

Reviews

Justine Baillie, *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 229 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4742-2291-4.

Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition addresses Morrison's recovery and reconstruction of African-American history, which has resulted in the creation of a literary aesthetic that is central to the imagining and re-imagining of American and diasporic identities. Baillie's study incorporates Morrison's novels up to *Home* (2012) as well as her essays, dramatic works and short stories. It also discusses her early interrogation of Black Power to her *fin de siècle* postcolonial critiques of nationalism and twenty-first century interest in ecology.

Morrison's aesthetic, argues Baillie, can only be understood in relation to the historical, political and cultural contexts in which it has been created and developed. Vernacular and American literary forms are synthesized by Morrison to construct an alternative and oppositional narrative of black American history. Her aesthetic involves constant variation, avoiding simplistic affirmations of blackness or African-American identity.

Literature for Morrison has a healing function similar to that which black music once had and has now lost, argues Baillie, because it is no longer exclusively for African-Americans. Writing is a political act, a way of absorbing knowledge that is non-prescriptive. Literature gives voice to the unspeakable which, for Morrison, entails recovering the psychological trauma of slavery. Literature articulates possibilities for the future. In so doing it reconstructs history and exposes the oppressive powers of a dominant language and ideology. While Baillie considers Morrison's aesthetic within her literary and political heritage, she also employs the critical tools of western literary and philosophical enquiry to demonstrate how Morrison's texts represent a radical attack on American literature and politics. She also identifies the political and social forces underpinning Morrison's narrative choices.

The five chapters of *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition* address the Harlem Renaissance; ideology, identity and the community in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973); intertextuality and gender politics in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981); repetition, memory and the end of race in *Beloved* (1987) *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998), and reading and writing in *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012) respectively.

Chapter four, on *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* is particularly interesting. In this chapter Baillie examines the implications of Morrison's assertion that language in itself is not oppressive; its force lies in the political and ideological functions of its application and interpretation. Because Morrison's texts are indeterminate the responsibility for interpretation falls on the reader. In other words, argues Baillie, the reader contributes to the construction of Morrison's texts as part of a communal act which has clear political undertones. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *Paradise* in which Baillie argues that "Morrison's version of paradise exists beyond the physical boundaries of the nation state and, as a metaphysical space, allows for the construction of affinities of experience that traverse racial, gender and class differences even as they are recognized and accommodated" (180). African-American artistic expression, claims Baillie, has tried to elevate itself to the level of the western canon at the same time as it has struggled to maintain its own identity and group consciousness. This is at root a political project that focuses on the operation and use of language; it is also the very foundation of Baillie's study.

Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition is a scholarly work that is well-researched, lucid and accessible. The extensive bibliography, sixteen pages, bears witness to the breadth and depth of Baillie's reading. The study draws extensively on secondary sources about African-American literature and music, race and culture in literature, folklore and American literary theory, black feminist criticism, identity and nationalism, as well as history, politics and gender in Morrison's works. Baillie's study is an excellent introduction to Morrison and a valuable reference for undergraduates and postgraduates as well as for teachers of Morrison's works and indeed, for all interested in Morrison's role in developing a uniquely African-American aesthetic.

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