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It was only a matter of time before we would have to feel guilty for enjoying the novels of Toni Morrison. In her wonderfully insightful book *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Madhu Dubey (rightly) spares no author and no critic in her always astute, always rigorous, and almost always fair analysis of “the postmodern moment” (24) in African American literature and literary studies.

Dubey’s argument pivots on the book—both as an object of exchange in a postmodern commodity culture and as a prized vehicle of modernist aesthetics and politics—as it is represented in a number of African American novels from the late 1980s to the present, by Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Sapphire, Gloria Naylor, John Edgar Wideman, Colson Whitehead, and Samuel Delany. To begin with, it is remarkable that so many contemporary African American novelists have explicitly engaged tropes of the book and of textualility. But Dubey goes far beyond such simple, if compelling, observations to deliver powerful original analysis of an extraordinarily rich body of recent literature. *Signs and Cities* is, quite simply, essential reading for African Americanist and postmodernist scholars.

Dubey categorizes her chosen novels and novelists according to four governing metaphors for the book and for reading and...
writing: the book as utilitarian and spiritual tool (Butler, Sapphire) (96), “writing as voyeurism” (Morrison, Wideman) (99), “reading as listening” (Morrison, Naylor) (144), and “reading as mediation” (Delany, Whitehead) (186). In Dubey’s view, the first three metaphors reflect “suspicion” regarding “print literature” and a resultant bias toward the mimetic, the oral, and the rural past even within formally postmodern writing (6). Dubey questions the logic and the political efficacy of such a nostalgic stance; her third metaphor—reading as mediation—clearly wins as the one most likely to drive a politically progressive, materially aware, and poststructurally fluent text. Delany, not Morrison, emerges as the hero of *Signs and Cities*, because he is “committed to a postmodern and decisively urban cultural politics, while remaining sharply alert to the materialist dimensions of culture” (185).

Dubey situates all her chosen novels in a postmodern moment wherein both race and the book are viewed by many as relics of the past. At this dual moment of crisis in print culture and in racial representation, African American culture “lies at the heart of discussions of postmodern crisis and is in fact pervasively summoned both to embody and resolve the sense of crisis” (7). In Dubey’s succinct analysis, “cultural critics on the left” find it difficult “to resist romanticizing black culture as the last vestige of authenticity left in postmodern times, at once radically other and viscerally knowable” (9). There are dangers, she reminds us, in holding African American culture apart from either print culture or postmodern commodity culture, in seeing it as an authentic “residual” untainted by capitalist exchange and outside the politics and possibilities of the literary (8). Cornel West, with his ongoing preoccupation with hip-hop, and novelists such as Morrison and Naylor, with their “turn south” (145), are indeed vulnerable to such a critique—and they are not alone.

According to Dubey, so many academics relish Morrison’s novels because they offer us “a synthesis of aesthetic indeterminacy and racial essentialism” (10)—that is, they privilege orality and past forms of community even as they take postmodern, experimental form. Thus we can have our cake and eat it too, getting a “fix of tribal values” that is rendered acceptable, even apparently progressive, because it is masked by the literary-aesthetic innovations of a novel like *Jazz* (237). Dubey resoundingly rejects any such association of
formal innovation with political progressiveness—and, although that same point has been made by other critics in other contexts, none has made it so decisively as has Dubey.

Throughout *Signs and Cities*, Dubey carefully connects her literary analysis to political and material conditions—for example, by correlating contemporary African American women novelists’ “turning south,” as in *Beloved* or *Mama Day*, to the disillusioning realities of northern urban living for the majority of African Americans. Such insistence on lived reality, along with its embrace of poststructuralist theory and (at least some) postmodern understandings of the city, marks Dubey’s work as at once deeply ethical and deeply engaged in imagining a better world, with novels and criticism working, in tandem, to look less to the past and more at the present and toward the future. It makes perfect sense, then, that Samuel Delany emerges as the author of choice in *Signs and Cities*; indeed, Dubey’s discussion of science fiction as a genre that is ideal for reconciling postmodern theory and materialist politics is among the many highlights of her book.

As Dubey points out, science fiction, unlike any other genre, can offer ideas and sentences that are both mimetic and figurative. Via Delany, she offers the following: “Gregor Samsa . . . realized he’d been transformed into a huge beetle” is a sentence that can be literally true only of an otherworld created by speculative fiction yet can, at the same time, also be metaphorically “true” of the present (224). In other words, science fiction can accommodate the real and the possible, the word as poststructural signifier and the word as shaped by and reflective of material reality. This sort of “mediation,” to use Dubey’s terminology, is precisely what we need now in order to transcend the reflexive theoretical dichotomies of postmodernism: progressive/reactionary, postmodern/modern, hyper-text/book, poststructuralist/materialist, oral/literary, and so on.

Along with such broad reimagining of a postmodern literary and critical moment, Dubey offers us a lively new vision for contemporary African American literary study, placing a previously marginalized subgenre (speculative/science fiction) at its center. Calling to our attention novels such as Delaney’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (reprinted since *Signs and Cities* was published) and Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* is, in fact, among her most valuable
services to the field. Just as important, she issues a number of challenges to conventional genealogies of the African American literary tradition and of postmodernism. For instance, Dubey argues that the Black Arts Movement (generally viewed as essentialist and clearly out of step with the poststructuralism that was flourishing in the late 1960s and early 1970s) should be considered postmodern, because it did away with high-low cultural distinctions and rejected unitary Western narratives. She even goes so far as to assert that “postmodern critiques of humanism were anticipated (or perhaps more accurately initiated) by the cultural nationalist project” (33). Dubey also makes persuasive connections between the nationalism and anti-middle-class bias of the Black Arts Movement and what she terms the current “postmodern politics of difference” (33) of thinkers such as bell hooks and Houston Baker.

Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of Signs and Cities is its clear, assertive, and courageous formulation of contemporary critics’ missteps. On the other hand, Dubey’s occasionally harsh assessment of Morrison—“Morrison’s image of rural southern community blossoming in poverty betrays a certain anxiety on the part of the professional writer who feels her access to authentic racial representation blocked by class and educational privilege” (164)—however provocative, is a bit less compelling and even a bit less fair, in part because it relies so heavily on novels, essays, and interviews from the early to mid 1980s. Arguably, Morrison’s more recent work fits less comfortably under a rubric of “writing as voyeurism” or rural nostalgia. The only other weakness worth noting is an occasional lack of clarity, with the prose sometimes veering into jargon ungrounded by concrete examples, as in “Technological determinism manifests itself as a revamped version of formalism in the sphere of postmodern literary studies” (10). Just a few additional sources might have lent greater clarity to such denser passages in the book. For example, the discussion of the “logic of absorption” (103) whereby black bodies “are embedded in the conditions of commodity consumption” (102) would have benefited from Dick Hebdidge’s classic study, Subculture: The Meaning of Style.1 Similarly, the discussion of the uses to which postmodernist intellectuals have often put

black women (for example, to represent “the real”) would have benefited from Deborah McDowell’s brilliant essay “Transferences: Black Feminist Thinking: The ‘Practice’ of ‘Theory.’” But these are minor omissions in a book that, overall, is argued and supported meticulously.

Along with that meticulousness, what sets *Signs and Cities* apart from much contemporary literary criticism is its willingness to go beyond diagnosis to prescription. By reconciling poststructuralist theory and materialist historicism and politics, Dubey suggests, we may be saved from “the culturalism and racial romanticism of most versions of the politics of difference” (233). She wants to supplant the too-common notion that, for African Americans, “critical resistance is primarily conducted in the field of culture” (22). On the other hand, she does not want us to abandon the literary, or the literary-critical, as a politically engaged mode. But as she cautions at the conclusion of *Signs and Cities*, “the book, the modern print tradition, will have to be refashioned before it can redeem its utopian promise” (241). In the end, Madhu Dubey is offering us tough medicine—but it is in our best interests to take it.

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