

*SONIDOS DE LA DIÁSPORA.*

*BLUES Y JAZZ EN*

*TONI MORRISON, ALICE WALKER, Y GAYL JONES.*

*ROCÍO COBO PIÑERO*

Sevilla: ArCiBel, 2015. ISBN-978-84-15335-58-0. 260 p.

MARÍA FRÍAS RUDOLPHI

*Universidade da Coruña*

*maria.frias@udc.es*

Without doubt the oral tradition and Black Vernacular are part and parcel of African American culture. Historically deprived of and punished for learning how to read and write, the afrodescendents in the American continent find an outlet for the systematic dehumanization and the outrageous violence of the so-called “peculiar institution” thanks to the spoken word. First, it was African words in myriads of languages. Those incomprehensible musical words were their only and most valuable baggage. Stripped of their clothes, their dignity, and their distinctive rich and varied cultures and traditions, these African men, women, and children carried with them their oral traditions—their *orature*—and meant to keep it as the most precious treasure. At first sight, one might think it was a worthless burden, but it was not. The Black Atlantic has been witness to the varied manifestations of the African spoken words: the sheer variety of languages, to start with, the riddles, the animal tales, the fables, the songs. The songs in particular because all over the continent Africans still perform special songs and dances for the different rites of passage—from birth to death. Then, in shock, the African slaves’ words encounter other incomprehensible words along the shores of the American continent and beyond. The African words start to mingle with the *ghost* (white) people’s foreign words. Centuries later, after crossing many rivers, some vernacular stories remain almost intact in the psyches of the Black community while others have adjusted to the new socio-historical circumstances, but they still keep their unique African flavor. From the spiritual songs and the work songs of slavery, the abolitionist speeches, the religious sermons, the rural and the urban blues, playing the dozens (or outsmarting your opponent through the use of words), the fables and animal tales, to the freedom songs and, most recently, hip-hop culture, the African American community have used the spoken word to resist, to denounce, and to complain, as well as to give voice to and celebrate the transcendence and beauty of their respective African cultures in the Diaspora.

Despite the odds, it does not take long for women of African descent to use those same words to struggle and speak out loud against racism, sexism, and social

exclusion. Thus, as early as 1831, at a time when slavery has not been yet abolished in the US, Maria W. Stewart furiously addresses her black sisters when she wonders: “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” (Richardson 59). Within today’s theoretical jargon, there is the temptation to easily label Stewart as a proto-black-feminist, worth bearing in mind, however, is that she was not the only one. Take, for example, Sojourner Truth’s powerful and much quoted impromptu speech given at The Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1851). Together with the disturbing rhetorical question, Truth offers crude facts about her life as a woman slave and her success in crossing the (color) line. With her powerful presence and the unveiling of the pornography inherent in slavery, Sojourner Truth denies her suffragist white audience the luxury of remaining blind or deaf any longer to the pain and injustices perpetrated on women who happen to be black.

Overall, it is safe to argue that given black women’s history of discrimination, interracial violence and hatred, as well as sexual use and abuse (both by white and black males alike), they tend to join and raise their voices in unison to denounce the many ways they have been—and still are—mistreated. Does it mean that all black women artists (whether writers or singers) are feminist? Is their spoken discourse, as in the case of Stewart’s or Truth’s, openly and inescapably black feminist? Referring to their literary discourse, though, and as the very title of his volume would suggest, Henry Louis Gates assertedly holds that “reading Black [women] is reading feminist” (1995). Well, not always. Trudier Harris’s controversial and provocative essay on Celie’s lack of agency in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* proves the contrary: “I couldn’t imagine a Celie existing in any black community [...] What sane Black woman, I asked, would sit around and take that crock of shit from all those folks?” A really annoyed Harris adds: “But the woman just sat there, like a bale of cotton with a vagina, taking stuff from kids even and waiting for someone to come along and rescue her” (155). Besides the specific response of reputable black women scholars like Harris, applied to the *orature*<sup>1</sup> or the literature of black women writers, the term feminist has proved polemical (as Rocío Cobo Piñero claims in her volume *Sonidos de la diáspora. Blues y Jazz en Toni Morrison, Alice Walker y Gayl Jones*), since the inception of the first feminist wave, back in the nineteenth century, up to the second wave of the nineteen seventies, and the current transnational and crosscultural theoretical arguments. Consistently, historically too, the words from the mouths and pens of African

---

<sup>1</sup> I am using the term *orature* following Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu. In his study on the connections between performance and orature, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o offers Zirimu’s definition of *orature*—a term coined by Zirimu himself in the early seventies: “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression” (4).

American women have echoed the simultaneous neglect and exploitation suffered at the hands of Western (white) feminists. No wonder that, given the reality of their multiple jeopardies (race, class, and sexism), it became imperative for Alice Walker to coin *womanism* as a way to refer to a feminist politics that unmistakably reflects on black feminist thought—or a feminism of their own.

For black women writers, feminism/*womanism* permeates their works. They listen to and read each other's texts and create thought-provoking stories of generations of women who came before or after them but who have left a memorable mark on these women's psyches—and later on their readers, whether black or white. Together with their *womanist* discourse (at times questioned), for African American writers orality is not just a recurrent tool but also an emblem and a political and aesthetic statement. For the most part daughters of hard working-class mothers and grandmothers (many of them illiterate—except for Gayl Jones whose mother had an education and was a writer herself), Morrison, and Walker, among others, learn how to find their own voices as well as that of their female characters from the conversations that often took place “in as unglamorous a setting as the kitchen” (Marshall 2)—when the working mothers, relatives or friends released the tension of working for “the [white] man,” and share their stories, covering the suffering and the shame with laughter (*laughing to keep from crying*, as Langston Hughes would put it in 1952), and blues songs, or just giving an outlet to the daily frustrations; they also learn the art of the spoken word from the porches of the South where their families were born and raised and where racism was rampant, and the savage raids of the Ku-Klux-Klan terrified young black women and emasculated black men and boys. They hear adults talking about the “Land of Milk and Honey” up in the Northern cities where men work in factories and women are forced to neglect their children and tenderly care for the needs of the almost-perfect children of the traditional and apparently impeccable white families.

But apart from its therapeutic effect, as Marshall defends, “that free wheeling, wide-ranging, and exuberant talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy these black women possessed.” Besides, in Marshall's words, “they are women for whom the need for self-expression is strong, and since language is the only vehicle readily available to them they make an art form out of it—in keeping with the African tradition where art and life are one” (2) and, in the process, Black Vernacular tradition functions as an integral part of their lives too. Furthermore, these womanist conversations act both as a refuge and a shield from the outside, ugly, and racist white world.

As Paule Marshall claims, those late afternoon conversations on a wide and interesting range of topics were a way for her mother and her mother's friends to feel they exercised some measure of control over their lives and the daily events that shaped them. “‘Soully-gal, talk yuh talk!’ they would exhort each other. ‘In this man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun!’ someone would shout out loud.

[The poets in the kitchen] were in control, if only verbally and if only for the two hours or so that they remained in our house,” Marshall argues (3). Borrowing from Marshall’s schooling in dialogue and characterization, these domestic workers’s “Kitchen Blues” remain “sites of memory” (Otele). Their daily *jam sessions* around the kitchen table might not eradicate the pain inflicted by the perpetrators, but each woman’s *solo break* might surely help to heal each other’s pain and traumatic experiences.

In the African American literary tradition, from Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1770) to Taiye Selasi’s first novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013) or Roxane Gay’s *An Untamed State* (2014)—and beyond—these women’s poems, plays and novels tell stories in written form for us to read. However, I have often had the feeling that, more than reading, I am *listening* to a long and unique song full of variations.

Like the authors analyzed in Cobo Piñero’s volume, each African American writer possesses a vibrant voice with a rhythm of her own. They know how to use words as weapons or to beautify their texts/lyrics with the irresistible *will to adorn*—as Zora Neale Hurston puts it. These writers’s songs/stories sing about the myriad ways black woman have historically made a way out of no way. They sing out loud about women who have been “in sorrow’s kitchen and lick all the pots,” echoing, once again, Hurston’s sentiments (322). They sing/write about women— young girls, too—who are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Overall, they struggle to find their own individual voices and be vocal and visible despite the many odds. Significantly, as Hill Collins asserts, black women writers raise their voices to write/sing about black female characters who start on a personal journey in search of: 1) self-definition; 2) self-evaluation and respect; 3) and, hopefully, self-reliance and independence. Far from their black male counterparts who—in the blues tradition—“hop trains” or “hit the road,” black women’s literary journeys tend to be personal and psychological (105). Some of Morrison’s, Walker’s, and Jones’s protagonists together with the blues black divas’s personal journeys prove Hill Collins is right. More often than not, they all write or sing the blues after the pain has visited them.

*Sonidos de la Diáspora. Blues y Jazz en Toni Morrison, Alice Walker y Gayl Jones* (2015), written by Rocío Cobo Piñero, is divided into three main chapters. Chapter One is devoted to Toni Morrison’s novels where the author focuses on *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz*. In Chapter Two, the author analyzes Alice Walker’s two novels, *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*, as well as her collection of short stories *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*—whose title, slightly modified, echoes that of a blues song by Perry Bradford. To complete this “unholy trinity” of canonized writers—as Walker would put it—for Chapter Three

Cobo Piñero chooses Gayl Jones, and her two controversial novels *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* together with her narrative poem *The Song for Anninho* which broadens the scope of the Middle Passage by introducing the trauma of the Atlantic Slave Trade not only in the United States but also in South America (Brazil).

As we can see from the authors chosen and the sheer amount of works analyzed, *Sonidos de la diáspora* is an ambitious academic project. Specially, if we bear in mind that the author reads/listens to Morrison's, Walker's and Jones's works in view of a theoretic framework that includes Jazz and Blues Studies as well as black feminist thought and *womanist* theories. Surprisingly, instead of providing a socio-historical background of the Blues and Jazz music in the United States in chronological order, the author intersperses her narrative with the sounds and themes of blues and jazz whenever they appear in the texts/novels analyzed—a decision that complicates the reading.

Following an Introduction in which the author justifies the existing dialogue between the literary and the musical discourses, “Voces de mujeres en la literatura y en la música negra” (Women's Voices in Black Literature and Music) (my translation), the first chapter opens with Nobel Prize Winner Toni Morrison, and Morrison's own definition of her work: it permeates with “the blues sensibility” (*Blues* 18). And rightly so. In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), albeit concealed, the presence of the blues is felt right from the title—the bluest/saddest I. A polyphonic text where Cobo identifies not only Pecola's utterly sad and heartbreaking blues, that is, her maddening desire for the bluest eye(s), as told/sang by Claudia (her childhood friend), but also Pecola's mother's blues (Pauline), or those of the trio of vulnerable but strong prostitutes—Poland, Marie, and China. In this section, Cobo pays special attention to the ways the antagonism between Mrs. McTeer (Claudia's mother) and Pauline Breedlove (Pecola's mother) is marked by the celebration of the black vernacular tradition and the blues (in the case of Mrs. McTeer), and the painful struggle to assimilate into citified working-class black society and embrace the Western Standard of Beauty (on the part of Pauline Breedlove). To prove it, Cobo Piñero highlights that the first full blues we hear Mrs. McTeer singing is Bessie Smith's “St. Louis Blues”: “St. Louis woman wid her diamon' rings / Pulls dat man aroun' by her apron strings / 'Twant for powder an' for store-bought hair / De man I love would not gone nowhere.” Instead, Poland (one of the prostitutes), on her part, and different from Mrs. McTeer, sings an empty bed blues—“Mealbarrel Blues”—where the uninhibited sexual message is absolutely explicit: “I got the blues in my mealbarrel / Blues on my shelf / Blues in my bedroom / Cause I am sleeping by myself.”

At the same time, Morrison's complex and contradictory characters—marked by or ignorant of the blues and the Black Vernacular—serve Cobo Piñero to close this section on *The Bluest Eye* with an introduction to the technicalities of the blues as well as its chronology and the myriad ways these are reflected in

Morrison's first novel. Thus, for the author, musical terms like repetition and innovation, *vamp*, leading melody, *breaks*, or *riffs* find an echo in Morrison's first novel. Rather repetitive in content, in the following section "Las características técnicas del blues y su representación literaria" (Technical Characteristics of the Blues and its Literary Representation) (my translation), the author goes back to revisit Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and explores the novel this time in view of Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* (1989). According to Murray, words like *riff*, *break* and *vamp* have traditionally belonged to the jazz vocabulary but his study tries to prove that they have originated in the blues. Thus, Cobo Piñero devotes a few more pages to proving Murray's thesis in view of Morrison's *bluesy* literary discourse.

While for Cobo Piñero, women like Claudia, Mrs. McTeer, and the prostitutes Poland, China, and Marie, personify the blues singers who "alzan la voz para defender las raíces africanas con dignidad" (54),<sup>2</sup> the author invests Pilate, one of the female characters in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), with the title of "cantante de Blues Clásico" (or Classic Blues singer). As the author rightly claims, while current criticism tends to focus on Milkman as the indisputable protagonist of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Cobo Piñero places Pilate in the spot light both as a blues singer and a "culture bearer" (McKay 398).

Perceived as an outsider and a freak of nature by her own black community, Pilate goes through different stages that work as stepping stones in her erratic and nomadic life: tempting and erotic; abandoned; subservient; and, finally, self-sufficient and vocal, a fact that helps Cobo refer to the manifold personalities of classic blues singers and their corresponding songs. Here, for example, given Pilate's masculine traces and lack of femininity, the author justifies a parallelism between Ma Rainey's bisexuality and transvestism—wearing male clothes even on the record cover of her, for some, scandalous "Prove It on Me Blues": "I went out last night with a crowd of friends / It must've been women, 'cause I don't like men" (65). Besides, Pilate's geographical mobility, her unheard of independence and her systematic questioning and subversion of social norms serves Cobo Piñero as a way to focus on and refer to the personal experiences of certain Classic Blues singers—from Ma Rainey and her "Wandering Blues" or "Prove It on Me Blues" to Bessie Smith and her "Empty Bed Blues," and thus establish a parallel.

In the case of Pilate, Cobo Piñero suggests that not only is her presence much more relevant than it might seem at first, but also that Morrison incorporates a symbolism that can be associated with the Classic Blues and that includes the following: the Myth of the Flying African (or the ability of the wise African man brought against his will to America/the US as a slave to fly back home and to

---

<sup>2</sup> "[They] raise their voices to celebrate the dignity of their African roots" (my translation).

freedom); Pilate's lack of belly-button; and the mysterious song she sings throughout the novel and that has been passed on through generations: "Sugarman Blues."

As in the chapter devoted to *The Bluest Eye*, Cobo Piñero closes her reading of *Song of Solomon* with the technicalities of Blues music and, this time, she refers to the symbolism implicit in Sugarman/Solomon/and Sugargirl Blues. Furthermore, the author pauses to analyze the novel's controversial ending, including Pilate's flight and Milkman and Guitar's fight. As with the vernacular tradition, and echoing Morrison's words, the author concludes that there is no ending—but rather intentional ambiguities since readers and listeners alike "must be kept thinking" (74).

The third work included in Cobo Piñero's text is *Jazz* (1992). The setting of the novel is Harlem (New York), and the time is the so-called Rollicking Twenties or the Jazz Age. It is here when Cobo Piñero introduces, albeit briefly, the cultural and social movement known as the Harlem Renaissance or *the time when Harlem was in vogue*; its intellectuals (Du Bois and Alain Locke); some of its writers (Nella Larsen, Jessie Faucet, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, among others); and its musical manifestations (blues and jazz); its terminology/vocabulary (jam sessions, piano stride, improvisation, antiphony, syncopation, among others); its night clubs (Cotton Club or Indigo); and its protagonists—the love triangle made of Violet, Joe, and the lover Dorcas.

It is in the next section, "Transgresión formal: la voz narrativa y el lenguaje jazzístico" (Formal Transgression: Narrative Voice and Jazz Language) (my translation), where the author situates Morrison's novel within the background of jazz music. In a nutshell, Cobo Piñero perceives the jazz language/music as so persistent and persuasive that it permeates the whole text as if it were a *jam session* where an omniscient narrative voice allows the characters/musicians to tell/sing their solos with their repetitions and improvisations. Thus, according to the author, this polyphonic text/song offers readers the opportunity to be "active participants" since Morrison encourages us to put together the pieces of the tragically ending amorous triangle. In the process, we not only become familiarized with the socio-historical setting of The City (Harlem) but are also transported to slavery times. All this without the help of a conductor since, as Cobo Piñero affirms: "la voz narrativa y los personajes, como los músicos de Jazz, se guían exclusivamente por su instinto y la efusión del momento" (96).<sup>3</sup>

Chapter Two explores Alice Walker's obsession with and celebration of black women's lives both real (Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Big Mama Thornton or Nina Simone), and fictional (Meridian, Shug or Celie,

---

<sup>3</sup> "As with jazz musicians, the narrative voice and the characters follow their instinct and the feelings of the moment" (my translation).

among others). Referring to Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Cobo Piñero affirms that given the history of subjugation and segregation, both the Black Church and Black music (spirituals and gospel) have had a therapeutic effect on the community. However, given the socio-political scenario of the Sixties and the Civil Rights Movement, the music and the rhythm might remain the same but the lyrics have drastically changed. Thus, the "sorrow songs" (spirituals) are exchanged for the "freedom songs." Openly militant in tone, these songs include a range of music, from the traditional protest song "We Shall Overcome" to "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" (1962).

Given its circular structure, we travel with *Meridian*—the young university student turned activist—from the South to the North and then back to the land of magnolias, and are witness to her transformation. *Meridian* becomes the spokesperson who revisits the "official story" and sings both her individual memory and that of her community. *Meridian* "cannot possibly kill for the Revolution" but, the author highlights, she does sing for the Movement (Cobo Piñero 109).

While B.B. King is one of *Meridian*'s musical heroes, in Walker's *The Color Purple* the powerful shadow of Bessie Smith permeates the characterization of Shug Avery—the blues singer. As mentioned above, in her study of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Cobo Piñero labels Pilate a "singer of Classic blues" and tries to prove her point. In Walker's novel, however, the fictional tandem Shug Avery/Bessie Smith could not work better. One of the blues singers included in the album *Mean Mothers*, Bessie Smith's life and artistic career finds an echo in Shug Avery, a fact that the author uses to provide a chronology of the socio-historical background of the Classic Blues without omitting detailed information on the segregation of the music industry and the racial discrimination these blues women suffered while they were on the road—whether in the North or in the T.O.B.A., the black circuit of the South.

Highlighting blues women's reputed sexual inhibition and their embracing of non-normative sexual relations, Cobo Piñero claims that the "devil music" (or blues) gains authenticity in the *juke joints* of the South, far from whites's supremacy and supervision. And it is precisely in one of these *juke joints* where we learn about the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie, and hear "Sister," the blues song Shug sings and dedicates to the shy and much abused Celie. A blues song that, according to the author, vindicates women's bonding, in general, and Shug and Celie's lesbian relationship, in particular: "I bet you think I don't know nothing / But singing the blues, oh, sister; / Have I got news for you, I'm something, / I hope you think you're something too" (132). In a volume peppered with subversive, provocative and sexually explicit blues titles, the author closes her study on Alice Walker with a collection of short stories that signify on Perry Bradford's blues "You



Cannot Keep a Good Man Down” (1920), that becomes, instead, “You Cannot Keep a Good Woman Down.”

Though Cobo Piñero refers to most stories included in the collection, albeit in passing, (“Source,” “The Lover,” “A Sudden Trip Home”), “Nineteen Fifty-Five” is the story that specifically reverberates with the sounds of black blues singers (Big Mama Thornton), and the appropriation of compositions by white musicians and agents alike (Elvis Presley). Consequently, the story focuses on a real event fictionalized by Walker where blues singer Big Mama Thornton (Gracie Mae Still, in fiction) is cheated and sells the rights to her song “Hound Dog Blues” for a pittance

Thus, through “Nineteen Fifty-Five,” Cobo Piñero criticizes the systematic way Black artists were cheated and exploited by more powerful agents and/or record companies that fabricated white stars out of black artistic talent. This is the case, for example, of Janis Joplin: the white audience made her a real rock star after she sang Big Mama Thornton’s “Ball and Chain” (1967). In Walker’s short story, the difference lies in the fact that while Big Mama Thornton could make big men cry when listening to her singing, “Elvis the Pelvis” never understood the meaning of the blues—or so Walker says.

Under the title “Gayl Jones y la liberación de las voces” (Gayl Jones and the Liberation of Voices) (my translation), the author opens the third chapter in which she analyzes two novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva’s Man* (1976), and the narrative poem *Song for Anninho* (1981). Described by Jones herself as “a blues novel,” *Corregidora* tells/sings the story/song of four generations of women (Greatgrandmother, Grandmother, Mother, and Ursa—the protagonist) who have had a past in slavery and have suffered sexual abuse by the Master of the Brazilian plantation. Starting in 1947, Cobo Piñero suggests that thematically Ursa mirrors Ma Rainey (“The Mother of the Blues”) together with Billie Holiday (Lady Day). Like Ma Rainey, who was a prolific writer, Ursa gives birth to songs—instead of bearing children. As with the older generation, Ursa is also a victim of domestic violence by her two former husbands. Unlike her female ancestors Ursa tries to break with the legacy of slavery and re-create herself through the blues—even if they are broken-soul blues. She would rather be “slave to the blues” than to an abusive partner. As for similarities between Ursa and Billie Holiday, Cobo Piñero makes clear that Holiday was the first jazz vocalist while Ursa remains a blues singer, but they nevertheless share: 1) the way they re-interpret the lyrics—especially those which refer to patriarchal abuse and/or sexual violence; and 2) both singers pepper their songs with social protest. For the former, “My Man” is quite representative; while for the latter, Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” is the most subversive, explicit, and poetic rendition of the horrors of lynchings in the South and beyond, the author states. She adds that *Corregidora* echoes the blues not only as far as themes are concerned but its literary discourse is also impregnated with the musical devices that go from blues

to *bebop* (or modern jazz). Among others, Cobo Piñero illustrates the case through Gayl Jones' "ritualized dialogues," with a language and a rhythm of their own; examples of call and response; improvisation and repetition of key words and/or sentences; and interior monologues or *solos*; and fragmentation as well as a non-linear narrative.

The memory and re-memory of an unbearable and unspeakable past in slavery make a jazz collage, the author argues, that connects with the transgressive attitude of *bebop* musicians who mix tradition and innovation, past and present, and speak for the individual and the community. Just as Ursa attempts to do while singing the blues instead of making generations to transcend the trauma of the past and re-create her new self.

In the section devoted to *Eva's Man*, the author incisively establishes a dialogue between the blues and its specific discourse on violence, and its varied manifestations: physical, psychological, verbal, sexual, domestic, familiar, and social, at the same time she focus on intraracial gender violence. Just the titles of the blues analyzed here speak for themselves: "Got All Cut into Pieces (Bessie Tucker, 1928); "Cell Bound Blues" (Ma Rainey, 1925); or "The Evil Mama Blues." The protagonist in *Eva's Man* has suffered from brutal violence since she was a child. In her adulthood, she drifts into and out of equally violent relationships until she ends up making her last lover pay for all the pain accumulated. She first poisons Davis, later she bites and sections his penis, and she finally kills him. Then, she calls the police and is sent to a mental institution where she seems to find some sexual pleasure in a lesbian relationship with another inmate. As Cobo Piñero rightly points out, Jones' theme echoes Victoria Spivey's "Blood Hound Blues" (1929), a story of love, hatred, and violence: "Well, I poisoned my man, I put it in his drinking cup / Well, I poisoned my man, I put it in his drinking cup / Well it's easy to go to jail, they sent me up."

For Mary Helen Washington, there is no doubt about it: "Gayl Jones's voice is a blues voice" (129). Cobo agrees with Washington, as far as themes and style are concerned, but she also justifies the presence of the transgressive *bebop* and its jazzy collage with Eva's demential *solos* and her self-quoting where Eva recites the names and violent actions of the perpetrators as a way to get rid of her pain—past and present—a sure sign of her mental instability.

With *Song for Anninho* (1981), Gayl Jones departs from fiction and creates, instead, this rare and yet powerful neo-slave narrative long poem where she uses her poetic imagination to re-visit and re-write the remains of the past in a Brazilian setting. Told/sung by Almeyda, a runaway slave who joins the cimarrons in Palmares, she recounts the ferocious attack of the Portuguese soldiers who, among other atrocities, cut off her breasts and throw them into the river. Her lover Anninho

is nowhere to be found. Almeyda sings as a way to give voice to her pain and that of her community hoping—against hope—to find her lover alive, and recover their fragile freedom.

In her reading, Cobo Piñero invests Almeyda with the resilience of the blues singer who sings to keep from crying in the face of the transcontinental horrors of slavery. In so doing, the author relies on Morrison's "literary archeology," or the process of re-imagining the past, as well as on Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction." Cobo Piñero also analyzes the narrative poem in view of the Myth of the Flying African. In her conclusion, the author argues that Gayl Jones re-appropriates a master narrative of colonization, human degradation and exploitation, but allows the subaltern—Almeyda—to speak/sing her song.

Rocío Cobo Piñero's *Sonidos de la diáspora: Blues and Jazz en Toni Morrison, Alice Walker y Gayl Jones* is a volume about blues & jazz-inspired canonized fiction writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones. This is a welcome addition which contributes to the comparatively scarce but ever growing literature on the field of African American Studies by Spanish scholars. **Written in Spanish, the original quotations, critical references and lyrics in English are also translated which prevent bilingual readers from hearing the authentic voices.** **Though** restricted to Spanish speakers, Cobo Piñero's research and critical efforts are to be applauded since this volume provides an introduction into the field of African American women writers and invites curious or uninformed readers to have access to and become acquainted with the beauty of the Black Vernacular tradition and the relevance of the blues & jazz culture among the peoples of the African Diaspora.

Metaphorically speaking, and echoing Paule Marshall's essay on black women's creative tools, Cobo Piñero's study sits Morrison, Walker, and Jones around a kitchen table, together with a choice of their respective female characters, offers them the luxury of the company of blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday, to later engage them in a conversational exchange. *Sonidos de la diáspora* is, therefore, the resulting dialogue between black women writers, their female characters, and the classic blues and jazz singers together with their corresponding blues songs.

This study evinces the author's knowledge of and passion for the female blues singers as well as for the writers and the texts analyzed here, while at the same time she illuminates with empathy the connection between blues songs and literary works. Cobo Piñero also shows her perception of the disturbing, maddening, contradictory, heart-breaking, challenging and empowering psyches and personalities of Morrison's, Walker's, and Jones's female protagonists—from little and tragic Pecola to exuberant, sensual, sexy and self-sufficient Shug, Ursa's blues wisdom or Meridian's militant activism, among others.

It is true that, before Cobo Piñero's work, there are other critics (all mentioned by the author) such as Angela Davies, Mary Helen Washington, bell hooks, Cheryl Wall, Hazel Carby or Daphne Duvall Harrison, to name some, who have indeed explored the relevance and the connection of blues singers to the works of African American women authors. However, the originality of this volume lies in putting under the same title the *unholy trio* of black writers together with the Queens, and the Empresses, and the Mothers of the Blues.

As stated earlier, *Sonidos de la diáspora* is a rather ambitious project given the sheer number of works analyzed (seven novels, one collection of short stories, and a narrative poem), as well as the complexity and diversity of the respective authors' literary discourses. The wide range of voices (critical, musical and literary) seems to force the author to leave aside or shorten related topics; at other times, the author provides rather descriptive information that might require a more in-depth reading. Also, and for the sake of clarity, I would have preferred a more informative Table of Contents which, except for the trio of black writers, only registers two proper names, Pilate (a character) and Billie Holiday (the jazz vocalist), as well as a more traditional and better organized structure and chapter division where the socio-historical and artistic background of blues and jazz are first introduced, followed by the most relevant information on the classic blues divas Cobo Piñero deals with (Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, or Billie Holiday), to later explore and focus on her comparative critical analysis of the literary works and the corresponding blues singers and blues songs.

Instead, borrowing from the terminology of blues & jazz, Cobo Piñero's literary discourse becomes unclear or distracting (with a profusion of references) and, at times, confusing. Namely, the author *cuts* the critical reading of a novel to insert a necessary but too long reference to a musical term/style or to a singer's biography, to later return to the point she was trying to make. That is, she interrupts/*cuts* the analysis to introduce a long digression. Likewise, there is *repetition* (of ideas, of general information, or about bibliographical references), and *quoting* when the author refers to information already provided with little or no variation. Personally, I find rather frustrating that a volume that documents and deals with blues & jazz-related stories lacks some *swing*.

As far as formal aspects are concerned, *Sonidos de la diáspora* needs polishing. The manuscript would have benefitted from Cobo Piñero's more careful editing because I find, among others, the following: there are numerous typographical errors (both in the main text, quotations, or end notes); misspelling of proper names or titles of works abound in the section on works cited/Bibliografía; some references that appear in the text are not included in the bibliography; and,

finally, in indented long quotations, the last line appears doubled-spaced instead of single-spaced.

As for content, given its transnational addition to Cobo Piñero's study as well as its literary relevance, Gayle's *Song for Anninho* requires a more in-depth reading. In particular, since Cobo Piñero is familiarized with the cultural landscape after her research stay in Brazil. I personally miss some critical readings that might have broadened the analysis of Almeyda. For example, I am thinking of Lovalerie King's essay "Resistance, Reappropriation, and Reconciliation: The Blues and Flying Africans in Gayl Jones' *Song for Anninho*" in *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones* (2006), or Trudier Harris's "A Spiritual Journey: Gayl Jones's *Song for Anninho*" (1982).

In a recent article on Thomas Pynchon (one of Morrison's favorite writers), and the uneasy relationship between literature and music, Fran G. Matute refers to the pervasive dichotomy between the so-called high culture (literature) and low culture (oral/popular/folk music), at the same time he deconstructs those archaic ideas when he illuminates the various and subversive ways the quintessential postmodernist writer's production can be read as a "Symphonic Poem for Band and Surf Orchestra" (my translation). Rocio Cobo Piñero could not agree more with that aesthetic statement. Her *Sonidos de la diáspora* proves not only the pervasive visibility of the Black Vernacular oral tradition, but also that the selection of works by Morrison, Walker, and Jones analyzed by the author can be critically read (and enjoyed) in view of the blues and jazz African American tradition. Cobo Piñero's ambitious project paves the way for new and subversive renditions of the, for me, inextricable womanist bond between these black women's literary characters and the protagonists of the blues as well as with those heart-breaking or life-affirming blues. I have read and re-read the novels. I have written and re-written about Rocío Cobo Piñero's *Sonidos de la diáspora* with the full soundtrack of the blues songs mentioned in this volume. I recommend readers do the same. Morrison's, Walker's, and Jones's texts/songs read/sound just like the blues and jazz, sensual and social cadences.

## WORKS CITED

- GATES, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (ed). *Reading Black Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Plume, 1990.
- HARRIS, Trudier. "A Spiritual Journey: Gayl Jones's *Song for Anninho*." *Callaloo* 16 (Oct. 1982): 105-111.
- HILL-COLLINS, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

- HUGHES, Langston [1952]. *Laughing to Keep from Crying*. New York: Amereon, 1983
- HURSTON, Zora Neale [1942]. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. New York: Harper, 2010.
- KING, Lovalerie. "Resistance, Reappropriation, and Reconciliation: The Blues and Flying Africans in Gayl Jones's *Song for Anninho*." *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*. Eds. Fiona Mills and Keith B. Mitchell. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
- MARSHALL, Paule. "From the Poets in the Kitchen." *The New York Times* 9. Web. January 1983.
- MATUTE, FRAN G. "La obra de Pynchon: un poema sinfónico para banda de surf y orquesta." *El País* 10 Dec. 2015. Web
- McKAY, Nelly. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Toni Morrison. Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 396-411.
- MILLS, Fiona and Keith B. Mitchell (eds). *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.
- MORRISON, Toni and Cornell West. "Blues, Love and Politics." *The Nation* 24 May (2004): 18-28.
- OTELE, Olivette. "History of Slavery, Sites of Memory and Identity Politics in Contemporary Britain." *Canal U: La webtv de enseignement superieur et de la recherche*. L'école de hautes études en sciences sociales. Web.
- RICHARDSON, Marilyn (ed.). *Maria W Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- THIONG'O, Ngugi Wa. "Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature." *Performance Research* 12.3 (Sep. 2007): 4-7.
- WALKER, Alice [1983]. *In Search of Our Mothes's Gardens*. New York: Mariner, 2003.
- WASHINGTON, Mary Helen (ed). *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women*. New York: Anchor, 1990.