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Recommended Citation

Philip M. Weinstein. (2002). "Review Of "The Identifying Fictions Of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity And Postmodern Blackness" By J.N. Duvall". *African American Review*. Volume 36, Issue 1. 154-166. DOI: 10.2307/2903387

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The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness
by John N. Duvall

Review by: Philip M. Weinstein

Source: *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 2002), pp. 164-166

Published by: [St. Louis University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903387>

Accessed: 19-08-2014 19:41 UTC

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John N. Duvall. *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness*. New York: St. Martin's (Palgrave), 2000. 182 pp. \$45.00.

Reviewed by

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African American Review, Volume 36, Number 1
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Several decades ago, Henry James served as the American academy's premier novelist, and his artist-story that most haunted professional commentators was entitled "The Figure in the Carpet." The most tantalizing of James's stories, this one intimated a certain elusive but all-implicating design functioning as the center of its fictional writer's work, but this design had escaped identification, despite obsessive detective work on the part of the fictional writer's critics. John Duvall's haunting study of Toni Morrison's work is no less in search of "the figure in the carpet," and as in the Jamesian story, that "figure" is autobiographical to the hilt. Read rightly, Duvall

argues, Morrison's work can be seen to declare nothing so tellingly as the scripted identity of its author.

Whereas James's "figure" remained fixed (however elusive to the critical eye), Morrison's figural identity, as Duvall pursues it, is fluid, aleatory, post-modern: "Supplementing the *genuinely autobiographical* is the *symbolically autobiographical*, since 'what makes one write anyway' is the need to confront self." Duvall has written a species of inspired sleuthing. The figure in the carpet he would delineate is the "symbolical" Toni Morrison, an entity inseparable from the biographical Morrison, yet one whose lineaments are traceable only in the symbolic arena of her own proliferating words. In a number of ways this enterprise succeeds admirably.

Most broadly, Duvall reads the becoming of Toni Morrison as a drama in two acts: the first four novels (*The Bluest Eye* through *Tar Baby*) invested in the project of racial authenticity (a modernist project, this), and the later three novels (*Beloved* through *Paradise*) sharing a postmodern awareness of "the constructedness of all identity." As a postmodernist himself, Duvall is clearly aligned with the stances operative in that second act; this alignment furnishes the critical edge of his book's meditation on the novels that pursue "identity" as authenticity in the first act. This two-act drama also unfolds as a drama of seven scenes: one per novel. Here Duvall shrewdly assigns to each of Morrison's novels the precursor writer he finds it implicitly interrogating: Ellison for *The Bluest Eye*, Woolf for *Sula*, Faulkner for *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, Stowe for *Beloved*, and the earlier Morrison herself for *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*.

These intertextual engagements are not always persuasive. But when they are, they not only illuminate the text in question, they also demonstrate Duvall's operative conviction: that writerly identity emerges in and as the engagement of one's own writing with that of others (including one's earlier self)—dialogic, mirror-driven. Finally, and this may be Duvall's greatest achievement, he manages, through this set of encounters, to convey a compelling inner narrative of Morrison's genealogy as a writer (what James called "the story of the story"). Adroitly, he shows how the "Pecola problem" festers and reemerges as Sula, then as Pilate, and finally (in a weird inversion) as the social neurosis of skin color in *Paradise*'s Ruby. Equally, he shows how place in Morrison's novels gets reconfigured rather than set aside: how authentic Shalimar becomes troubling Eloi (of *Tar Baby*), and finishes as the quietly disastrous Ruby of *Paradise*. Most intricately, Duvall traces Morrison's own shifting handwriting on the walls of her texts: the disappearance and reappearance of Chloe, the invention of Anthony and of Toni, the family-name allusions that escape most readers yet insinuate legible dramas for those prepared to decipher. In all, Duvall demonstrates that Morrison's texts not only wrestle with precursors but unfold as a

contestatory inner/autobiographical history: never repeating, never forgetting either. The hydra that emerges is many-headed, but it remains one beast.

There is more to praise here: courage for taking on the touchy issue of racial identity politics (Morrison as the preserve of black critics who understand her as white critics cannot), humor in seeing himself implicated in his dealings with others' words no less than Morrison is, and finally a carefully wrought clarity of expression. You may not agree with all of Duvall's claims, but thanks to his labor you will know what he is talking about and why he is talking about it.

Another name for "courage" is foolhardiness, and sometimes Duvall forges ahead when a measure of "negative capability" might be wiser. He likes, in comparing a fictional moment with a biographical one (even when they are decades apart), to press hard on the contradictions. Morrison's sympathy for dark-skinned Pecola is thus juxtaposed against her undergraduate predilection for "pretty-girl" popularity, with Duvall commenting that he is not criticizing her, "since people during their young adulthood often participate in activities that they later find suspect." The tone of schoolmasterish forgiving in this sentence recurs (we hear often, in a raised-eyebrows sort of way, of Morrison's having been a beauty queen), and it makes me wonder two things: At this level of sleuthing, who'd escape whipping? and in what ways do such inconsistencies matter? What more do they tell us about Morrison's fiction? Duvall has a tendency to insist rather than ponder. The Seven Days in *Song of Solomon* are read repeatedly as patriarchal villains, and while the case for criticizing them is good, Duvall cannot see why the anguish of black males might lead them into such disastrous paths. Likewise, he reads Morrison's investment in distinctive black differences as a simple inversion of the white racist trope of a drop of "black" blood. Now the "sacred drop," rather than the "fatal drop," but a drop is a drop: Morrison's unjustifiable thinking in essences. Omitted from this judgmental assessment are the intricate reasons that Morrison might well consider black culture fundamentally different from white culture. (In this study *fundamental* tends to equal "essential," which tends to equal "mistaken.")

The project of autobiographical detection carries, moreover, its own liabilities. Duvall adopts Morrison's "the subject of the dream is the dreamer" (*Playing in the Dark*) as a guiding truth for his search. But writers are more than dreamers, and—more important—texts are more than dreams. The social scope and diagnostic portent of texts dwarf those of dreams, and undue attention to the dreamer risks missing the larger resonance of these texts—the manifold ways in which they are not, finally, about Toni Morrison. She matters to literary criticism only because she has written a number of commanding fictions, and she matters only in the measure that attending to her sheds light on them. Duvall's dreamer is never just personal, of course, but someone confusingly implicated in the larger identity-conferring categories of race, gender, and class. Yet sometimes the relentless search for "artist-figures"—the need to read these novels as, foremost, an autobiographical quarry—seems a touch myopic.

But only sometimes: The book is tougher than the questions one puts to it. A representative case: Duvall takes *Song of Solomon*'s 1977 attack on black middle-class aping of white middle-class property values and juxtaposes it against a 1998 profile of the Nobel laureate's ownership of four homes. ("I was a child of the Depression," Morrison is cited as saying, laughingly, in her defense.) My first response was embarrassment: Why subject Morrison to these demeaning juxtapositions? But on further pondering I began to wonder who was embarrassed: Morrison, for this reversal of views? Duvall, for catching her out? or myself, for preferring not to confront the writer's relation to her work at this level? A piece of scholarly sleuthing, a telling inconsistency (Duvall makes you see, for instance, how money changes meaning and location in the writer's

career), a moment in which Morrison's dual identity as biographical personage and disembodied intelligence of her texts suddenly causes discomfort—Duvall is intent upon staging just such encounters. The risk of failure is inseparable from the bid for success, not just because the evidence for his argument is dauntingly circumstantial, or even because we do not know the “correct” way of connecting writer with writings. Deeper than these reasons, Duvall risks failure because many readers' resistance becomes well-nigh impenetrable when made to enter such charged territory. This turning of the screw is precisely why Duval's book matters.

Marc C. Conner, ed. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000. 153 pp. \$18.00.

Reviewed by

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African American Review, Volume 36, Number 1
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This collection of eight essays, with an introduction by the editor, Mark C. Conner, enters the apparently ineradicable debate about the relationship between politics and art. Conner offers *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* as a corrective to a perceived imbalance caused by a critical lens too narrowly focused on the racial politics of Morrison's writing to the neglect of her artistic achievement. (Conner is not unaware of the tenuousness of this distinction. Less acknowledged is a counter-argument that would suggest a paucity of politically engaged criticism that approaches Morrison's work from a queer or global perspective, that situates her use of African cosmologies next to

that of, say, Simone Schwarz-Bart or Bessie Head.) In a lucid introduction that outlines productive and contentious twentieth-century talk about the proper goal of African American literature, Conner cites the importance of the Black Aesthetic movement while lamenting some of its effects, namely the ostracism of certain artists and the subordination of what might be called formal considerations to what might be called political concerns. Conner concludes that Morrison's “writing is uncompromisingly political; but its aspiration is to the status of art, the realm of story and music and restoration.” Take the *but* out of that sentence, and we may finally begin to move.

The collected essays are accessibly written with useful information about signifying, nommo, the grotesque, the sublime, Aristotle, Booker T. Washington, Edmund Burke, Madam C. J. Walker, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Salmon Rushdie, narrative theory, and founding racism. In a brief, suggestive essay, Barbara Johnson reads the severed limbs, traumatic scenes, and primal reverberations in *Sula* as a reworking of Freud's theory of the uncanny, which Freud considered an aesthetic question. The structure of the novel performs an “affective discontinuity”; or, as Johnson nicely puts it, “Things don't happen when they happen.” She argues that the novel mediates between “aesthetic” and “rapport,” between detachment and attachment, contemplation and action. A great deal of violence in the novel is “watched” by characters (Shadrack watches the face of a soldier fly off, Nel watches Chicken Little disappear into the river, Sula watches her mother burn to death), and in turn readers watch, and enjoy. As in ancient theatre, aesthetic pleasure derives, in part, from personal and political trauma. Maria DiBattista also investigates Morrison's attraction “to the sheer gorgeousness of the language of pain and contention.” Focusing on *Tar Baby*, DiBattista questions whether or not Morrison comfortably fits within the realist-novelist tradition, casting her primarily as a communal storyteller: “It is the fabulist, the