

Re-enchanted with the Work

COURTNEY THORSSON, *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2013), pp. 227, paper, \$27.50.

As scholars increasingly reconsider the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Courtney Thorsson's *Women's Work* stands at the cutting edge of scholarship that assesses the legacy of that movement for black women writers. Thorsson theorizes a strand of contemporary African American women's novels that "reclaim and revise cultural nationalism" (1) as a literary discourse and everyday practice. Through meticulous, original readings of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), Thorsson argues that these "novels of the cultural nationalist revision" (4, 12) theorize a cultural nationalism that depends upon "shared longing and radical imagining" (12) as performed through practices of organizing, cooking, dancing, mapping, and inscribing. "Women's work" names the fictional activities through which characters imagine a "sovereign homeland in spaces as local as the kitchen and as broad as the planet" (24) as well as the writers' own "textual-social struggle to envision alternative communities" (1). These works dismantle divisions between the theory and practice of nation to offer an expansive vision of post-Black Power collectivity.

The black women writers Thorsson examines sustain "the black arts tenet that literature should do work in the world," but they also "expand the genre, gender, and geography of [the Black Arts Movement] and break with its realist bent" (173). That is, whereas the Black Arts Movement "privileged poetry and drama," these writers choose the novel (5). Their fiction re-centers "the public and private work of ordinary women" often marginalized by Black Arts (3). And they expand Black Arts geography by defining nation as practiced through "daily, local labor informed by many routes of identification" (10). Scholars such as James Smethurst and Margo Crawford are expanding our sense of the "limited geography" (8) and "realist bent" (173) of Black Arts, thus revealing more of the "startling variety" that Thorsson states is "a less noted legacy of the black arts movement" (19). But whether we wish to distinguish black women novelists' imaginative and expansive works from those of Black Arts writers or we do not, Thorsson beautifully illuminates the work that her writers use the novel to do. Exploiting the novel's traditional role in nation formation but unmooring it from the nation-state (6, 115), these novelists practice nation as Brent Edwards's writers practice diaspora (28): by imagining portable, mutable, diverse black communities bound more by what Ralph Ellison called "an identity of passions" than by a shared place (qtd. in Thorsson 12).

Thorsson uses the term *nation* to describe these imagined communities because her writers themselves do so (3)—as when Paule Marshall states, "Black people in this country [the United States] really do constitute a nation apart" (90). Thorsson uses the term *cultural nationalism* "to both articulate an African American nation that is distinct from the nation-state and to place these authors in a . . . tradition" of African American letters stretching from Phillis Wheatley to Black Arts writers (3). The cultural nation envisioned here is not without dissent or tension, but it is cohesive. Hence contemporary black women writers "perform just

the complicated negotiation of identity that [Paul] Gilroy imagines, but do so through identification with the cultural nation that he would discard" (176). Their work "demand[s] that scholars address the continued relevance of nation in post-black arts writing" (1).

Thorsson's study extends the work of Madhu Dubey and Houston Baker in addition to that of Gilroy and Edwards. Whereas Dubey concludes *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994) by invoking the "tense dialogue between black nationalist discourse and black women's fiction in the 1970s" and its legacy for "black women's fiction in the 1980s" (qtd. in Thorsson 15), Thorsson picks up the thread by showing how black women writers "incorporate the multivalent and thick subjectivity of 1970s women's novels" into their vision of cultural nationhood in the 1980s and 1990s (16). Whereas Baker's *Workings of the Spirit* (1991) seems to "celebrat[e] a vague 'Afro-American women's expressive production' rooted in romanticized southern folkways," Thorsson insists that women novelists are not "transmitting vague, gendered wisdom" but rather performing the "specific, embodied, detailed practice of an African American cultural nation" (30–31). Even the links between nation and "spiritual knowledge" that are so important to all of these novels manifest as practices (28). Indeed, Thorsson's use of the term *practice* is in part designed "to suggest the connotative meaning of practice as conjure or second sight" (*ibid.*).

Women's Work begins with Bambara's 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*. This text is a key precursor to novels of the cultural nationalist revision not only because it offers a feminist revision of Black Arts but also because Bambara's "preface frames the volume as defined 'by practice'" (19) and makes "*the black woman . . .* a multivalent, shifting, complex term" (20). Thorsson links Bambara's editorial organization of that anthology to the narrative organization of her prismatic novel *The Salt Eaters* in chapter 1. Here Thorsson shows that Bambara organizes the fragmented narrative around the healing of activist Velma Henry to create "a chorus of voices, coalitions, and modes of knowledge that come to function as a complex, multifocal healing system" (51)—a nation defined by "generative dissonance" (59).

Thorsson's following chapter on Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* highlights the practice of cooking, showing how "recipes in particular celebrate women's bodies, invite participation, pass on personal and familial history, and make imagined travel possible" (65). Chapter 3 examines scenes of dance in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Following protagonist Avey Johnson from a Brooklyn living room to the South Carolina sea island of Tatem to the Caribbean island of Carriacou, Thorsson shows how the character " sifts through her individual and collective past" and ultimately dances as a performance of a complex "diasporic consciousness" (110). She analyzes Naylor's *Mama Day* in chapter 4, arguing that Naylor does not figure the South as "a site of nostalgia or literal return" but rather as "a portable homeland" "defined more by culture (foods, 'codes of behavior,' speech, and upbringing) than by geography" (121).

Thorsson's readings refuse to idealize the nation as a harmonious sisterhood; she notes the homophobia (14) and class privilege (127) that threaten coalitions. But neither does she romanticize "diversity within unity," a fragile calculus in which the former might always undo the latter. She writes, "As the twentieth century draws to a close . . . , diversity and dissent threaten to dismantle collectivity . . ." (138–39). The generative counterpoint Thorsson locates in *The Black Woman* becomes cacophonous division in her rather surprising final chapter on Morrison's *Paradise*.

Paradise is set in 1976, a year when "anxious affirmations of Americanness at a moment of deep disillusion among African Americans [mark a deep] disconnect between the nation-

state and its African American residents" (144). As Morrison states in a 1986 interview, "Suppose everything turns out just fine? And in five years or ten years, boom, integration, whatever this moment was about happened and we all lived happily ever after? I said nobody's gonna get away with that; they're not gonna tell me it was that easy... Like, it was not easy being a black girl in 1940.... Before you erase this, *wait*" (qtd. in Thorsson 144). According to Thorsson, Morrison writes these "forgotten" histories into *Paradise* in the form of barely legible inscriptions (*ibid.*). Although it is not entirely clear whether inscription is meant to "restore multiplicity" to community (170) or fragment it by "refus[ing] the reader and characters any safe home" (163), the archive that Thorsson unearths here is remarkable. Her archival research itself refuses to "erase" the Toni Morrison who once spoke so forthrightly—and not only about the fact that "it was not easy being a black girl in 1940" but also about the fact that it was not easy being a black woman in 1970. As she recalls in the same interview, "There was a lot of macho stuff in that [Black Power] movement.... There was a heavy weight of men with dicks.... The earnest *desperation* for proof of maleness, proof of manhood for black men, was at the heart of that movement" (151). Such moments offer a crucial glimpse of the candor that Morrison's stylization as the stately queen of American letters would soon suppress.

Thorsson seldom calls attention to such brilliant critical moves, often deferring to her novelists as "serious literary scholars" in their own right (4). She rightly notes that most of her authors "hold graduate degrees" and write literary criticism and give interviews through which they theorize their own work (4, 30). However, the unique literary critical work Thorsson herself does warrants attention. First, one of her major contributions is to identify this strand of African American literary production as such. At this moment, she writes, "there is room to identify specific strands and trends within contemporary African American literature," far beyond noting "books that are contemporary narratives of slavery and books that are not" (178). Her aesthetic history of this particular strand offers a model for subsequent literary critical studies—as does her refreshing commitment to the literary despite the move toward interdisciplinarity and her sustained attention (following her writers) to the nation amid "the current move toward global, diasporic, and transnational perspectives in the humanities" (175).

Above all, *Women's Work* is among the best demonstrations I know of the idea that literature can "do work in the world." We understand this—or kind of understand it, when we are not questioning the social efficacy of studying literature—but the way Thorsson makes this case is powerful. On one level, she follows in the footsteps of black feminist literary critics such as Valerie Smith and Deborah McDowell who dismantle divides between fiction and theory (188); she does so not only by arguing that novels produce theory but also by granting Ellison's and Morrison's commentaries about the novel as much weight as Franco Moretti's. But Thorsson also destabilizes boundaries between art and life; she does this through her own subtle practice of what I would term "critical conjure."

She explicitly and inventively reads "the work of writing novels in conversation with the fictional women's work in the novels" (9). For instance, *The Salt Eaters* ends with an evocation of a new future in which "another script could play itself out." Thorsson writes, "It is up to the novelists writing in the wake of this healing to inhabit this space [at the end of the novel] to write 'another script' for an African American cultural nation. Bambara prepares this ground" (63). Shange's Indigo embodies "the many modes of knowledge Bambara calls for in *The Salt Eaters*" and "is the nationalist culture worker [Bambara's protagonist] plans to be"

(79). Thorsson's formulations give characters a life of their own: Avey Johnson "gets a book-length praisesong because she does the work of traveling . . . toward African American collectivity" (25). Refusing the disenchantment and skepticism betrayed by critical keywords like "problematic," Thorsson's rhetorical conjure brilliantly bears out Bambara's claim that writing is "a perfectly legitimate way to participate in struggle" (4). We need not imagine the work of nation to be out there somewhere else: the work of creating and responding to these fictional worlds *is* the work.

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