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Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison by Saadi A. Simawe
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Saadi A. Simawe, ed. *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York: Garland, 2000. 275 pp. $80.00.

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When in 1935 the Martinican writer Aime Césaire coined the term *négritude* in an essay published in *L'Etudiant Noir,* he grounded this term in the historicity and particularity of the imperialist and supremacist subjugation of black people and in the ensuing cultural and political resistance by black people to that subjugation. Even in 1939 with the publication of his celebrated piece in prose and poetry titled "Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal" ("Notebook of a Return to My Native Land"), Césaire situated négritude within the lived realities of his life as a French colonial subject and his rejection of that condition. Over time, however, this term, along with its English predecessor and analogue *blackness,* has come to be associated with some sort of mystical and transcendent African/Black essence or soul.

This essentialist conceptualization of black culture has locked far too many discussions of African diasporic cultural and political issues within a binary prison of black versus white or dominant versus subordinate, and focused far too many discussions on transgressions against the purported power of whiteness instead of on understanding the operations—at all of their various intersections, social, political, historical, intellectual—of the culture at hand. In 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Leopold Sedar Senghor's anthology of black literature (*Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poesie Négre et Malgache*) positioned négritude writers within the self-reflexive and transgressive qualities of the orphic, and referred to these writers as Black Orpheus. This, very likely inadvertent, act of un-naming potentially usurps the particularity suggested in the term *négritude* as well as contests the négritude writers' desire to position themselves in an African heritage rather than in the hegemonic and often tyrannical embrace of universalism located in ancient Greek culture. Subsequent uses of Sartre's appellation by Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, the German founders of the Nigerian-based literary magazine *Black Orpheus,* contrast with the titles of similar journals (founded by diasporic Africans) from the 1930s through the 1950s, *L'Etudiant Noir* and *Presence Africaine,* as well as the title of Senghor's book, all of which conspicuously reclaim the contested terms black and African. Along with this reclamation or reconstruction of identity comes the concomitant revisions that the African enacts upon the received and privileged European culture in which she also is situated.

In African American literature, Kimberly Benston's revision, in the 1970s, of the orphic as a "re-membering"—a unifying and a recalling gesture situated in the music of John Coltrane—seemed to draw to a close this decades-old discourse on Black Orpheus, as few contemporary scholars now employ this allusion as an effective means through which to discuss African American literature. Thus my surprise when I encountered Saadi A. Simawe's edited volume of essays titled *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. Simawe collects in this volume nine essays that, for the most part, present discussions of the figure of the musician, of jazz styling in prose, or of the transforming power of music in fiction by Sherley Anne Williams, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Gayl Jones, Ann Petry, Ntozake Shange, Nathaniel Mackey, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. The value of this volume is in its emphasis on reading music in African American prose, as the operations of music in fiction are an often cursorily explored wellspring of cultural knowledge about black people in the United States.

Most of the essays in *Black Orpheus*, however, suffer from the same limitation; they are too heavily invested in the concept of Black Orpheus as their controlling theme rather than on the rich operations of music in the fictional texts that the writers discuss. In, for instance, Johanna X. K. Garvey's "That Old Black Magic: Gender and Music in Ann Petry's Fiction," an otherwise wonderful reading of gender and music in Ann Petry's fiction, Garvey appears to establish the orphic as a standard against which Petry's characters are measured and suggests a certain failure in those characters that lack orphic qualities as Garvey defines them. The Blues characters Boots Smith and Lutie Johnson from Petry's novel *The Street* fail, from Garvey's perspective, as orphic characters, while Mamie Powther from *The Narrows*, Belle Rose from "Olaf and His Girlfriend," Chink from "Miss Muriel," and the writer Ann Petry all are lauded as representations of Black Orpheus. While the articles by Jacquelyn Fox-Good (this writer not only loses Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* in the orphic but also immerses it in an ahistorical post-structuralist framework), Jane Olmsted, and Tom Lutz are firmly invested in the Black Orpheus concept, other writers in this volume manage to minimize or resist this limitation and write engaging articles on music in African American fiction.

Maria V. Johnson's discussion of Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* and Allen Joseph's article on Nathaniel Mackey's *Djbot Baghostus's Run* both provide insightful readings of music in the narratives on which they focus. Katherine Boutry in her piece, "Black and Blue: The Female Body of Blues Writing in Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones," delineates an important social narrative that informs Blues music and its connection to black women. Boutry is concerned with the way in which the black female body operates as a blank space upon which listeners project their own images of the music as well as the performer. Boutry's article provides a valuable, historically grounded discussion of gender and music in three important African American novels. Perhaps a deeper understanding of African American culture is the only thing that may have been a valuable addition to this article, as such an understanding could expand Boutry's interpretative options to include the possibility of reading the first word in Morrison's *Jazz* as a teeth-sucking gesture and to acknowledge the vernacular use of the honorific term *Mama*.

The strongest article in Simawe's collection is Alan Rice's "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing: Jazz's Many Uses for Toni Morrison." Rice, who has published other articles on Toni Morrison's uses of music in her fiction, convincingly situates the improvisatory actions of Paul D and the other chain-gang prisoners in *Beloved* within the context of Jazz and liberation. He also reads music as consolatory for Morrison's title-character Sula, and in so doing acknowledges the "multifaceted function" of music in African American culture. Simawe ends his volume with his own essay, "Shamans of Song: Music and the Politics of Culture in Alice Walker's Early Fiction," in which he primarily discusses the figure of the musician in Walker's early writing. Frequently, analyses of Walker's writing center on her concern with important issues related to gender, yet her firm grounding in African American culture and her concern with music are less frequently mined. Simawe's discussion of Walker's short story "1955," an oblique commentary on the inequitable differential between Big Mama Thornton's and Elvis Presley's, black and white, male and female cultural capital in the United States, locates Walker's early writing within a critique of the politics of the power discourses on capitalism, gender, and cultural hegemony.

The strong essays in *Black Orpheus* make it a worthwhile volume, if for no other reason than that these essays provide in one place insight into music that is located in a broad range of African American narrative texts. The notion, howev-

er, that the orphic provides a suitable metaphor through which one should read music in African American narrative proves to be problematical. Alan Rice's essay in *Black Orpheus* effectively states this position. Critics, Rice believes, should guard against the "slavish adoption of Greek mythical allusions that, though relevant, are not dominating in Morrrison's fiction"—and, I would add, in African American fiction for which music is a metaphor that frequently contains valuable cultural, social, political, and intellectual narratives.

Maria Lauret. *Alice Walker*. New York: St. Martin's P, 2000. 252 pp. $35.00.

Reviewed by

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Within the last two decades, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker has emerged, both nationally and internationally, as one of the most versatile and controversial writers of African American literature. Although extensive critical studies have attempted to assess Walker's works, others still continue to unravel the mystery of this novelist, poet, essayist, and short fiction writer. Thus, Maria Lauret's scholarly work, the first book-length study of Alice Walker's prose to appear in Britain, is a valuable new addition in the Modern Novelists series edited by Norman Page and published by St. Martin's Press. For the scholar and novice reader, Lauret's volume adds significantly to our understanding of a pioneering literary figure who continues "to create new voices and new visions of the role that literature can play in shaping and critiquing society."

The volume opens with a refreshing critical approach to Walker's life. By extracting a biographical sketch from Walker's essays and interviews, Lauret examines Walker's autobiographical voice and the kind of critical authority her persona invokes for the reader or critic. Through Walker's non-fictional writings, Lauret charts the author's self-fashioning "as victim/survivor, activist/teacher, writer/healer and finally elder," from the 1970s to the late 1990s. After such an assessment, Lauret ends the chapter by acknowledging how the works of Zora Neale Hurston and those of Virginia Woolf have shaped and informed Walker's writing throughout her literary career. While Lauret notes that Hurston is both a role model and ancestor, she further claims Hurston is a "legitimating presence for Walker in the African American literary tradition." She contends that it is Southern folk culture, and more especially the black vernacular, that Walker sees in Hurston. A number of critics trace the similarities in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*. However, operating on the premise that there is a need for critics to locate Hurston's presence in other works besides *The Color Purple*, Lauret successfully traces how Walker uses Hurston's anthropological work on voodoo, *Mules and Men*, to validate her mother's discourse, especially in the short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff." In the final comparison of the two, Lauret argues quite convincingly that Hurston's major influence enables Walker to articulate her critique of race and gender relations in the feminist post-Civil Rights era and to theorize it in the concept of womanism. Using Walker's definition of womanism, at the beginning of *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Lauret indicates how Hurston serves as a model, as Walker formulates, revises, and offers a critique of the term.

Though Lauret heeds Morrison's warning against the comparisons between black and white writers, Lauret argues that her comparison of Walker and Woolf, as with Hurston, provides "a form of knowledge" that, when examined together, "can raise our consciousness about what is involved when 'our mother's