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Justine Baillie. 2013. *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition. The Invention of an Aesthetic*. London: Bloomsbury. 229 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4411-8310-1.

Mar Gallego Durán
Universidad de Huelva
mar@uhu.es

This volume, authored by Justine Baillie, is a significant contribution to African American and diaspora studies since it explores the evolution of Morrison's aesthetics from her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to her next to last, *Home*, published in 2012.[1] In her analysis of Morrison's novelistic production, Baillie points to the importance of historical, political and cultural contexts in comprehending Morrison's engagement with the development of "an alternative and oppositional narrative of black American history" (1-2).[2] According to the author, the so-called 'oppositional narrative' in fact constitutes an alternative concept of black aesthetics based on Morrison's meditation on two main ideas: authorial responsibility and her long-standing preoccupation with the political and ideological functions of language as a site not only of contestation but also of liberation. Thus, Morrison's project of rewriting and reconstructing African American history runs parallel to her deep commitment to communicate and make visible the African American absence in American culture by articulating African American identities and experiences that can set the records straight, as it were. As a whole, the volume succeeds in its purpose of tracing Morrison's aesthetic trajectory in terms of the changes African American epistemology has undergone from the 1970s to the twenty-first century.

As a starting point, Baillie feels the need to acknowledge the crucial contributions of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and writers to the establishment of an aesthetics that clearly connected with contemporary debates about modernity and the pervasive impact of primitivist preconceptions, but also about African Americans' take on controversial topics such as the minstrel tradition, slave songs and other vernacular forms. I deem particularly appropriate the author's choice of situating Morrison's aesthetics within the historical and literary milieu of the Harlem Renaissance,

[1] Morrison published her last to date novel *God Help the Child* early this year, after this piece had been accepted.

[2] Coinciding with other recent scholarship on Morrison such as *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning* edited by Adrienne Seward and Justine Tally (2014).

since it is arguably one of the defining moments of African American literature and criticism. Bringing to the fore the primacy of the intellectual concerns of the period certainly stimulates a more nuanced interpretation of Morrison's aesthetic project and her definition of the writer's pedagogical responsibility. In this vein, W. E. B. DuBois' efforts to shape a distinct African American identity and language politics are extremely revealing. Examining the racial *problem* in his classic text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois' theory of double consciousness served as a springboard to address the manifold ways in which racialized identities can be reconfigured, including through the strategic use of folk expression. I would argue with Baillie that DuBois' legacy was, and still is, crucial to understand the contours of contemporary and current debates on race and identity.

Moreover, Baillie knowingly focuses on Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) as the literary manifesto of the so-called Harlem or New Negro school. Calling for a new cultural expression to validate the views of the young generation of writers and artists, Locke also formulated a complex theory of race and culture that highlighted African American particularisms. Baillie insightfully problematizes the difficulties these artists faced in establishing a new standard of art in their search for *authentic* African American expression. Drawing on Gilroy's groundbreaking *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Baillie foregrounds the pervasive influence of black double consciousness as "a counter culture of modernity" (28), to illuminate Morrison's shared concerns with her Harlem precursors—especially Toomer and Hurston. As the author skillfully summarizes, Morrison utilizes them to devise a black poetics that politicizes black experience "by drawing on the tools of western aesthetics while simultaneously privileging the African-American tradition of orality" (31).

Aptly entitled "Ideology, Identity and the Community," the second chapter evaluates Morrison's first two novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* (1973) as a response to Black Power affirmative aesthetics, but also as contestations of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific racism, 1940s hegemonic concerns, and 1960s and early 1970s feminist debates. Thus Black Power and Black Arts' belief in racial pride rooted in African American vernacular and musical traditions is resignified through Morrison's consistent deployment of Bakhtin's dialogical and double-voiced theoretical perspectives to include neglected issues such as black women's experiences and a more complex articulation of communal values. In her discussion of *The Bluest Eye*, though, Baillie falls short of her promise, as her recounting of nineteenth-century racial discourses does not take into account key texts to document those pseudo-scientific theories.[3] Testifying to Morrison's endeavor to unearth the control and power structures that govern what she tellingly calls the "race house" in her essay "Home" (Morrison 1997, 8), Baillie signals the powerful allure of popular culture,

[3] Some references are explicitly made, but others should have been included, such as Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2004), Fredrickson's *Racism* (2002), or more recently, *The Invention of Race* edited by Bancel et al. (2014), to name a few.

but proves how Morrison chooses to stress the strengths of the African American community by turning to Fanon's seminal works *Black Skin*, *White Masks* (1952) and, especially, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Appropriated by Black Power intellectuals, Fanon's insights into the power of colonial ideology helped to envision strategies for empowerment and agency. Morrison's adoption of these strategies draws attention to her interest in giving voice to the black community and offering a different script for black femininity in *Sula*. Informed by certain feminist approaches,[4] Baillie's provocative reading of *Sula* as a catalyst for the anxieties derived from the new dilemmas concerning identity, gender, social mobility and migration leads her to connect the novel to Hurston's effective use of folk forms in her haunting masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Devoted to *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981), the third chapter opens with a very interesting discussion of nineteenth-century America's adaptation of the European romance form to explore fears of otherness and darkness personified by blacks. In both novels Morrison is again interested in dismantling damaging constructions of blackness by means of a more profound exploration of the relationship between the individual and the community, centering on the development of black masculinity in the former and on African myth traditions in the latter. Baillie makes an eloquent case for intertextual interactions with Woolf, Faulkner and Joyce, to reiterate the way in which Morrison eschews Bloom's anxiety of influence. Her quest for racial integrity involves the redefining of black manhood, and the investigation into the nature of gender roles and relations. Patterson, Dollard, Wallace and hooks are also invoked, among others, in Baillie's overview of negative stereotypical designation and emasculation of black men, but other important studies on black masculinity are glaringly absent.[5] By engaging once more with issues of identity and class formations, Baillie resorts to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature (1975) to ground Morrison's political deterritorialization of language and her (re) construction of a racial slur and a myth—the motif of tar baby. In this case, both the female and male protagonists embark on a journey to find a meaningful racial identity that would ultimately redeem them from idealized notions of blackness calling for a more balanced vision of gender relations.

The fourth chapter, dealing with the study of Morrison's well-known trilogy *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1994) and *Paradise* (1998), shares certain features with the previous chapters in terms of the preoccupation with language, the rewriting of (hi) story, and their significant impact on identity politics. Tracing the discontinuities of history, Morrison confronts the psychological traumas engendered by slavery,

[4] One is certainly left to wonder about the criteria adopted for the selection of these, and rejection of other, feminist viewpoints.

[5] To sustain her critical stance, Baillie could have relied on prominent contributions such as hooks' pioneering work in *Black Looks* (1992), and her excellent *We Real Cool* (2004); but also Patricia Hill Collins' pertinent *Black Sexual Politics* (2005).

the 1920s and the legacy of the Civil Rights period. Hence, she manages to throw light on the debated terrain of race as the *presence of the absence* that haunts American configurations of the self by insisting on the need to evoke a usable past against the dangers of historical and cultural amnesia. Revisiting and inhabiting the past and its unrecorded (hi)stories by means of psychoanalytic approaches, Baillie's compelling chapter substantiates Morrison's transition from an African-American-centered aesthetics to a more diasporic conceptualization, especially regarding the processes of commodification and reification of race presumably constructed "beyond racialized discourse" (163). In the last novel of the trilogy, *Paradise*, Morrison revisits the 1970s to promote a racial theory for the twenty-first century, where the errors of the past would not be repeated, through her use of a de-raced language. Reconstructing a communal history would then enable the disruption of past trauma, eventually facilitating the location of a home, diasporic it is true, but a home after all.

Calling on other possibilities to unsettle hegemonic discourses by unraveling an alternative aesthetics, Baillie's final chapter is a nuanced investigation into the politics of memory with a necessary reassessment of other recurrent themes in Morrison's literary universe: love, race and, overall, the motif of home. In her last three novels, Morrison moves from the 1990s in *Love* (2003), to the late-seventeenth century in *A Mercy* (2008), and then back to the 1950s in *Home* (2012), while at the same time emphasizing the multiple ways to rethink the themes above in the 9/11 aftermath. Discarding an economy of marginalized existence that negates multifaceted African American experiences, Morrison asserts the need for love as a redemptive source, paying homage to Baldwin in *Love*.[6] Baillie further argues that Morrison's critique of the dominant patriarchal model validates the possibility of other non-hierarchical identities, which foster links across generations, classes, races, etc. In *A Mercy* Baillie reiterates hybridity and fluidity as part of Morrison's intervention into ecocritical and postcolonial thinking. By subverting the "colonial language of taxonomy, discipline and control" (De Loughrey and Handley 2011, cited in Baillie 193), Morrison opposes imperialistic expansion, and looks for an alternative cosmology that facilitates the survival of the land and the people who inhabit it. The concept of home is once more re-imagined in Morrison's homonymous novel inspired by her parents' and her own experiences in the 1950s. Her rewriting of this fundamental period of American history scrutinizes the regenerative power of home by revealing the economic and racial strictures assigned to it. Once again the motif of the journey and dislocation, psychological traumas (tied to the horrors of the Korean war but also of segregation) and the different versions of black masculinity are conjured up by Morrison to produce a much needed corrective to the celebration of the 1950s as a decade of stability and abundance. In this case, Baillie rightfully

[6] Consistent with her tribute in "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in his Language" (1987), where she lists his three gifts: language, courage and tenderness. In a touching sentence she directly addresses him saying "You knew, didn't you, how I loved your love?" (Morrison [1987] 2008, 93).

contends, Morrison is quite articulate in her purpose of reconstructing the past "as a means to truth, self-acceptance and redemption" (199), which should be an author's main duty, according to Morrison herself.

By questioning the logic of hegemonic racial, gender and class hierarchies, Baillie brilliantly argues the importance of Morrison's critical interventions endowed with obvious political and ethical intent. In her exhaustive reading, aided by an impressive command of diverse theoretical perspectives and paradigms, Baillie advocates that Morrison's narratives show an aesthetics rooted in folk art and sensibility, the eminent roles of ancestors, and vernacular forms. But Baillie also proves Morrison's deconstruction of those hegemonic epistemologies and ideologies in order to allow space for alternative identity and language politics. Despite the (intentional?) lack of a conclusion, Baillie clearly enriches our understanding of the radical shift in perspective that Morrison's complex and multilayered aesthetics propounds, and her thought-provoking publication is certainly a welcome addition to the field of African American and diasporic studies.

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Mar Gallego Durán is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of Huelva. Her research interests include African American and African Diaspora Studies, with a special focus on women writers, and gender and migration issues. She is the author of *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance* (Hamburg: LitVerlag, 2003), and has co-edited seven essay collections. Currently, she is the Director of the Research Center for Migration Studies.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa. Facultad de Humanidades. Av. Fuerzas Armadas, s/n. 21007, Huelva, Spain. Tel.: +34 959219123. Fax: +34 959219143.