H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Tuire Valkeakari**. *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel, 1952-1998.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. ix + 261 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3055-5.

**Reviewed by** Carolyn M. Jones (Department of Religion, University of Georgia)
**Published on** H-Amstdy (May, 2008)

**Re-Shaping the Sacred Through Literature**

Tuire Valkeakari's excellent study considers a wide range of literature produced between 1952 and 1998 to examine the ways that African American writers have explored and shaped the Christianity that African slaves received when they came to America. Valkeakari's study includes Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and works by Leon Forrest, Gayle Jones, Ernest Gaines, and Octavia Butler. She traces the "roots" of these writers' concerns to African American letters, invoking the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frances Ellen Harper, James Weldon Johnson, Margaret Walker, Nella Larson, and others. Valkeakari examines the "creative re-visioning" and "re-shaping" of the Judeo-Christian inheritance that African Americans undertook in their expressive culture under oppression to resist and undo that oppression (p. 1). Her examination leads to her final questions about home and belonging.

Valkeakari argues that this re-shaping has been multiple, without any one particular trajectory; instead, African American writers are "signifyin(g) on the sacred" (pp. 4-5). The two-ness that African Americans experienced was not that of a secular-sacred split; instead, it was the "double consciousness" and how that worked within and against an African sense of the sacred and profane or secular as not two, but whole. Valkeakari argues that, given this orientation, the writers utilize Judeo-Christian notions to affirm civil and human rights and democracy and to think critically about messianic discourse, violence, and scape-goating, and to construct and deconstruct the Black Christ figure. She also looks at the figure of the minister in African American fiction. Finally, Valkeakari's work emphasizes the importance of Ellison's *Invisible Man* for the writers who came after him. Indeed, Ellison becomes, in the work, a kind of pivot or fold between the writers who came before and those who came after him, as he, in many ways, sets out an agenda for thought.

Valkeakari does not want to argue whether African American writers, in thinking about religion, have stayed within denominational boundaries; neither does she want to do "myth criticism" (p. 12). Her task is to examine cultural mixings and the development of hybrid forms to understand a unique and varied African American production.

I was particularly impressed with the work on female ministry. Valkeakari looks at the role of the African American woman as minister in *Beloved*, *The Healing* (1999), and Octavia Butler's *Parable* series. African American women historically have been spiritual leaders in their communities and there is a long tradition of African American women in the evangelical tradition, and Valkeakari shows us the important emphases that Morrison, Jones, and Butler bring forth in their works–the body, the "talking cure," and community. All these function to break the kind of exclusion and exclusiveness that Valkeakari looks at in her final chapter on Morrison's *Paradise* (1999). Cutting across boundaries opens possibilities of renewal and regeneration. Equally impressive is the discussion of African American Christ figures, like the Invisible Man, Pecola Breedlove, and others. The figure of sacrifice and what that figure contains, represents, and ushers in for person and community is an important strain of thought throughout the work.

Valkeakari's themes come into focus in her final chapter, an examination of the significance of Toni Morrison's *Paradise.* The tension between paradise and home is a subtheme throughout Valkeakari's work and an element of the religious thematics of the African American novel. The issues of renewal, the scapegoat/Christ figure, and the hybrid forms that African Americans "made" in relation to the Judeo-Christian message they received all focus on the questions of "What kind of future may we hope for?" and "Where is home–now and in the future?" and "How do we preserve our freedom?" Avoiding the exclusionary forces of racism, sexism, ageism, etc. is the

promise in African American signifyin(g) on the sacred.

Valkeakari's is a well-constructed work. Valkeakari is deeply immersed in and knowledgeable about African American literature and makes connections across writers and centuries that other critics might miss. That she is able to put African American women's fiction and African American men's fiction into dialogue and to see the tensions as well as the common interests is quite impressive. And she is aware of the subtle connections, not just the broad themes, which bind the works. She combines close readings of key texts with more theoretical discussions across the disciplinary boundaries of African American literature, postmodern theory, and theories of religion. The interplay of discourses allows Valkeakari to make hers a kind of hybrid text, not taking a "traditionally" critical role while examining important tropes in the fiction with which she works. The book is engaging, well written, and beautifully researched. It would work well in African American religions or literature classes and in any class that deals with culture and criticism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

**Citation**: Carolyn M. Jones. Review of Valkeakari, Tuire, *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel, 1952-1998*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.
**URL**: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14524

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.