
Cynthia R. Wallace. *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering*.
New York: Columbia UP, 2016. 316p.

DOREEN ALVAREZ SAAR

DREXEL UNIVERSITY

The title of Cynthia Wallace's *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering* cleverly announces her ambitious attempt to re-envision poet and feminist Adrienne Rich's 1976 work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Intuition*. A "provocative" source for the exploration of the relationship between literature and ethics, Rich's work and her personal battle to bring attention to the indivisibility of art and moral behavior and the reality of women's experience and suffering inspire Wallace's authorial stance (including the interweaving of her own story of suffering into the text) and anticipate her concerns with ethical reading practice. The expansion of Rich's title from "woman" to "women" and from the particularity of women's suffering in motherhood to a generalized understanding of women's suffering in relation to redemptive suffering underpins the study. In addition to Rich, *Of Women Borne* devotes a chapter on redemptive suffering to each of three other modern women writers: Toni Morrison, Ana Castillo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Wallace introduces her project not with a "definitive" argument but with "a series of premises" that "build to a hypothesis" (209). The first is that ethical criticism needs correction. She identifies two strands of ethical criticism: the traditionalist "moral criticism" (Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth are among its exponents); and the "new ethical criticism" (allied with post-structuralist criticism and represented by, among others, J. Hillis Miller and Derek Attridge). Despite differing approaches, both camps, in her view, erase gender and religion: *Of Women Borne* seeks to remedy this absence doing "justice to redemptive suffering" by providing a "contextual framework for the ongoing presence of the religious—and the specifically Christian—in conversations of suffering and self-sacrifice" (9). This context, Wallace believes, will be strengthened by an examination of women's writing, particularly of the "historiographic metafiction" (18) variety, that engages "a dynamically related ethics of literary representation and ethics of readerly attention" (11) and "the problematics of language" (209). Thus, by looking to the continuous reimagining, re-figuring and re-representing exemplified by female texts, *Of Women Borne* hopes to steer between the Scylla of traditional moral universalism and the Charybdis of new ethical criticism (particularly that influenced by the writings of Emmanuel Levinas) that ignores the presence of religion and gender.

The author expands on these premises by embracing Rich as for-

gotten foremother of ethical feminism. Rich's interrogation of suffering and constant revisiting of her own premises is central to ethical literary and reading practice. As Rich moves from her early white American feminism to an embrace of all the particularities of feminist experience, Rich, unlike most ethical literary critics who present a "strangely contentless structuralism as an ethical paradigm," makes "explicit" the "implicit gendered and religious history of the terms 'suffering' and 'self-sacrifice'" (79-80).

Read through the lens of Barbara Christian's insight that "people of color always theorized in . . . narrative form," Toni Morrison's literary praxis is congenial to Wallace's hypothesis. Suffering in myriad forms appears through Morrison's *oeuvre* yet Morrison resists easy assignments of blame, revealing instead the complexities of context and the interwoven frameworks of oppression. A master of form, Morrison not only illustrates injustice but embodies particular injustices in literary form. Morrison presents an exemplar for the kind of reading that integrates form and content while always insisting on the ambivalence of both the act and the reading of the act: "Justice, universal and blind, is longed for but yet always challenged by the call for mercy, tentative, concrete and narrative bound" (124).

In the fourth chapter offers a reading of Ana Castillo's "subversively mystical-political" novels and their "paradoxical evaluations of religion and of sacrificial motherhood" as somewhat "tentative and gestural" because of their "textual strangeness" (156). Wallace transmutes her own difficult reading experience into an acceptance of the revelations offered by Castillo's representation of the particularities of Chicana suffering whose central premise is that due to misogyny, all women suffer. In the light of Castillo's repudiation of Catholicism and feminist liberation theology, Wallace offers the "interpretative methodology of liberation hermeneutics" as a way to reconcile the paradoxes of Castillo's position.

As *Of Women Borne* expands outward from the Americas, Wallace considers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work as representative of the complexity of the postcolonial location and the need for the reader to be alert to the particularities of local cultural production (such as the Nigerian tradition of politically allegorical writing). Stressing the open-endedness of the reader's task, Wallace reads Adichie's early novel *Purple Hibiscus* against the later *Half of a Yellow Sun* to illustrate how, in the post-colonial context, Christianity both empowers women and enchains them. To further illuminate this hypothesis, she introduces the work of the West African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye and the feminist theological work of Kwok Pi-lan

Her final chapter acknowledges the riskiness of her project: "A literary ethics can never be adequately summarized . . . The particularity of the whole exceeds any attempt at generalizing. I have said this over and over

again, and it holds true for my own writing” (228). Noting that she does not seek to transform the works she has read into mere cries for political and social action, she leaves the reader with the assertion that “[r]eading is not enough, it does not complete the work of justice but it does *matter*” (167).

Carter Wilson. *Revelation: A Thriller*. Longboat Key, FL: Oceanview Publishing, 2016. 352p.

CASSANDRA (BISHOP) STEPHENS
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA RENO

Held captive in conditions beyond horrific, Harden finds a typewriter along with a stack of blank paper. The words “Tell me a Story” signal the chilling beginning to his predicament. Under normal conditions, being faced with a writing deadline is enough to freeze many in their tracks, yet when faced with said deadline, there is still the option to stall, to let life get in the way, to convince oneself of the need for more incubation time, more time to let the subconscious work out the details. However, this is not the case for Harden; there is no deadline extension available for him. His survival depends not only on his ability to write on command, but also on his ability to write what his captor wants to read. As a result, Carter Wilson’s *Revelation* presents its audience with an unreliable narrator.

While unreliable narrators are common, they are rarely manipulating another character in the story to the extent that the audience must parse out what they believe Harden wants them to hear versus what they feel to be the truth that he must tell. Over time, his captors are revealed to him. One of the Babyface captors admits that Coyote chose Harden because he was so unpredictable. Coyote is a psychopath, who is obsessed with power dynamics and who has the need to consume another’s energy, and a former friend of Harden’s who provokes those he encounters in an effort to gain insight into how modern-day cult leaders find their following. Although the fractured structure allows for some immediacy in the moment with his thoughts, it is Harden’s fear of death that forces him to carefully craft what his captor wants to read.

Shifting back and forth between Harden’s current confinement written in the third person, where the audience is privy to his thoughts, and the story that he is being forced to write in the first person, Wilson steadily controls the flow of Harden’s writing. Short, choppy chapters evolve into longer, more detailed and engaging parallel narratives, which, when combined, form a larger picture of the whole story, albeit not a completely reliable one, leaving the audience to ponder Coyote’s role.