reading Morrison is a process that brings the critic to examine how and why he or she is engaged with the text, and concludes by citing Morrison's Nobel Lecture to emphasize the importance of ethics in her oeuvre. These last two points, actually, are where Andrea O'Reilly's work on Toni Morrison begins.

Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart recognizes the development of a postmodern black aesthetic⁵ in Toni Morrison's fiction and non-fiction, an aesthetic that requires her receptive readers to take cognizance of their own relations to culture and power that they will inevitably bring to that imaginative space they occupy in her novels.

Andrea O'Reilly fulfills this requirement in the "Preface" to her book, where she narrates her own involvement with Morrison's work. Having had her first child while completing her B.A., O'Reilly wondered where in literature were the stories about motherhood to which she could connect. Two children, several years of graduate work, and a specialization in Women's Studies later, she read *Beloved* in one night. Over the course of the subsequent three weeks, O'Reilly read all of Morrison's books and completely changed her graduate studies focus. How, she wonders, did "a woman of English, Scottish, Irish ancestry who grew up in working-class Hamilton in southern Ontario, Canada" get "so hooked" on Morrison (x)? In spite of understanding the important differences between her experiences of motherhood and those narrated in Morrison's work, she recognized that she was somehow "more at home in Morrison's maternal world than that of Anglo-American feminist thought" (x). Thus begins O'Reilly's "talking back" to Morrison's fiction, interviews, and essays.

Reading Morrison as a maternal theorist, O'Reilly first considers black women's critical perspectives on motherhood and how Morrison defines motherhood as a site of power for black women. Then, she considers specifically how Morrison's novels render mothering as "a political and public enterprise" and "motherwork" as an enterprise of profound social significance. Drawing upon the work of Patricia Hill Collins and Sara Ruddick, O'Reilly considers how the practices of mothering produced "a distinct black maternal perspective on motherhood" (1) as black women had to learn to protect their children in a racist, sexist world. Collins's "standpoint" theory, that black women formed a perspective on black womanhood independent of dominant cultural norms and practices while drawing upon African perspectives on the individual and community, has become a widely recognized and cited discourse in African-American studies and Women's studies. O'Reilly fashions her analysis of Morrison's oeuvre squarely upon Collins's theory, noting with bell hooks that much of feminist discourse on mothering is racially coded (4). O'Reilly cites another theoretical definition that she applies to Morrison's novels. "Othermothering" is an African/African American practice which, developed out of an African-based value system in which other mothers' children were all mothers' responsibilities in the community (5). In African-American practices, this became a "strategy of survival in that it ensured that all children . . . would receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical well-being" (6). "Othermothering" and also "community mothering" (6-7) are sites of social activism, argues O'Reilly, for they provide space for African Americans to experience themselves as subjects, not objects of the dominant, racist gaze. Another critical concept to be applied to Morrison's fiction is "the motherline," which describes the connectivity between mothers and daughters supported by stories, traditions, and experiences of empowerment (11-16). All of these, the author notes, become apparent in Morrison's maternal theory.

One of Morrison's fictional strategies in constituting a "politics of the heart" is to "portray mothers' despair at not being able to fulfill the essential tasks of motherwork and the inevitable suffering of children and the larger African American culture in the absence of maternal preservation, nurturance, and cultural bearing" (46). However, notes O'Reilly, Morrison's strategies are non-prescriptive. Morrison has frequently indicated in interviews and essays that one of the ways she summons the reader to enter her work is

through making us "yearn" for lost presences (Morrison, "In the Realm" 250); another is "to shape a silence while breaking it" (Morrison, "Unspeakable" 23). And these strategies are employed in rendering "Disconnections from the Motherline" (chapter 2), an analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby*. Here, O'Reilly asserts that normative gender ideologies are damaging to mothers (Pauline Breedlove) and daughters (*Sula*, Jadine) because they lead them to reject their "ancient properties" and "the funk" of the African-American motherline that would enable, rather than disable, them (48).

Chapter 3, "Ruptures/Disruptures of the Motherline," considers the slavery, migration, and assimilation experiences depicted in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, where historical circumstances have broken connections within families and traditions. Ruth, Hagar, and Sethe are disempowered by the loss of the motherline; however, in the next chapter, O'Reilly considers how, for Sethe, the motherline is reconnected. This "return" (93) is most prominent in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (Pilate, Milkman) and *Tar Baby* (Son], two works which "make clear . . . who may be qualified to guide" people on the journey of reconnection. Whereas Pilate succeeds, Son fails, "not because he is a man but because he is not truly a son of the motherline" (116). Chapters 5 and 6 concern "Maternal Interventions" and "Maternal Healing" respectively. While some of these considerations appear in several critical essays, as O'Reilly acknowledges and cites, some significant new perspectives are here as well. There is the argument that Eva Peace's murder of her son, Plum, "distresses readers . . . precisely because Eva claims a maternal power that upsets comfortable notions of maternal powerlessness" (119). Eva's action, in fact, can be understood as a black mother's "refusal to give her son up to patriarchy" (151). Another important analysis in this chapter is the consideration of Morrison's maternal theory as it is dramatized in *Paradise* (139-42) through maimed daughters, childless mothers, and the one "community mothering" figure, Consolata. This reaffirmation of female "funk" is taken up in the next chapter, "Maternal Interventions: Resistance and Power." Positioning Alice Manfred as Violet's "othermother" figure, O'Reilly demonstrates that for both Violet and Joe, finally "mourning the loss of their mothers" is what enables them to let go of their denials and false coping strategies and move towards "adult selfhood" (154).

Jazz and *Paradise*, O'Reilly suggests, provide detailed narratives of "unmothered children," whereas the earlier novels consider the disconnections in the motherline and how one can be returned to it. In the "Epilogue" of this book, however, we learn that in Morrison's eighth novel, *Love* (2003), there is a striking absence of mothering and mothers. To ni Morrison and *Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* was in final production when *Love* was published, so O'Reilly's consideration of it is brief. Arguing that most early reviews misread Morrison's deliberate "silences and absences" concerning motherlove, O'Reilly sees in the novel "the truth and significance of Morrison's maternal theory" (176). With *Love*, Morrison "reflects upon the damage that love can do, particularly forsaken, misused, ransomed, and distorted motherlove" (O'Reilly 179). However, there is deliverance of a sort. "L," the narrator of *Love*, knows that those who are not destroyed or damaged by the destruction of the motherline "can survive bad love as an adult" (180). Perhaps, O'Reilly is suggesting, "L" is like Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*, a child who did receive nurturance and is therefore able to bear witness to the "hows," if not the "whys," of other girls' disasters.

Creating a critical response that can blend with Morrison's composition and add something to it requires a fundamental orientation. One must recognize and affirm the inseparability of cultural and aesthetic processes in her novels. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said states that American critics live in an actively imperialist country, "a cultural fact of extraordinary political as well as interpretive importance, yet little notice is taken of this horizon" (56). The literary-critical enterprise becomes impoverished if it assumes an epistemologically privileged space of choosing to look-or not to look-at culture, as if it were free of it (Said 55). Lucille P. Fultz and Andrea O'Reilly remain cognizant of that perspective in their respective books, giving Morrison's readers wonderful models of how to be active, lucid, passionate, and ethical participants in her works.

[Footnote]

Notes

1. see, for example, Taylor-Guthrie's collection of interviews with Morrison between 1974-1992, as well as Morrison's essays.
2. Conner examines a shift in Morrison's work from another the vantage point: namely, that "Morrison's engagement with the relations between the individual and the community reveals a striking progression" (49).
3. Most critical works on Toni Morrison's fiction take cognizance of this; see, for example, Peterson 205-07 and Spillers 227-33.
4. Critical materials focusing on race in Morrison's work are too numerous to cite here; several critical books that have race as a primary consideration are Grewal; Weinstein; and Kolmerten, Ross, and Wittenberg.
5. Morrison's position in relation to the classic "Black Arts" aesthetic formulated in the 1960's is complex; she is not an advocate of a proscriptive agenda for artists based on cultural nationalism. For an excellent, recent commentary on Black Arts criticism, see Bolden 18-36. Morrison's orientation would seem to parallel Bolden's: "Rather than asking what is African American art, the more pertinent questions are, Who constructs the parameters in which black art is conceptualized? And why are some models privileged over others in society?" (19).

[Reference]

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