

GUY MARK FOSTER

## Looking Good: Neutralizing the Desiring (Black Male) Gaze in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

I have no doubt that urban ghetto life and economic deprivation are *necessary* factors contributing to an explanation of the Afro-American problems of gender and family relations. But they cannot be sufficient. Something else must be at play. Something that runs deep into the peculiarities of the Afro-Americans' own past. In search for it, we are inevitably led back to the centuries-long holocaust of slavery and what was its most devastating impact: the ethnocidal assault on gender roles, especially those of father and husband, leaving deep scars in the relations between Afro-American men and women.<sup>1</sup>

As evidenced by the above quotation from the noted sociologist Orlando Patterson, scholars and even fiction writers have been turning to the historical past since the 1960s, specifically to slavery, to explain a whole host of ills that currently plague cross-gender relations between black men and women. These ills include much higher divorce rates for blacks than whites, non-marital failed heterosexual unions, the contemporary phenomenon of 'baby mamas' and of absentee fathers, as well as conflicts between the sexes over whose gendered experiences of oppression get privileged in narratives purportedly about the racial group as a whole (see McDowell 1991). These or similar arguments have been advanced by such well-known scholars as E. Franklin Frazier (1966) and John Hope Franklin (1967) in the past, as well as by Orlando Patterson (1998) and Elaine Pinderhughes (2002), among others, today. While many of these scholars point to this past in order to explain how the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade distorted African gender and sexual roles, the revered African American memoirist and poet Maya Angelou turns to the slave past as a way to *recuperate* those same roles that others would

claim were systematically destroyed. For Angelou, the current 'schism' between contemporary black men and women is both 'painful and frightening,' primarily because, in her words, black men and black women 'were taken *together* from the African continent' rather than separately. With her own pointed reference to the earliest stages in the history of 'the peculiar institution,' Angelou provocatively suggests that the intersubjective and emotional bond joining black men and women should in fact be *far stronger* and inherently *more egalitarian* than the bond that supposedly joins white men and women.<sup>2</sup> Angelou shrewdly transfers the stigma of crisis attached to black conjugal relations to whites' own declining marital statistics (see Schoen and Canudas-Romo 2006). '*We* [meaning black men and women],' Angelou states, 'lay spoon fashion, back to belly, in the filthy hatches of slave ships, and in our own and each other's excrement and urine. *We* stood up at the auction block together. *We* were sent to work before sunrise, came back after sunset together. *We* have been equals and we are in danger if we lose that *balance*[,] because if women begin to feel, 'The black woman is the strongest—', then where is the man? If the man begins to feel, 'I have no place in her life', then there's no balance, and *all people* will have paid all of those dues for nothing' (qtd. in Franklin 26; emphasis added).

It is certainly telling that good faith efforts to comprehend the impact of the historical past on the current gender relations among African Americans, both married and non-married, should engender its own contestation over whose explanatory narrative to endorse—Patterson's or Angelou's. However, the purpose of the present essay is not so much to resolve this dilemma as it is to interrogate the underlying assumptions that circumscribe it as a discursive event. In other words, despite their differences, both positions seem to proceed from similar assumptions about racial, national, and gender affiliation, as well as historical patterns of kinship and intimacy that do not appear to hold up under closer scrutiny. Although Patterson traces the seeds of contemporary black gender and sexual dysfunction to the time of capture itself, while Angelou appears to locate that rupture in those first moments *after* the arrival of blacks to the New World, both positions seem to hold to a clear belief in a prior period of African gender egalitarianism that was summarily lost to African men and women upon forced contact with their European and American slavers—a point that contemporary scholarship on sub-Saharan African gender norms does not validate (see Cornwall 2005; Kent 1998).

My essay will take Angelou's account as representative of that body of writing that views slavery as the source of the perceived gender crisis

among contemporary black men and women. As such, I want to risk suggesting that writers like Angelou, however well-intentioned, often come across sounding more like apologists for modern-day black male chauvinism than they do responsible intellectuals who are genuinely invested in resolving some of the thornier issues that afflict contemporary black folk. After all, the mystical 'balance' that Angelou conjures in the above passage might give us pause were it not so eloquently stated. The author's reliance on gender equity in her reference to historically as well as culturally distant African men and women, and her effort to employ that gendered and (hetero)sexual narrative as a privileged interpretive lens through which to ground her argument about *contemporary*, U.S. black male and female dynamics, appears to function as a corrective to the much rumored gender 'rift' afflicting black America. But Angelou's privileging of the black heterosexual conjugal pairing should be seen as serving another strategic function as well, and that is as surrogate figure for assessing the psychological and material well-being of the black community as a whole. In doing the latter, Angelou traffics in the outmoded practice of attempting to constrain black gender and sexual freedom for the sake of a cultural nationalist project that, at its core, betrays an uncritical heterosexist and masculinist bias—as she puts, 'if women begin to feel "The black woman is the strongest—", then where is the man? If the man begins to feel, "I have no place in her life."' Similar to the 1960s black power rhetoric where such mawkish allegories of ancestral pridefulness are often found, Angelou's invocation of the transatlantic experience functions chiefly as a way to lend a 'racially' authentic cultural backdrop against which to anchor her claims about the existence of an inherent black resiliency and bondedness. These are attributes that all black men and women must not only rely upon in working together to overcome the deviousness of the 'white man,' but that each of them, according to gender, must then also tap into if that person is ultimately to play his, or *her*, assigned role in ensuring the group's eventual survival and health. And it is important to remember, too, that the available roles, at least in the 1960s, as Michele Wallace acerbically notes, were limited to just one or two paired options: the black man as 'America's latest sex object, king of virility and violence, master of the ghetto art of cool, or a Mickey Mouse copy of a white capitalist', and the black woman as 'the workhorse that keeps his [the black man's] house functioning, [who] is the foundation of his community, . . . raises his children, and . . . faithfully votes for him in elections' (Wallace 16, 14). It is now possible to see that such gendered 'cooperation' (Angelou prefers the term 'balance') is nothing more than, as Kevin Kopelson reminds us,

'the complementarity of sexual difference,' which contemporary Western, but not African, feminist thought has argued inscribes female subordination to males as a *pre-condition* for the peaceableness of this relation (3-4).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Cathy Cohen and Tamara Jones argue, 'Specific gender roles are an inevitable consequence of a heterosexist belief system,' one that structures family life in many black communities across the U.S. Not only is it the case that '[w]omen are believed to have certain rights and privileges as a function of their biological gender, [but] the same holds true for men.' Moreover, those African Americans who hold to this view 'often trac[e] this gender division and specialization to (supposed) historical African practices,' even though 'there is no evidence to support the assertion of homogeneously heterosexual African societies' (Cohen and Jones 90-91). For Paul Gilroy (1993), 'What is racially and ethnically authentic is frequently defined by ideas about sexuality and distinctive patterns of interaction between men and women, which are taken to be expressive of essential difference. This authenticity is inseparable from talk about the conduct and management of bitter gender-based conflicts which are now recognized as essential to familial, racial, and communal health. Each of these—the familial, the racial, the communal—leads seamlessly into the next' (197). If it is true, then, as Rhonda Williams has asserted, that '[r]acist narratives that pathologize our families and sexualities diminish heterosexual privilege within black communities,' then heterosexuality itself, as well as any form of sexuality that is *not* black heterosexuality, must be reigned in and assiduously policed (Williams 144).

What I am suggesting here is that Angelou, perhaps unknowingly, reproduces much of this retrograde logic as part of what seems to be her own ultimately conservative gender and sexual politics. After all, Angelou's reference to the Middle Passage, especially to the fact that African men and women suffered these hardships 'together' rather than separately, chiefly functions to locate an untapped source of intestinal fortitude within contemporary black men and women that she imagines the experiences of enslavement and later systematic discrimination has covered over and in some cases eroded altogether. But such a tactic is merely obfuscating in that it fails to comprehend the sheer magnitude and scope the violation of slavery visited upon captured Africans, body and mind.

This point is hardly lost on Hortense Spillers. In her own seminal essay, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,' Spillers offers an account of the Middle Passage and its expansive impact on contemporary African American gender and sexual dynamics that calls into question many of the

underlying assumptions that inform Angelou's troubling claims. For Spillers, the experience of crossing the Atlantic Ocean from the continent known as Africa had a profound impact on the bodily and psychic integrity of *all* the African men and women who endured it, and not just on those who were preoccupied with thoughts as to which gender was the strongest or weakest in narrowly heterosexual terms. Indeed, this last point seems to be at the heart of contemporary efforts to invoke the legacy of slavery as the central source of the black community's present dilemmas. But as Spillers notes, 'th[is] New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its *active* desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific' (259; emphasis added). For Spillers, the transatlantic journey itself was so transfiguring an experience that it had the effect of wiping the captive body clean of all its sexed particulars, if not to the subject him- or herself, then at least to that person's European and American onlookers. Moreover, this radical re-territorialization of the African body took place upon a discursive terrain in which the struggle for meaning was in fact no struggle at all, as the captives were themselves lashed to the cargo hold of a slave ship in row upon row of putrefying human flesh, their own and others'. In such a discomfiting and humiliating environment—as far from any semblance of 'home' as one could be—all sexual and ethnic affiliations were effaced, to be replaced by a form of difference, that is, racial 'blackness,' that would in the immediate future, and for centuries thereafter, become far more imprisoning. As Spillers writes, with the full benefit of hindsight before her:

I would suggest that 'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin or cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those persons it 'covers' in a particular place. Contrarily, the cargo of a ship might not be regarded as elements of the domestic, even though the vessel that carries it is sometimes romantically (ironically?) personified as 'she.' The human cargo of a slave vessel—in the fundamental effacement and re-mission of African family and proper names—offers a

counter-narrative to notions of the domestic.... We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a *wild and unclaimed richness of possibility* that is not interrupted, not 'counted'/'accounted,' or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities. (266-67; emphasis added)

I have quoted Spillers at length here because of the rhetorical damage—indeed, the unremitting and assaulting refutation—her words seem to do to arguments like Angelou's and Patterson's that would insist on a psychological and bodily, that is, sexual, integrity inhering within black subjects, even in the face of such dehumanizing experiences as enslavement. These writers' calculated privileging of black heterosexual relations, therefore, as the lynchpin for measuring the health or pathology of the black community as a whole has serious implications that should not be ignored. For one thing, such views call attention to a stubborn effort on the part of some interested commentators to hold on to treasured, and entirely ahistorical forms of gender and sexual identifications that not only may not have survived the treacherous ordeal of that initial transatlantic journey, supposing such identifications even existed in forms recognizable to us today, but which may have had to be reinvented anew within hostile and alien territory. To repeat Spillers's words, such an ordeal is perhaps 'unimaginable [to us] from this distance.'

I argue in this paper that Alice Walker's 1976 novel of the Civil Rights movement, *Meridian*, appears to anticipate Spillers's provocative claims about the degendering dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade on the bodies of its African captives, which would subsequently leave lasting, and still now largely unresolved effects on the bodies of present-day African diasporic subjects, especially African Americans. However, *Meridian* engages this narrative primarily for its productive benefits, and not for those that may prove further debilitating. The novel takes up this narrative in two ways: (1) it suspends gendered 'looking' relations in its normative, that is, in its narrowly heterosexualized, register—in fact, the novel remains deeply skeptical of a historically static and nostalgianting heterosexuality as a vehicle of community-building—and (2) it produces a plot structure in which the temporal process of male-female gendering is literally and systematically undone. What this means is that the novel's two primary black female and black male characters—Meridian Hill and Truman Held—eventually become stripped of their conventional feminine and masculine gender and sexual identities over

the course of the novel, to arrive, both of them, at what Spillers might call, 'the man/woman on the boundary'—a figure that represents a neutered identity, neither man nor woman but a curious, *potentially* productive hybrid of the two (269). My modest claim here is that Walker takes her characters through such a harrowing process in order to position them at an originary state, perhaps a beginning from which to start anew, and one that recalls that 'wild and unclaimed richness of possibility' that for Spillers perversely characterized the Middle Passage itself. The benefits of returning to such a state is perhaps most urgent for the black male character Truman, whose masculine arrogance and chauvinism (conveyed throughout the novel by his emotionally abusive interactions both with Meridian and later with his Jewish wife Lynne Rabinowitz) sends the message to readers that he may have the most to gain (or to lose) from the experience. Angelou's obfuscating reliance on the language of complementary gender relations notwithstanding, Walker's novel strongly suggests that, far from 'balancing' each other out, the racialized gender and sexual identities these characters had formerly inhabited tended to produce psychological and interpersonal dynamics that stabilized and 'trapped' each of them (black men and women, as well as, considering Lynne, white women—but not white *men*, about whom the novel curiously seems to have the least to say) into mutually exclusive, rigid identities and desires that *prevent* genuine human interaction rather than enable it. Among other questions, Walker's novel appears to want to ask if it is possible for black male and female subjects, especially those living in the midst of a transatlantic, and thus rapidly changing, world, to 'look' at one another differently, so that the presence of male or female anatomical body parts would not be determinative of those relations but, rather, *indeterminative* of them. And if such a thing *is* possible, then, what type of person would we black men and women see staring back at us when we looked across a crowded auditorium, rather than, say, a slave hold? Would we see a 'man,' a 'woman,' both or neither standing before us? Or might we see some entirely new, genderless, but crucially—if we as a nation cannot eventually find a way to rid ourselves of the enduring problem of antiblack racism—not altogether *raceless*, being? But, then, what of desire, in the 'active,' corporeal sense that Spillers seems to mean? What of sexual pleasure?<sup>4</sup>

#### THE GENDERED POLITICS OF RACIALIZED LOOKING

For there is a boundary to looking.  
And the world that is looked at so deeply  
wants to flourish in love.

Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>5</sup>

*Meridian* spans roughly 25 years and charts the racialized, gendered, and sexual development of a young southern black woman as she struggles against the backdrop of events dramatized during the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. As the reader follows this character's development from a young, docile teenage mother to an imposing, yet unconventional political activist, we are made aware of the many interpersonal battles this character has to wage in order to arrive at a sense of self that, in her refusal to accept limitations on her thoughts and actions, forces those closest to her to reexamine their own choices and behaviors. Over the course of the novel, Meridian undergoes a dramatic transformation from being conventionally feminine—a woman who, by her own admission 'got pregnant on less screwing than anybody's she had ever heard of' (Walker 114–15)—to an androgynous figure who, as one critic has put it, 'from all outward appearances, is indistinguishable from a man' (Buncombe 425). Told in a series of connected, seemingly random flashbacks, in which the characters shift in age from young college students to mature adults, and back again, the narrative initially presents challenges to the reader's sense of time and place. However, the dizzying momentum of the novel's design merely assists the author in making the reader complicit in the narrative action. As Elliott Butler-Evans has argued, *Meridian* is 'largely a work in which an accurate reading depends on the active participation of the reader. Form becomes a signifier of new consciousness' (116). This is an important point to keep in mind. Moreover, to emphasize the strength of the black female protagonist's influence, Walker titles the novel after this character, and offers the reader a list of definitions for her first name in the frontispiece of the book. These possible definitions include the following: 'the highest apparent point reached by a heavenly body in its course'; 'in astronomy, an imaginary great circle of the celestial sphere passing through the poles of the heavens and the zenith and nadir of any given point, and cutting the equator at right angles'; as well as 'in geography, a great circle of the earth passing through the geographical poles and any given point on the earth's surface.' One thing these definitions do, in conjunction with the disjointed narrative structure, is to place the novel's title character within spatiotemporal contexts that are formally unsettled. In a way, such an approach connects her, however tenuously, to the transatlantic experience of rupture and displacement; but because the novel does not explicitly name this experience, it holds her apart from it as well. In short, the novel seems to want to reinvent a relation for this character to the Middle Passage in a way that pays homage to the

discursive event itself, but which does not overdetermine that relation in a way that is predictable, and hence settled. Each of the definitions for her naming, to some extent, plays on the phenomenon of sight: Meridian is a force that one must *see* to believe.

It is all the more significant to note, then, that of the three major characters in Walker's novel, only one, the sole male, is a visual artist—someone who 'looks.' The remaining two characters, both women, are poets of one sort or another. In fact, at his very first introduction in the narrative, the black male character Truman Held is already seen to be deeply engaged in his chief preoccupation. For example, when Meridian Hill comes to volunteer at the home where the civil rights workers are headquartered, she encounters Truman, '*looking* at her in a steady, cool, appraising way' (81; emphasis added). Soon, he transfers what I provisionally want to call his *desiring* (black male) gaze to 'three exchange students,' all of whom are white women; one of these, Lynne Rabinowitz, he falls in love with and eventually marries. However, as the narrative moves forward, Truman maintains his most faithful 'looking' relationship with Meridian. And as Walker chronicles the highs and lows of their mutual attraction to one another, the terms of that attraction, for each, but especially for Truman, change dramatically over the course of the novel. In the last pages, emptied of the purely sexual, his desire for her as an erotic being is transformed, instead, into a kind of yearning that actually exceeds her physical body as well as his own. To state it simply: Truman no longer simply *desires* Meridian; he desires to *be* her. While such a dramatic shift might ordinarily suggest that Truman be seen by the reader in terms of lesbian identification (after all, if *he* is a woman and she, Meridian, is also a woman, then the mutual desire of *two* women for one another is conventionally understood as 'lesbian'), I want to suggest that because Meridian's gendered identity as 'woman' undergoes its own transformation over the course of the novel (that is, as she becomes more masculinized, he becomes just the opposite—more feminized), gender then becomes, for these two characters, an unreliable means by which to determine their sexual orientations.

Recall that, in the Freudian psychodrama of sexual differentiation, desire-for and desire-to-be are bound up with the cultural mandate for all human beings to assume properly sanctioned gendered and sexual positions along the way to successfully working out their respective Oedipal dilemmas—in other words, for anatomical males to become 'men' and for anatomical females to become 'women,' and for both to become resolutely heterosexual. As Judith Butler puts it, 'The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually

exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender' (1993: 239). Moreover, 'it seems crucial,' adds Butler, 'to rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested' (18). According to the Fanonian scholar Lewis Gordon, when racial distinctions are seriously considered, interpersonal dynamics across and within the color line often proceed on bad faith assumptions in which those with 'black' skin are treated much differently than those with 'whiter' skin. These dynamics have important implications when it comes to decoding the gendered and sexual dimensions of interpersonal relations in what Gordon calls an 'antiblack world.' For in such a world, not only has 'social reality [become] skewed,' but it has also become 'aim-inhibited,' 'antisocial, antihuman, [and] anticomunicative.' Consequently, what emerges are 'underlying themes of subverted recognition' in terms of gender and sexuality (Gordon 80). Gordon explains the matter this way:

In an ordinary human environment, for instance, human phenomena are accessible to all human beings, and, as such, have an anonymous dimension to their meaning; they become, in a word, *typical*. In a skewed context, however, the typical has been transformed in such a way that the atypical becomes normative. Relationships are therefore skewed in such a world, and what counts as typical of certain groups hides, in effect, atypical realities. For example, in an antiblack world, to be a typical black is to be an abnormal human being. Thus, normativity is indexed by its distance from blackness. The black could at most hope to be a black who is typically white, which in effect is to be atypically white. To be black in that world is, therefore, to be trapped in an obversion of normative reality: To be an extraordinary black is to be an ordinary person; to be an ordinary black is to be an extraordinary person. 'Normal blackness,' as Fanon has shown, ... is to be locked in the absurdity of everyday or banal pathology. The implications of this absurdity become stark when we return to our matrices of value and consider them with the added element of desire. Desire can be constructed along matrices of (a) *most-desired*, (b) *desired*, (c) *less desired*, and (d) *least desired*.... Since our context is an antiblack world, it should be obvious that, on the level of color, to be white is a conclusion of ideal desire (a) and to be black has its conclusion in no desire (d), because there is no desire that is less than no desire at all. (80)

Although her work is highly esteemed, Butler does not often make good on her repeated calls to factor in the variable of 'racial distinction' in the way that Fanon consistently does. Perhaps this may explain why Fanon is often embraced for his commentary on racial hierarchy, but vilified for his commentary on the sexualized dynamics of that hierarchy, while Butler, for her part, has been canonized for her sophisticated theories of embodiment in which racialization is remarked upon but ultimately, when all is said and done, minimized in her conclusions. Despite the bemused skepticism to which some critics have tended to greet Fanon's bold assertion that, 'Like it or not, the Oedipus complex is far from coming into being among Negroes' (Fanon 151-52),<sup>6</sup> it should be noted that the Martinican theorist's statement was principally designed to call into question the regulatory fiction within conventional psychoanalytic thought that privileges the closed circle of the nuclear family as the sole locus of subjectivation.<sup>7</sup> For Fanon, the colonial relation, from the outside in, superimposed itself onto 'Negro' family dynamics in a way that produced a deforming effect upon those subjects. 'A normal *Negro* child,' Fanon writes in 1952, 'having grown up within a normal family, will become *abnormal* on the slightest contact with the white world' (143; emphasis added), and the child does so in the very way that Gordon explains it above—that is, he/she immediately becomes either typically or atypically black according to a preexisting evaluative scale in which white identity is inherently privileged as the presumed normative, and hence universal, form of embodiment. It is hardly surprising, then, that one of the principal mechanisms antiblack societies have long had for reinforcing these unequal power relations is the manipulation of the gaze. Indeed, throughout his most famous text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon resorts time and again to the gaze as a central metaphor for demonstrating how black subjects are interpellated as inferior to whites. For Fanon, the following statements, 'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro,' exemplify this conscripting visual gesture racist whites have routinely unleashed on the body and psyche of the black (Fanon 109). But as some black feminist scholars have pointed out, the 'nigger' or the 'Negro' who is under the white gaze in Fanon's powerful formulations is always already a black *male* subject, and never a black female one. As Lola Young writes:

Since the power implicated in the act of looking and being looked at is asymmetrically allocated to white and black, to male and female, in racially stratified patriarchal societies, changing the sex of the participants in this ritualized version of the encounter between black and white to one which focuses on a black woman

as the object of the look, serves to foreground a different set of relations and experiences: a set of relations upon which Fanon does not turn his critical gaze. (Young 93)

This tendency is decidedly not true of Walker. Unlike Fanon, Walker reminds us in her many detailed and heartfelt scenes depicting the painful psychological struggles that Meridian suffers as a result of her sexual interactions with numerous black male figures in the novel—including her first husband Eddie, Jr. as well as Truman—that male/female gender relations do not always have to be interracial for them to be marked with the power imbalances that Fanon's analysis of the gaze privileges.

For instance, early feminist film theory tells us that 'looking' is a two-way street, divided up in terms of gender. As Laura Mulvey has famously explained it: 'The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly' (27). Put simply, men *look*, women are looked *at*. What more recent theories have yielded of late, however, is the very complexity of the spectator's identificatory process when that person is engaged in the actual act of 'looking'; rather than a two-way street, perhaps a more apt metaphor for this relation is the one of multiple intersections. In other words, looking is not always bound up with rigid subject/object relations; those who are looked at can often choose to take up complex positions vis-à-vis the scene/seen of the encounter itself that are not always reducible to fixed and stable power dynamics. Women, for instance, do not always have to return a man's gaze in order to assert agency; they can choose to deflect their interlocutor's gaze and focus their visual attention elsewhere. This is exactly what Meridian does when the lecherous old professor, Mr. Raymonds, a character I address later in the essay, locks his eyes on her and she neutralizes his masculine authority by choosing to interpret 'the gleam in his eye' not as an indication of his sexual prowess, which is the message he imagines he is sending out, but rather of how 'pathetic' he appears to her just then (Walker 113). As Steve Neale puts it:

The spectator does not therefore 'identify' with the hero or heroine: an identification that would, if put in its conventional sense, involve socially constructed males identifying with male heroes, and socially constructed females identifying with female heroines. *The situation is more complex than this*, as identification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen, a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various positions that are involved in the fictional narration.... *Identification is therefore multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent*

*parts of the spectator's own psyche paraded before her or him.* (Neale 279: emphasis added)

Portrayed variously by Walker as a photographer, a painter, and a sculptor—in other words, as someone who is actively engaged with visuality itself—Truman Held not only *looks* but actually *creates* the types of images he wants to look *at*, and in turn identify *with*. His character, therefore, offers a convenient model of this complex process of identification that feminist film theory and Fanonian discourse have taken up, albeit with different goals and effects.<sup>8</sup> It is primarily through this intimate relationship Truman has to the multiple and fractured processes of 'looking,' both as an artist and as an erotic being, that he experiences others and the world around him. Most importantly, it is through the 'gaze'—or more precisely, learning how to gaze *differently*—that he is best able to ready himself for the 'true' (male or female? heterosexual or lesbian? both or neither?) loving that the irony of his first name perhaps actually portends, and which, over the course of the changing nature of his relationship with Meridian, she requires of him.

Early in the novel, the reader learns that Truman Held is an artist not because *he* says he is, but because others do. We get this information chiefly from his wife, Lynne, a woman he will eventually desert once her white female identity begins to conflict with his half-hearted racial politics. At this point in the narrative, Truman himself is surprisingly inarticulate about his process of seeing, perhaps because he never seriously reflects on it. An artist is just something he is—just like he is a lover. In fact, being a visual artist and being an erotic being are not separate for Truman: to both he brings a penchant for hyperbole. Once, while on her way to Truman's studio after their young daughter has been attacked and killed, one of the numerous subplots that structure the novel and lend the narrative its dizzying temporal framework, Lynne remembers that her husband had painted African American women as 'magnificent giants, breeding forth the warriors of the new universe' (168)—a point I will return to shortly. And earlier, after he has made love to Meridian and then gone directly back to Lynne, Truman calls out to the novel's protagonist: 'I think I'm in love with you, African woman. Always have been. Since the first' (115). It is important to note that while Truman's invocation of a transatlantic connection between the American-born Meridian and her ancestral homeland is ironic in this instance—Truman after all is a poseur *par excellence* and does not invest seriously in the appellation—Walker herself records a more meaningful African/American female moment of bonding in the novel with the imbedded narrative about the West African slave and storyteller Louvinie,

who years ago toiled on the Saxon plantation, the future site of the all-women's college Meridian attends as a young woman. Louvinie would suffer swift retribution when, after entertaining the master's children with a particularly gruesome horror story, the youngest of the children, one whose heart was already weak, fell dead at the story's climax. As punishment for her role in the boy's death, Louvinie had her tongue severed from her mouth. Rather than see such scenes as random and disconnected from the novel, Elliott Butler-Evans argues that they actually function as 'articulations of a nascent feminist consciousness. Each narrative, although essentially self-contained, contributes to a Gestalt' (Butler-Evans 118). Moreover, he adds, 'These episodes are digressions from the larger struggles of the civil rights movement and deliberately place the personal histories of women in the foreground. The reader must establish a relationship of these apparently disparate narratives to an implied feminist discourse. The cluster of narratives all focus on problems of women's empowerment or, more accurately, *disempowerment*' (119).

Hence, Truman's willful, even cavalier, (mis)recognition of the black female body—whether represented in his artwork or in 'real life'—illuminates the primary flaw in his structure of seeing: he cannot rest his eye upon any object, but most especially a woman, without distorting its very surface with his own self-interested, (black male) patriarchal/faux afrocentrist desire for it—behavior which, ironically, links him with the same, white male power structure he says he abhors. In this instance, the seeing position that Neale describes as narcissistic—and which ordinarily leads to *self*-recognition in the other—here, when reconsidered with visual theories of masculinity, translates directly into issues of aggression, power and control, *as well as*, it is important to note, self-recognition (Neale 279). What this means in Walker's novel is that Truman, a black man, recognizes himself *racially* in Meridian, while at the same time he also recognizes the difference in Meridian's *gender*—what Mulvey refers to as a woman's '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 27). The result is that Meridian, regardless of her racial sameness to Truman, is a potentially useful and *convenient* spectacle for his erotic (black male) contemplation, just like the 'three exchange students' have been. Unlike these other women, only Meridian's black femaleness seems to function for Truman as a useful vehicle for nurturing his fantasized connection to a form of psychological and bodily wholeness that he can imagine in terms that are deeply, even spiritually, linked to embodied metaphors of mother Africa. 'In this authoritarian, pastoral patriarchy,' as Gilroy puts it, the same one with which Truman is most closely aligned, 'women are usually identified as the agents and means of this process of cultural reproduction' (197).

Although Walker often portrays Truman in the act of directing his controlling gaze at women for the sake of fulfilling his own erotic pleasures, like those I mention above, at other times she portrays him either consciously or unconsciously manipulating the gaze of others upon himself in a deeply disavowed act of exhibitionism.<sup>9</sup> Once, for example, during a playful discussion he and Meridian have about the ethnographic tendencies of one of the white female exchange students caught taking snapshots of black women styling their hair, he alludes to the benefits to be had by both parties, subject and object, in such a relationship. 'It *pays*,' he tells Meridian, 'to have a little tolerance with other people's curiosity. It never bothers me anymore when foreigners look at my hair and say, "A leetle beet of zee tar brush, eh?"' (103; emphasis added). Although Truman takes a different stance later when he feigns humiliation at being objectified by the elderly white women at the country club where he sometimes works—white women who 'watch' his black (male) body, bent over at the waist, scoop out cigarettes butts from the swimming pool—his outrage is, in the end, unconvincing.

'Trooo-munn,' they coo, 'I bleve you got *to lean over more* this way, don't you?' Or, 'You're just a very ajul boy, for a boy *your size*.' And I have to just stand there and grin and bear it. I despise them. (113; emphasis added)

Indeed, the rancor of this last statement of Truman's—serious though it seems on the surface—is undercut not only by the earlier scene in which Truman admits to sometimes enjoying being objectified, especially if those doing the objectifying are (white) women, but it is also undercut by the very next thing Truman says to Meridian: 'You women sure are lucky not to have to be up against 'em all the time.' Prior to this exchange, Walker once again shrewdly flashes back to a period when Meridian herself actually *was* 'up against 'em all the time,' for example, in her own stint of having to work for the elderly, but perpetually horny, bourgeois black professor Mr. Raymonds, a man who chases Meridian around his office and dry humps her whenever he gets the chance. What is important to note is that Truman's use of the third-person objective pronoun 'em' (a black vernacular contraction of 'them'): centers race only and conveniently neglects both race *and* gendered constructs—as in also, men vs. women, or black men vs. black women. A correlative of Truman's claim, then, is his unstated belief that black diasporic peoples, and the forms of oppression they experience, are undifferentiated by anything as minor as gender—simply: what black men experience, black women experience too. Of course what Truman's statement also reveals is the gendered double-standard operative in his masculinist logic:



although black women experience the same forms of oppression black men experience, and do so as a pre-condition of blackness itself, black men decidedly do *not* experience the same oppressions black women experience—sexual vulnerability at the hands of other men—since to do so would be to render black men feminized, and hence to expose their gendered embodiment as particular rather than normative and therefore representative of the racial collective as a whole. But what Truman does not acknowledge is that black women experience forms of oppression to which black men are immune; in other words, black women are not only oppressed by whites as blacks, but that they are also oppressed by whites and by blacks, especially by black *men*, as women—a point that Walker's carefully placed flashback between Meridian and Mr. Raymond graphically illustrates for the reader's consideration. The fact that Truman does not know this, or cannot *admit* to knowing it, and therefore actually seems to believe that only black men are sexually harassed, reveals the degree to which his own structure of seeing is self-interested, linked, as it always seems, to his own tightly circumscribed bodily effects and (heterosexual) desires and fears.

In the end, the two experiences—Truman's pleasurable subjection to the lusty gaze of the 'old skinny broads,' and Meridian's to the 'race man' Mr. Raymonds—cannot be reconciled by appealing to conventional analytical tools of looking that fail to consider the structuring influence of the transatlantic slave trade on the historically produced psyches of both black and white gendered subjects alike. For if we consider the hierarchy that Mulvey sees as structuring heterosexual looking practices: active/male, passive/female, we notice almost immediately that, in at least one of the above instances, the addition of racially contrasting signifiers (whiteness in conjunction with blackness) has the effect of disrupting its smooth workings. Simply, Truman, as a male, is 'passive', whereas, in Mulvey's model gender difference is centered and race is marginalized, and he should be active. However, insofar as the 'old skinny broads' look *at* Truman, he also looks *at* them; he only does it 'on the sly,' I would say, and not full on. For how else could Truman be sure they were looking at him, and hence report back to Meridian his resentment, if he were not also looking? In other words, Truman is simply not gazing in the unmolested manner in which he, as a black heterosexual man in a white-patriarchal society, is *accustomed* to gazing, but he *is* gazing nonetheless. Notably, Mulvey's gender-centric model does not adequately allow us to capture this crucial distinction. Walker's authorial tone throughout this scene, moreover, suggests to the reader that Truman is quietly compensated for his masculine 'trouble' by having these women, although white and elderly, provide psychic validation to

his threatened sense of heterosexual, masculine privilege, which is hardly canceled out by the objective fact of racism since he mobilizes that privilege elsewhere in the text. Put differently, Truman's desiring (black male) gaze has merely been *disrupted* by the momentary 'irruption' onto his direct viewing field of (an)other gaze, and not destroyed altogether. Far from it. According to Norman Bryson:

The intrusion of the other makes of the self a spectacle or object in relation to that other: the self is threatened with annihilation by that irruption of alterity on the subject's horizon.... [But this process does not] become a *decentering* of the subject. [The] watcher is objectified by the other's gaze, just as that other is objectified by *his* gaze: but the fundamental terms, of subject and object, remain intact throughout the encounter.... Though menaced by the other, neither is *fundamentally* challenged: the subject can *survive* such a gaze, and survive more strongly for being exposed to this 'alterity' which may menace the subject but which does not in any sense actually dissolve or annihilate it. The subject's sense of being a subject is heightened, not undone. (Bryson 95; emphasis in original)

In contrast, Meridian's 'sense of being a subject,' whether through gender or sexuality, is not at all 'heightened' by Mr. Raymond's lecherous gaze; rather, she is psychically and actually diminished, a point that Walker makes clear when she writes, 'Each day when she [Meridian] arose to go—having typed letters for him in a veritable swamp fog of bad breath—he clasped her in his arms, dragging her away from the door, the long bones of his thighs forcing her legs apart, attempting to force her to the floor. But she smiled and struggled and struggled and smiled; and pretended she knew nothing of his intentions' (Walker 112). Willfully oblivious to the brand of *intraracial* sexual abuse that Meridian suffers at the hands of Mr. Raymonds, Truman's, then, is what David Michael Levin has called "'the assertoric gaze", that rigid, inflexible, monocular, egocentric look of objectification and, finally, conquest implicitly regulating difference in the confrontational opposition of self and other, subject and object' (qtd. in Wallace 2002: 172).

Hence, the benefits that Truman earlier insists can be enjoyed by both parties in looking relationships, the active and the passive, in reality only holds in certain race/gender contexts, but not in others. For example, the pattern of racial sameness and gender difference represented by Meridian's female body ('to-be-looked-at') and Mr. Raymond's male body ('*not*-to-be-looked-at') reactivates the active/male, passive/female paradigm in just the way that Mulvey suggests. In Truman's case, however, the

double difference between his black (male) body and the white (female) bodies whose gazes he tacitly solicits (*both* bodies, in *this* context, 'to-be-looked-at') actually cancels out the terms put forth by this gender-centered theory of looking relations; renders those terms null and void, as it were. Here, the position of the primary gazer(s) is reversed, represented collectively as 'white female,' while the object gazed *at* is represented singularly as 'male,' but crucially a 'black male.' From this, we can conclude that structures of looking are destabilized interracially when the 'passive' position is occupied by a man of color, though not necessarily *intra*racially. Although on the surface this insight comes perilously close to affirming Maya Angelou's claim of 'togetherness' functioning as the enabling marker distinguishing black male-black female relations from those between white males and females, it eventually does so in a way that further exposes the masculinist bias that I argued earlier underpins its founding assumptions, and it is simply this: that such a perspective, if clung to, arrogantly minimizes, even erases, black women's decidedly more compromised gendered experiences of oppression as *women* in a white- and male-dominated culture in favor of centering the gendered experiences of black men as *men* in that same culture. Moreover, this perspective does so even while attempting to collapse the two experiences collectively into those of the latter. But although Walker's novel chooses not to dramatize the kinds of sexual vulnerability black women like Meridian face, and have faced historically, at the hands of white men in favor of focusing most of its narrative attention on the sexual and emotional vulnerability such women endure at the hands of black men, it cannot be said that the matter of black women's expanded and therefore multiple points of vulnerability is not an aggressively foregrounded concern of this novel in particular, and of Walker's writing more generally. As she put it in a 1973 interview, three years before *Meridian* was published: 'I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world' (Walker 1983: 250–51). In other words, for Walker, the exchange of the gaze between black men and black women functions in a similar way to that between white men and white women, that is, it 'disturbs the peace' (Bryson's phrase); but the same exchange between black men and white women, although it may *temporarily* 'menace the subject,' as Bryson notes (and as Truman confirms when he says earlier: 'I despise *them*'), 'does not in any sense actually dissolve or annihilate' that subject; on the contrary, such a gaze may in fact be experienced by the black heterosexual male subject as a psychic boost

of sorts. In the end, the opposite may be true for black women like Meridian.<sup>10</sup>

If, then, Truman's sense of gender identity undergoes a shift in the novel—as it clearly does—it is not entirely because of what or whom he looks at or how they look at him, but rather how *he* looks at *them*. Truman's gaze is acquisitive and self-deceiving. It is erotic, in the narrowest, most crude sense, and not in the expansive, holistic sense Audre Lorde meant when she wrote: 'For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.'<sup>11</sup> Truman Held, when *he* looks, takes but does not give; nor does he recognize, when it is offered, giving in others. His efforts to *bold*, hence his surname, two women—one black (Meridian), one white (Lynne)—in a revolving constellation of desire without losing either, results in complications to his unreflected process of visuality. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that it is primarily through the loss of one form of vision, and the gaining of another form—one he refines through his art-making—that Truman Held acquires a new and different way of seeing, and ultimately a new and different way of loving. To do so, the novel suggests, he must lose that rapacious indifference, common to his much vaulted black male heterosexuality, and submit to being reborn in a new image—a feminine-identified one.

#### THE BLACK WOMAN C'EST MOI: SELF-RECOGNITION AND THE VISUAL ARTS

Blackness is regarded as a hole in being. Black men are hence penises that are holes; and black women are vaginas that are holes—holes that are holes. If blackness is a hole, and women are holes, what are white women, and what are black men in an antiblack world?<sup>12</sup>

Recall Hortense Spillers' comments about the Middle Passage and how that harrowing ordeal had the effect of stripping the captives' bodies of recognizable and valuable forms of self-recognition that would need to be reconstituted—that is, "'counted"/"accounted," or differentiated'—once those bodies 'gain[ed] the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure' (267). Despite its apocalyptic tone, I find this scholar's effort at narrativizing that past far more useful than I do either Patterson's or Angelou's essentially romanticized versions in which male and female African gender relations were inherently characterized by an egalitarian ethos that was then systematically destroyed at some point during the transatlantic encounter. Instead of making black ancestral

gender and sexual dynamics the hallowed ground upon which to advance her claims about contemporary African American gender conflicts, Spillers invites her readers to consider the opportunity for a broad rebuilding of a whole series of black interpersonal and self-relations in the contemporary moment, one that her own narrative holds out as a distinct, if radical, possibility. For when Spillers famously states at the conclusion of her essay that 'the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself' (278), it should be clear to any one reading that we are firmly in the presence of something new. The paragraph's conclusion leaves no doubt about this: 'It is the heritage of the mother,' Spillers writes, 'that the African American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of "yes" to the "female" within' (278). Far from taking a negative and viewing it as something that needs to be disproved and corrected because, at bottom, it represents a perversion of the status quo, and therefore an emasculation of the black male patriarchal figure—a claim Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous 'Report' has been charged with making—Spillers takes that supposed 'negative' and embraces its potential to inspire reflection, eventual action, and ultimately transformed social relations between the genders.<sup>13</sup> So too does *Meridian*. For although Walker divests her primary black female character of the trappings of conventional femininity at the start of the narrative, when it depicts her 'dressed in [men's] dungarees and wearing a light-colored, visored cap, of the sort worn by motormen on trains' (Walker 1976: 21)—this look being a far cry from her appearance in flashbacks as a much younger woman, before her once lustrous hair has fallen out due to the heroic acts she 'performs' throughout the South—it strategically waits until near the end of the narrative to make similar drastic changes to the appearance of its primary black male character, Truman Held. But those changes do arrive. Characteristically, they are set in motion by Truman's engagement with his most treasured means of negotiating both the psychological and the social—namely, his visual senses.

In Part II of the novel, appropriately titled after this character (just as Part I is titled after *Meridian*), Lynne, Truman's wife, visits Truman's studio and pictures it as a 'neat space of quiet light and white walls'—in other words, a place where uninterrupted contemplation can occur. Here, Truman returns to the figures in his imagination that mean the most to him, but which he has been unable actually to touch or interact with on any sustained level in his life. It is significant to note that all the images that Truman depicts are, in fact, of black women—writes Walker: 'voluptuous black bodies, with breasts like melons and hair like a crown of

thorns' (168). For Truman, the black woman's body, rather than the white woman's, or the black man's for that matter, represents the ultimate body: the body in suffering, and yet the body in plenitude too. It is this *too-full* body he cannot love, this body he runs from and returns to again and again, because, ultimately, it is also *his* own body, and, crucially, to recall my earlier criticism of Maya Angelou, not a *complement* to his body. As I mentioned early, the logic of complementarity is one that privileges male-dominated social orders by insisting upon essentially conservative notions of gender division and sexual hierarchy. Hence, not only are black lesbians and gay men subordinated within such a system, because their gender and sexual identities fail to correspond to heterosexual norms, but so too are straight-identified black women subordinated by such ideologies.<sup>14</sup> 'Black women—whatever [their] sexual identities—are castigated unless [their] identities and actions are primarily defined in subordinate relations to black men. This unremitting censure is necessary to reinforce a system which is unable to value female identities and accomplishments unless they are centrally informed by heterosexual social relations. Heterosexism and patriarchy thus results in increased freedoms for black men (mitigated by race) while severely limiting the freedoms for black women' (Cohen and Jones 91). However, another reason the black female body is coveted for Truman is because it is the body with which he most identifies at the corporeal level. According to Lewis Gordon, because of the association of blackness with femininity in an antiblack world, black men bear an even stronger relation to femininity than do white women: 'His [the black man's] skin, his eyes, his nose, his ears, his mouth, his anus, his penis ooze out his femininity like blood from a splattered body' (Gordon 1995: 127). Again, it is the visual that is the most revealing.

In her analysis of the work of Monica Majoli, a lesbian artist who attempts to signify lesbian desire, not through the female body, but through the portrayal of gay *male* bodies engaged in sadomasochistic sexual practices, the art critic Liz Kotz writes:

[T]he small canvases evoke a sense of forbidden obsessions, and a world in which the painter herself is completely absent. But is she? Majoli has stated that the stories resonated with her because 'what these men were doing was how I had sometimes *felt* with women, that sense of erotic torture, of suffocation.' Besides, offering *psychic substitutes* for her own lived sense of masochism, the men also represented figures of *desire* for Majoli—'working on the paintings was a way to work out my feelings about men, about the male body—as well as a locus of

*identification: 'I am that man in the bathtub. He is me.'* (Kotz 17: emphasis added)

In his work on modern painters, Peter Gay reaches a surprisingly similar conclusion in his analysis of the neoplastic grid abstractions of the Dutch artist Mondrian, who never married and in fact seemed to view women with great anxiety. As Gay puts it, for Mondrian, '[p]ainting was...the aesthetic correlative for his repressions, his way of coming to terms with himself—at once an expression of his problem [with the female form, and hence with his (hetero)sexuality,] and an *embodiment* of his solution' (Gay 197: emphasis added). Both analyses, of Majoli and Mondrian, might equally apply to Truman's psychological relationship to his own black male body via his paintings of black women. After all, Lynne is absolutely convinced that it is because of Truman's intense engagement with his art, and the discoveries he makes in his studio—for instance, the *difference* of her white body 'compared...to the bodies of black women,' one representing Truman's *expressed* desires, the other his *repressed* ones—that eventually turns him away from her. Lynne was 'so sure,' writes Walker, 'that Truman, having *fought* through his art to the *reality of his own mother, aunts, sisters, lovers, to their beauty, their greatness,* would naturally seek them again in the flesh' (169; emphasis added).

But Lynne's anxiety notwithstanding, this return to the black woman's body on Truman's part is not necessarily, I would say, an erotic return, narrowly speaking. For Walker suggests that Truman's desiring (black male) gaze has been reconfigured this time through the tactile experience of his day-to-day work as a visual artist, and by his own identification with the racial and gendered suffering of the figures he depicts—figures that represent his own troubled relation to the feminine as a black person in an antiblack world, regardless of gender. Simultaneously an acceptable 'psychic substitute' for his own body—a 'surrogate' figure, Kotz calls Majoli's studies of gay male figures—as well as the *embodiment* of the solution to his patriarchal way of seeing that Gay asserts was the case for Mondrian, the black woman's body represents two things to Truman: not only is her body the body of a lover, but it also represents the multiple *bodies* of countless black women who have exhibited resilience in the face of historical and contemporary subjugation. Importantly, some of these women are relatives—that is, women with whom his relationships have been defined in ways other than primarily sexual. Just prior to this stage in Truman's transformation, Walker writes of his feelings for Meridian: 'He wanted her still, but would not have wanted (or been able) to make love to her' (141). In other words, his heterosexual desire has been extinguished for the time

being, and replaced by a gendered identification in which the sexual, in purely erotic terms, lay dormant in preparation for his imminent rebirth into a new self. When the two next meet, in the southern town where Truman tracks Meridian, the looking relationship between the two has been radically altered. His (black male) desire is no longer for her (black female) body, in a narrow and restrictive sexual sense; rather, it has been rechanneled to the level of an abstract, almost androgynous yearning, one that can never adequately be satisfied, because, finally, the ultimate release that he requires can only be achieved through his delving into himself. The critic Marie Buncombe contends that in her novels 'Walker uses androgyny as a metaphor for the "wholeness", the totality of the black experience as she sees it. This "wholeness" calls for a new look at traditional definitions of such terms as "masculine", "feminine", and "lesbian" since the conventional meanings have led to polarization, fear, and hostility, resulting in the falsification of black history and literature and the destruction of many black people' (Buncombe 420–21). The result, I'd say, is what Judith Butler elsewhere has called an 'antigenital sexuality,' one that 'serves as the singular, oppositional alternative to the hegemonic structure of sexuality' in which the hierarchy of male and female condemns women as the 'natural' subordinates of men. However, for Butler, such a sexuality 'is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition of a masculinist economy of identity.' Rather, the sexualities that result from this resignification 'swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities for 'subjects' that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible' (Butler 1990: 27, 29).

Only in the last chapters of her novel does Walker portray Truman and Meridian existing on an equal plane, with him neither desiring her sexually, nor attempting to manipulate her affections, as he had earlier in the narrative. Instead, the two go off jointly, with the sole purpose of helping others help themselves, as each, over the course of the novel, has helped the other. Like the corpulent figures of the black women in his studio, Truman himself has come to embody *both* suffering and plenitude in his reconstituted and radically altered relationship to Meridian. He has accepted Meridian, just as he has accepted *himself*: that is, in the limited sense of beginning to own up to that self's thoughts and actions, without needing to impose that self on others as a way of evading responsibility and self-knowledge. One afternoon, alone with Meridian, Truman is surprised but not repulsed to discover that he actually has 'maternal' feelings for her (213). This reference from the novel dovetails nicely with an insight Andrea Cornwall makes in her Introduction to

*Readings in Gender in Africa* (2005), where she zeros in on representations of mothering to point out a crucial distinction in how feminists in the West—by which she means those primarily in the United States and Britain—and those in Africa choose to place the emphasis on this subject in their writings. For instance, African feminist writers often criticize their Western counterparts for focusing too single-mindedly on what the former call the “sexual politics” of heterosexual relationships.’ Doing so, African feminists contend, ‘undervalue[s] motherhood and the significance of “maternal politics” in Africa.’ Addressing this criticism further, Cornwall goes on to state:

The importance of ‘maternal politics’ emerges not only in forms of collective action, in which African women—white as well as black—have deployed discourses on motherhood as political strategies. It is also reflected in women’s lived experience of the micro-politics of intra-household relations. Focusing on women as mothers displaces the heterosexual relationship from its central locus in ‘gender studies,’ and permits a closer focus on relations *between* women or men and on the power effects of other configurations of difference within and between sites such as ‘the household’. (Cornwall 4; emphasis in original)

But what about ‘men as mothers’? According to Hortense Spillers, for a black male subject to achieve his greatest degree of self-actualization, he must be willing to submit to a specifically ‘black feminist’ self-interrogation (Spillers 278). Much more so than white men, black diasporic men, Spillers would claim, are better equipped to assume anti-patriarchal male positions, not primarily because of slavery—although slavery is certainly an important historical antecedent for understanding black male identity—but because of the racial group’s consequent exclusion from dominant forms of gendered authority, which the horrors of the Middle Passage stripped from them. It is not so much, then, that black men and black women in a world structured by a transatlantic prehistory ‘balance’ each other out in the gender arena, as they do in Maya Angelou’s romanticized use of the hierarchical language of complementarity; if this were so then white women and white men would balance each other out in the ‘racial’ arena as well, given the normativity of gender difference in a patriarchal society. But that is not the case. As Spillers reminded us earlier, the black American male represents ‘the *only* American community of males’ with such a psychically intimate relationship to their own internalized femininity, one which can only become activated, as it were, by acknowledging the specter of the ‘mother’ residing deep within themselves.

For Truman, as a result of his own engagement with the ‘female within’—as his entire body of work might be said to reflect—this need to direct his controlling (male) gaze at women, either white or black, has entirely receded. For instance, not long after he admits the maternal feelings he has for Meridian, he tells his estranged wife Lynne: ‘I love you... But I don’t desire you anymore’ (215). And when Truman looks at Meridian in the novel’s final pages, he almost does not see her as having a corporeal identity; rather, his experience of her is strangely mystical, a sensory contact only, like the process of creating a work of art with one’s eyes closed, perhaps. Movingly, Walker writes of Truman’s dawning awareness of this stunning transformation in his structure of seeing:

What he *felt* was that something in her was exactly the same as she had always been and as he had, finally, succeeded in knowing her. That was the part he might now sense but could not *see*. He would never *see* ‘his’ Meridian again. (219; emphasis added)

For Walker, this sudden shift in Truman’s own previously ‘assertoric’ male vision, which fixes and ‘holds’ others in a gaze defined by objectification and conquest, is only a first step in transforming the patriarchal relations between black men and black women. There is a great deal of more work to do, on both sides. But, as I have been arguing, at least Walker’s novel allows us a brief glimpse into what a new beginning to the world might actually look like. Notably, it would be a beginning in which any conventional notion of desire would have to be abandoned and ultimately radically reconfigured. And when that day arrives, as the Prague-born lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke hints at in one of the many eloquent letters he wrote over his lifetime, ‘there will be girls and women whose name will no longer signify merely an opposite of the masculine, but something in itself, something that makes one think, not of any *complement* and limit, but only of life and existence: the feminine human being’ (Rilke 37; emphasis added). Alice Walker was quite familiar with the letters Rilke generously wrote to his many admirers worldwide. She was especially familiar with those he composed to a young military cadet and aspiring poet, Franz Kappus, between the years 1902 and 1908, and collected in the edition, *Letters to a Young Poet*. Not only had Walker referred to these letters in one of the poems included in her second volume of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* (1973), but she had also used a well-known quotation from another of these letters as an epigraph to her first collection of stories about black women, *In Love & Trouble*, also published that same year. The quote tells us a great deal about the sensibility Walker felt she shared with Rilke, that most

uncompromising of writers when it came to making a choice between self-actualization and the obligations we may feel to others: 'People have (with the help of conventions) oriented all their solutions toward the easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must hold to what is difficult; everything in Nature grows and defends itself in its own way and is characteristically and spontaneously itself, seeks at all costs to be so and against all opposition' (qtd. in White 231). Although in this passage Rilke is neither addressing the preoccupations of black diasporic subjects, nor the transatlantic slave trade per se, the fact that Walker saw fit to use this quotation to introduce her fiction writing about the lives of contemporary black women to her readers suggests that, for the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, an underlying logic connects them all at a very deep level. I would say that part of this logic has to do with Rilke's abiding distaste for male-female relations that were overburdened with cultural assumptions as to the proper roles each gender was expected to play in their relationships with one another, but also in the world more generally—a distaste Walker, in her life and work, seems to share abundantly (see White 2004).

Carolyn Heilbrun has written that 'our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen.' For Heilbrun, then, the concept of androgyny, perhaps as it did too for Rilke, 'suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes,' one in which neither man nor woman—whether black, white, straight, lesbian, gay, or other—was beholden to the other in a limiting and oppressive way (qtd. in Buncombe 427). In its uncompromising, and yet loving depiction of the temporal trajectory of the Meridian-Truman union, Walker's novel, *I like to think*, attempts to lay the groundwork for just such a future to exist between black men and women. Moreover, such a future will not be overburdened by the legacy of their ancestors' shared transatlantic experience in the narrow, ultimately constricting ways that writers like Maya Angelou and Orlando Patterson have forwarded. After all, one of the final things Meridian says to Truman, as she is about to leave him at the end of the novel, to take off herself for parts unknown, while Truman, the reader is led to believe, will temporarily take over the 'maternal' role that Meridian had formerly inhabited, is the following: 'You are free to be whichever way you like, to be with whoever, of whatever color or sex you like—and what you risk in being truly yourself, the way you want to be, is not the loss of me' (Walker 216). Far from a turning away from the erotic, the novel represents, in these words, a turning towards the erotic in the Lordean sense, and

profound rejection of all those modes of *heteroeroticism*, in particular, in which black women—and now we know black men too—have been supremely disadvantaged.<sup>15</sup> Often that disadvantage has been masked over and consolidated by black men's strategic use of the patriarchal gaze as a way to fix and hold black women in their places, so as black men would not then have their masculine authority and dominance challenged, or usurped. But such efforts to impose rigid divisions between the genders are merely evasive rather than illuminating. As Rilke reminds us, 'perhaps the sexes are more related than we think, and the great renewal of the world will perhaps consist in this, that man and [woman], freed of all false feelings and reluctances, will seek each out not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will come together *as human beings*, in order simply, seriously and patiently to bear in common the difficult sex that has been laid upon them' (Rilke 35). Such insights represent one of the most valuable lessons contemporary readers can take away from Walker's impressive, but demanding, second novel—and it is this: that sex is difficult, but that it is not impossible.

Bowdoin College

## NOTES

1. Orlando Patterson. *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*. (1998). 25.
2. Elaine Pinderhughes (2002: 269–70) cites statistics asserting that divorce rates for African Americans are twice those of their white counterparts. For similar figures, as well as further analysis, see Robin D. Stone's article, 'The State of Our Unions: A Snapshot of Marriage in Black America,' published in *Essence Magazine* (August 2005): 132–35.
3. Indeed, Andrea Cornwall argues persuasively that the Western model of 'sexual difference,' and its attendant conceptual language of complementarity and hierarchy are out of place when considering structural relations between African men and women, both present-day and in the past. This is especially the case with African feminists. Some of these authors, Cornwall writes, 'tak[e] this argument further to insist that 'gender' as it is understood in Western feminist discourse did not exist in Africa prior to the colonial imposition of a dichotomous model of sexual difference that rendered women subordinate, residual and inferior to men. What is most significant about this line of argumentation is less its problematic presentation of a harmonious pre-colonial idyll than the questions it raises about the status of the concept of 'gender' (Cornwall 5). Sudarkasa builds on this point, writing: 'In recent years, the postulation of separate, non-hierarchically related—and, therefore, complementary—domains for women and men has been disputed by anthropologists who argued that women occupied the 'domestic domain' and men the 'public domain' and that, because power and authority were vested in the public domain, women had de facto lower status than men. It always seemed to me that in many African societies a more appropriate conception (and by that I mean one that makes sense of more of the

- realities of those societies) was to recognize two domains, one occupied by men and another by women—both of which provided personnel for domestic and extradomestic (or public) activities. It also seemed that there was considerable overlap between the domestic and public domains in precolonial African societies' (qtd. in Cornwall 26).
4. It is important to note that I am *not* conflating gender with sexuality here. Crucially, my point is to uncouple gender from serving as the sole variable in determining forms of sexual desire and to create theoretical space for considering other variables as well (or at the very least considering *co*-variables) in that determination—for those of African descent in a European imperial world (the phrase belongs to Ann Laura Stoler 1996: 206), this project would necessarily have to consider 'racial' variables. I believe that Walker's novel goes to great lengths to assert the value of decentering gender as the privileged variable for marking sexual subjectivities.
  5. Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Ed. & Trans. Stephen Mitchell. (New York: Vintage, 1984): 135.
  6. For a look at critics who exhibit skepticism with regards to Fanon's idiosyncratic engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis, see Daniel Boyarin's 'What Does a Jew Want?; or, The Political Meaning of the Phallus,' in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*. Ed. Christopher Lane. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 211–40; Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Lee Edelman's *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Diana Fuss's *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kobena Mercer's 'Decolonization and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics,' in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. Ed. Alan Read. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996): 114–31; Ann Pellegrini's *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Even Fanon's biographer, David Macey, condescendingly dismisses the Martinican writer's comments about the Oedipus complex in *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador USA, 2000), when he writes: 'Fanon explicitly rejects that [Freud's Oedipal] thesis. It is, he argues, the encounter with the white world that creates the black man's neurosis.... In psychoanalytic terms, the argument is quite untenable but it is consistent with the primal experience of the burning gaze of the *beké* [whites] and the absolute wound inflicted on Martinique by colonialism. It is also consistent with both a dream of a 'natural' pre-colonial Martinique and the natural being of a black boy who grew up there without knowing he was black because no one had told him he was.' (192–93)
  7. David Eng offers a wonderful gloss on the Lacanian mirror stage in terms of how the infant's mother helps the infant to internalize social difference with respect to the 'pregiven set of social (gendered, racial, and class) expectations' he or she will inherit as a result of being born into a particular historical and cultural moment. See Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), especially 111–18.
  8. My conflation of two different forms of visuality, film and the visual arts, is not without precedent. Several critics have noted the seeming interconnectedness across ways of seeing, particularly how the structure of power relations are surprisingly consistent (or not) across genres. For example, in Chapter 6 of his book *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 73–92, Richard Dyer draws upon film, paintings, and print media (especially dust jackets of novels) to analyze what he calls 'the stereotype of the sad young man' depicted in all forms of representational media, beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 50s and 60s. Richard Meyer does something similar with film and photo stills in his essay 'Rock Hudson's Body,' in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991): 259–88. Likewise, Griselda Pollock analyzes photography along with paintings in 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?' in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 135–45.
  9. The very first paragraph of the novel foregrounds a looking relationship between men. '[Two men] looked at [Truman] as he got out of his car' (17). For Steve Neale, as for others, 'in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look [without signaling homosexual desire]: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed' (Neal 281). In this case, the look between men is displaced onto Meridian's body, who is about to 'perform' one of her spectacles.
  10. In his discussion of the film *Le Samourai*, S. Neale comments on how the appearance of a black woman nightclub singer in the film, and her 'exchange of looks' with the white male protagonist, results in his downfall. 'It is no accident that Delon's downfall is symptomatically inaugurated in his encounter with the black woman. *Difference (double difference) is the threat*' (Neale 280; my emphasis). For Neale, *interracial* looking, as opposed to *intra*racial looking, in which the male figure is white and the female is black, results in a direct loss of power for the man, whereas I argue the result is just the opposite when the racial and gender markers are reversed, as in the case of Truman and the older rich white women. Race, then, operates as the mediating term between gender: functioning to confer either activity or passivity, depending upon the gender configuration (or operating to destabilize the terms altogether). Neale's failure, however, to focus any attention on the black woman's response leaves the analysis open and therefore contested. Of course, Kobena Mercer's courageous rereading of Mapplethorpe's black male nudes, in which he too borrows Mulvey's formulations, addresses the power dynamics in same-sex interracial looking relations. See Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), especially Chapter Six.
  11. This quote appears in Audre Lorde's essay 'The Uses of the Erotic.' *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Eds. Henry Abelove, et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993): 340.
  12. Lewis R. Gordon. *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (1995).
  13. For a still very insightful analysis of Moynihan's study, see Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1990).
  14. Tellingly, Walker includes a short passage about black lesbians in the novel. The reference occurs in the midst of one of the numerous embedded episodes that structure the narrative, and help place it within what Elliott Butler-Evans (1993) calls an 'implied feminist discourse' (119). After waxing on about the shortcomings of white women, the novel's omniscient narrator turns to describe the ingenuity and resiliency of Southern black women, stating: 'On the other hand, black women were always imitating Harriet Tubman—escaping to become something unheard of. Outrageous.... Two other girls went away married to men and returned home married to each other. This perked up the community. Tongues wagged. But in the end the couple enjoyed visiting their parents, old friends, and were enjoyed in turn. "How do you suppose they do it?" was a question which—though of course not printed in the newspaper—still made all of the rounds. But even in more conventional things, black women struck out for the unknown.' (Walker 109)
  15. See fn. 11 above.

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