
Jennings, La Vinia Delois. — *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*

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REFERENCES

JENNINGS, La Vinia Delois. — *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*. Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 259 p., bibl., ill.

- 1 Although the title of this study has a philosophical ring to it, what La Vinia Jennings actually does is to trace religious figures or motifs of African origin in Toni Morrison's fiction. This is not an easy task, as she implicitly admits in her first section and introduction: "Finding the elusive but identifiable blackness within the culture out of which Toni Morrison writes." Out of the six sections of the book, four are dedicated to the search of figures and/or motifs: section 2 "Kongo's Yowa and Dahomey's Vodun: the survival of West African traditional cosmologies in African America", 3 "Bandoki: witches, ambivalent power, and the fusion of good and evil", 4 "Kanda: living elders, the ancestral presence, and the ancestor as foundation", and 5 "Banganga: the specialists-medicine (wo)men and priest(esse)s". Section 6 is presented as a conclusion with the subtitle "Identifiable blackness: Toni Morrison's literary canon at the Western crossroads" (this alleged canon includes the following novels: *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* and *Paradise*). This is followed by 33 pages of footnotes, a substantial list of works cited, and a useful index.
- 2 There is no doubt that Jennings' endeavor—revealing in a more systematic way than heretofore the role that African traditional religious symbols (such as the cross within a circle) play in Morrison's work—is interesting and justified. The resulting study, also based on visits in Haiti and Ghana, is well-researched and does provide an overall take on those symbols, their links and correspondences, that may not be obvious at all to most readers of Morrison's fiction— whether they be African-American or not. The latter point raises the somewhat troubling question of the implied reader of Jennings'

essay. Many of her formulations in her effort at “uncovering and interpreting the African themes, images and cultural resonances in Morrison’s fiction” (back-cover) may strike one as partial or reserved to worshippers: for example the conclusive paragraph of Jennings’s acknowledgements (“Lastly, I am deeply indebted to Chloe Wofford Morrison, an artistic visionary and a literary genius, and to all the ancestors who looked on as I wrote”, p. viii), unless it be meant as a humorous wink, or the mention of “genius” and its obligations in the last lines of p. 177. It is also perhaps a bit unfortunate that the essay starts with a 1984 quote in which Morrison had asserted that she did “not like to find her books condemned as bad or praised as good” on the basis of “criteria from other paradigms [than those of the African-American culture out of which she writes]” (p. 1). This may cast a little chill on outsiders, and unnecessarily so, since it is hard to imagine that a writer who has, since, received a National Book Award and a Nobel Prize for fiction could expect not to be discussed universally, at least in terms of literary criticism.

- 3 So Jennings does indeed show how “Morrison’s fiction exposes an African palimpsest upon which European-American culture superimposes itself” (p. 2). But are those “traditional African religious subscriptions” really “implemented as real and discernable presences in African-American life and culture” (p. 3) today? or even 100 years ago? Can there be any comparison of the importance of *Voudoun* in Haiti (as illustrated in the Haitian painting reproduced on the book’s cover) and *Voodoo* in the USA at any historical moment? Does the tracing of African motifs and religious symbols justify the reference to an entity called “Transatlantic Africa” (meaning Africa, the USA, and the Caribbean)? Such a mythical geopolitical flag covers only thinly the major cultural differences so evident in the languages: if Haiti managed to create and keep an African-based creole as *lingua franca* to this day, obviously no such thing happened in the USA where the relatively small Black minority adopted English rather rapidly and stuck to it even in those towns or areas where Blacks lived segregated from Whites. The blurring of the line between literary motifs and cultural realities is also evident when Jennings opposes “the ‘mythic’ with respect to West African beliefs and practices [which] transcends the mythological and enters the present moment” (p. 5) to “the mythic substructures” employed by Joyce in *Ulysses*. This amounts to comparing a cultural/social practice with a literary representation.
- 4 It is of course unavoidable that Jennings’ endeavor of highlighting positively the specificity of the African aspects within the African-American culture depicted in Morrison’s œuvre entails almost constant confrontation with the European influences which have been responsible for the suppression or containment of anything African over centuries in the USA. But it is irksome when the foregrounding of African values or merits is achieved with formulations containing mistaken or trite generalizations of what is Western or European. Thus when Jennings deems that “Christianity” and “Eurocentrism” are responsible for the fact that African-Americans “erroneously blurred the practices of Voodoo with witchcraft” in the 20th century USA (p. 8), one might interject that, except in the Vatican, Christian churches have far less influence in Europe (where non-believers are a majority, overall, today) than in the USA. At the latest since Voltaire, European atheists have fought religious superstition—including the Christian ones. The phrase “the Western reader’s Christian worldview” (p. 79) ignores historical developments of the magnitude of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the separation of Church and State in most European countries since then. In recent years a row developed over a mere mention of a “Christian heritage” in

the European Constitution. Ultimately Jennings' slant raises the vexing epistemological question: is Christianity bad because it came from Europe, and Voodoo good just because it originated in Africa? Haitian writers like Jacques Roumain and Jacques Alexis found both religions socially and intellectually crippling, and more contemporary Haitian writers still do so today.

- 5 Jennings delineates well the fascinating ways in which Morrison has integrated African motifs in her fiction. But the claimed "authenticity" of such a recovery of "the ancestral past" (p. 5) is weakened by the essayist herself when she discusses Morrison's distrust of written and/or historical sources and her preference for "other ways of knowing" (pp. 180-181). Such mysterious sources of inspiration are the privilege of fiction. Morrison's is striking, and she may indeed have succeeded in formulating a "diasporic [...] alternate form of modernism" (p. 5). Unfortunately Jennings does not make that interesting notion clearer in her somewhat weak conclusive paragraph (p. 184).