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The Black Woman As Artist and Critic: Four Versions

Margaret B. McDowell

Telling stories and writing criticism, Eudora Welty says, are "indeed separate gifts, like spelling and playing the flute, and the same writer proficient in both has been doubly endowed, but even he can't rise and do both at the same time."¹ In view of the general validity of this observation, it is remarkable that several of the best Afro-American women authors are also invigorating critics.

Notable among them are Margaret Walker, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. In the breadth of their inquiry, the zest of their argument, and the intensity of their commitment to issues related to art, race, and gender, they exemplify a new vitality that emerged after about 1970 in women's discourse about black literature. Informally in their speeches and interviews, and more formally in their essays, these four women analyze and evaluate specific texts, including their own. Going beyond the texts, they define and interpret issues in black culture which have influenced the creation and the reception of the literature. Each of the four has clearly specified her critical principles; nearly all have remained consistent in their views on the function and aims of black literature; all have speculated publicly about the possibility of creative gifts being determined early by race and sex; and all have commented on their own backgrounds and professional or political interests, especially as these have influenced their writing of fiction and poetry.

In spite of the openness of their communication and the public attention the four have received, one must move cautiously in considering them systematically as a group, because their creative work is varied, and their critical statements reveal divergent emphases. Nevertheless, the study of these four author-critics in relation to one another may provide insight into writing by Afro-American women and the controversial issues in Afro-American aesthetic criticism. In my essay I shall examine the position of the

four women in several of these controversial areas: the necessity for black literature to reflect a writer's serious purpose, usually one related to racial issues; the necessity for a writer of black literature to be "immersed" in a particular social, racial, and intellectual milieu; the assumption often made by black critics that literary realism best expresses an author's social commitment and contributes most cogently to social change; and the theory that creativity in black women writers has a special origin and nature, determined by the writer's race and gender.

I

Margaret Walker, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison all acknowledge that some serious social purpose related to their race and sometimes to their sex motivates them, and that they expect to see in other black writers a similar sensitivity and concern, if these writers' works are to be considered authentic "black literature." All of the women regard their own work as authentic "black literature." All of them expect their own work to influence, support, educate, or change their readers—particularly young blacks and women. They consider literature to be an instrument of power, engaging its readers' minds and emotions, motivating their behavior, and enlarging their perspective; but none would compromise the artistic integrity of her work by subordinating it in a utilitarian manner to feminist or racial principles. None would, in fact, recognize a separation or essential conflict in their imaginative work between aesthetic principles and political beliefs.

By introducing each writer-critic briefly in turn, I shall try to establish certain similarities and differences existing among the four. I also hope to suggest the attitudes and values that underlie the work of each and the basis for her criticism of works by other black authors.

Margaret Walker, born a generation before the others and now retired after a long career as professor at Jackson State University in Mississippi, generally speaks of other black authors as her friends, her people, her brothers and sisters. She has known them across greatly different decades, and she places them in an exact context of the black society and its literature in the particular periods of time through which she has lived. Of the four women discussed here, only Margaret Walker experienced in the 1920s a

childhood excitement in reading poems just published by Langston Hughes or Countee Cullen; only she in the 1930s had the comradeship of Richard Wright, while both worked on a WPA writing project in Chicago; only she experienced at the beginning of the 1970s a ranging and lively interchange with Nikki Giovanni; and only she later in the 1970s suffered the frustration that led her to sue Alex Haley for plagiarism and to develop great bitterness against the publishing industry for its treatment of blacks and particularly black women.

In Walker's view, the work of black authors has value not only "for my people," but as it contributes to a worldwide humanistic culture. The writer's "immersion" in such an international culture liberates the spirit from the limits of time and place. She expects this liberating immersion for blacks to include the study of languages, art, music, history, and literature of ancient as well as modern civilizations; merely living daily in an Afro-American community is not enough to keep one vitally in touch with the intellectual and artistic aspirations and achievements of human beings, especially of those who are female and black and of those who lived in other ages. Immersion in humanistic values leads one to struggle against forces that oppress writers and limit cultural development. As an educator, she has long expressed concern about the inadequate artistic and intellectual experience of black children and students, and as a feminist, she has hoped to see black women writers—her "sisters" throughout the world—gain the psychic freedom denied them in many countries. Though Walker was active from her Chicago days in labor and voter rights groups, later in Southern civil rights agitation, then in Vietnam protests, and finally in the resurgence of feminism, she shows surprising resignation as she concedes that freedom must be, for the black woman writer, only the attainment of a confident state of mind, a state which when expressed in her writing will liberate others in a similar psychological way. Her words remind us of the limited victory expressed in the 1926 statement of her childhood hero, Langston Hughes: "We stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." In her ambivalent essay, "On Being Black, Female, and Free" (1972), Walker moves between expression of satisfaction in being born black and female, on the one hand, and acknowledgment of the difficulty experienced by black women in the conduct of their lives, on the other. As a humanist, one attains a sense of liberation by retreat to an inner world of the spirit, but

one also is led to political struggle through the juxtaposition of the humanistic ideals with anti-humanist forces.

I like being a woman. I have a proud black heritage, and I have learned from the difficult exigencies of life that freedom is a philosophical state of mind and existence. . . . The mind is the only place where I can exist and feel free. In my mind I am absolutely free. . . .

Only when she [the black woman writer] escapes to a spiritual world can she find peace, quiet, and hope of freedom. To choose the life of a writer, a black female must arm herself with a fool's courage, foolhardiness, and serious purpose and dedication to the art of writing, strength of will, and integrity. . . .

This clash of my ideal with the real, of my dream world with the practical, and the mystical inner life with the sordid and ugly world outside—this clash keeps me on a battlefield, at war, and struggling. . . .²

Margaret Walker also made no reference to militance or to political efforts when she responded to a question about her views on the "Black Aesthetic" at the height of the Black National Cultural Movement in 1968.³ Instead, she maintained that the Black Aesthetic would encourage artists to find their materials "in ancient civilizations and in far away lands," and thereby direct their attention to the art of Egypt, Babylonia, India, China, Persia, and the whole Islamic world from which Anglo-Saxon influences, she thought, had diverted attention. Unlike most recent Afro-American writers, she has spoken often of the advantages for the artist of "mixed blood," and has remained responsive to her Jamaican father's teaching that "nothing is sacred in the integrity of the race." She has spoken often of her father's ancestors from many races, of their scholarly commitments to humanistic studies, especially in comparative religions and languages, and of her father's knowledge of Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, and Hindustani. She acknowledged, with much warmth, her father's influence and "spiritual comradeship" in several long poems in *October Journey* (1973), a book she dedicated to her father and Langston Hughes.

On the other hand, Walker in her only novel, *Jubilee* (1966), celebrated the more narrowly defined culture of her mother's heritage: the Afro-American slave background, the Christian commitment, and especially the deep affinity with music. In her own poetry and fiction, she early used gospel, blues, and folk song as specific motifs and as structural patterns. As a critic, she praises the innovative and spontaneous quality of black music and folk poetry and prefers it to conventional modes of composition that stress organization, repetition of theme, and unity. While many black critics have defended innovative and relatively unstructured black music (and by implication a loose and open structure for fiction and poetry), she was a generation ahead of others in asserting just as strongly that such spontaneous story telling or singing was not only acceptable but a higher art, often aesthetically superior to more structured and supposedly sophisticated modes of composition.

While Margaret Walker believes that black literature functions mainly to provide psychic liberation "for my people" through immersion in a humanistic culture, Audre Lorde, a poet and also a professional librarian, writes primarily for and about women.⁴ Like Margaret Walker, Lorde focuses on women's internal or psychological victories and creative gifts. Above all, she believes that poetry must express strong feeling, and in doing so, provide mental health and order for women readers as well as for the poets themselves. Although Margaret Walker and Alice Walker have also written several volumes of poetry, Audre Lorde is the only one of the four author-critics I am considering who is *primarily* a poet. In her prose she speaks frequently of Africa—African history, African goddesses (particularly Afrikete), and African women and their experience. She refers also to the life of women in her mother's island birthplace in the Caribbean—the small island of Carriacou—where lesbian love was common and did not incur societal disapproval. In writing about poetry, Lorde concentrates on the effect that writing produces on the poet as well as the effect of the poem on the reader. While the other three women discussed here suggest in various ways that blacks and/or women may possess unique innate creative predispositions, this theory is much more central to Lorde's critical thought. Ironically, her belief that, as a black woman, she has been given special favor is balanced by her perception of herself as a "Sister Outsider." As a female and a black, she felt vulnerable precisely because she was

female and black; as a child she was uncertain of her mother's love for her and at school she felt diminished by her extremely poor eyesight; as a "Zami" (lesbian) she was conscious of her identification with an unpopular minority; as a lover of a white woman, she saw herself rejected by those lesbians who resisted inter-racial alliance; and, eventually, she saw herself as a cosmic victim when struck by breast cancer.

The most basic tenet in her critical overview is her belief that poetry is the strongest expression of intense feeling and the best nurturer of it. Only emotional experience which is "fully lived and responded to" can be converted into poetry. It is Lorde's conviction, furthermore, that poetry is essential for woman's spiritual and mental health; the writing and reading of it are not extraneous or irrelevant activities for women, but necessary for their psychic growth and survival. Poetry orders and gives expression and form to women's chaotic "inner" resources, she believes. In a letter to Mary Daly, Lorde describes this inner transformation of the unorganized self: "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless, so it can be thought." It makes tangible and clear what would otherwise remain nebulous and undifferentiated. Since passionate feeling is often sexual, the erotic is a basic aspect of her total view of experience and a predominating element in her work. She believes that the erotic is, in fact, the principal motivating force in female creativity. A woman's "knowledge of life" and her aspirations derive from her sexuality and become the "illuminating principle" both in her inner existence and in her outward activities.

In her critical prose, Alice Walker, even more insistently than Margaret Walker, speaks of significant black literature as that which encourages black readers to discover "a wider recognition of the universe" rather than to encourage them to think only of their more immediate concerns. Through her own fiction and poetry, she would hope to deepen their sense of the self, to enlarge their sense of kinship with people in other parts of the world, and to place their understanding of the black race in the widest possible perspective. She seeks to immerse her readers in black culture and so lead them to a sense of kinship with others and eventually to the sense of "intimacy" with people of all races, lands, and times. Her ultimate goal would be to foster a state of universal awareness and sensitivity in her readers and to encourage them, moreover, to see themselves in relation to the past as well as to the present.

That she succeeds to a large extent in her ambitious goal is evident if we can accept Michael G. Cooke's judgement in *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (1984).⁵ He cites Alice Walker several times as a contemporary who works toward the achievement by her readers of intimacy with others as a primary goal. He thinks that in *Meridian*, Walker's second novel, she has created characters who move convincingly from isolation to intimacy and that she has thus developed an articulated world view from which to discern the problems and the potentialities of blacks. The black reader, through identification with these characters, thereby overcomes his own alienation to attain intimacy with other human beings. Cooke and Walker recognize, furthermore, that black writers and black readers must immerse themselves in the life of the black family and community in order not only to attain but also to maintain the state of extended intimacy with people outside the limits of the self. Such intimacy will, of course, lead to an increased understanding not only of other people but of their problems, which are often social in their implications. Alice Walker believes that the achievement of this desired intimacy is an ongoing process and is a state that no individual fully attains. Hence, even more than the other three writer-critics, she emphasizes the vitality inherent in a state of continuous change; woman's capacity to change and adapt is conclusive evidence of her resilience and resourcefulness. Walker perceives that rather than finding change threatening or destructive, black people often survive by their capacity to change. Her characters employ various modes of compromise, resistance, or accommodation to insure their survival, rather than cling to a single idea, ideal, or goal.

Because she believes that great black literature comes from an author's "vision of history," she never simply celebrates the past as a golden age or allows her characters to long to return to it in order to evade the responsibilities and options of the present.

Unlike the other three women, Toni Morrison has not published poetry, but the recurring symbols, phrases, rhythms, and themes in her novels suggest the repetitive motifs basic to many forms of poetry and music. In her somewhat loosely structured narratives, her unexpected innovations or digressions, her spontaneity, and her implication of a listening audience, all of her novels manifest characteristics common to oral story telling or to the folk tale that can be varied here and there in its many retellings. Morrison

speaks often of her use of gospel and of blues in the structure and tone of her fiction, and she finds black language fascinating not only in its image-making power but also in its sounds. She worries at times that the associative powers of language and her attention to its "music" may prevent her from conveying through her diction a clearly articulated meaning.⁶

With a strong interest in Aeschylus, she has struggled, like him, to achieve the cathartic ending characteristic of Greek drama in the final scenes of her novels. In this attempt to connect her novels with folk history and with classical drama, she, like the other three author-critics, is searching for a perspective that comes with a sensitivity to the past of her race and to literary tradition. Such enlarged perspective she often achieves even when she encloses an entire novel within the confines of a single black community or household. She often uses an older character—an "ancestor" figure—in her novels to convey such a sense of enlarged time, of myth, and of prophecy, and this figure is a unifying influence in her novels as a voice throughout, embodying a choric and charismatic wisdom.⁷ Her "ancestors"—for example, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*—are more central than are the peasants in novels by Thomas Hardy or Ellen Glasgow, who comment upon the action but who are peripheral participants in the plot; they are also different from the loquacious elderly narrators who in much traditional fiction act as first-person narrators and commentators. For Morrison, the ancestor offers a sense of timelessness and continuity and provides instruction and benevolent protection for the black readers, who, because of their own cultural background, experience a "visceral, emotional" response to the ancestor's wisdom.

In connecting her fiction with a serious social purpose, Morrison is the most consciously didactic of the four author-critics we are discussing. She feels a special debt to what she calls the "superwoman" in the family and in the history of American blacks, women who were not only slaves or pioneers, but who transcended their outward limitations. She recalls with a kind of awe her grandmother's coming from Alabama to Ohio with seven children and only fifteen dollars, but knowing surely that she was doing the necessary thing, because she was fleeing the likelihood of death for members of the family if they stayed in the South. Morrison expects to repay her debt to this heroic ancestor by creating strong women in her novels and by appealing through her

books to a new generation of blacks. She argues that by returning to "ceremonies, gossip, and storytelling" the black novel can sustain younger readers and teach them how to respect the vital aspects of black tradition, how to change or discard outworn conventions, how to act with a sense of perspective and proportion, and how to recognize and combat evil as a social force and as an ever-present reality. She explains in her 1984 interview with Audrey T. McCluskey that black music has lost its specific racial identity and become "everyone's music"; that race-related anecdotes and tales are no longer handed down in conversation among city families; and that the speed of integration may have placed young people in need of a counterbalancing influence that will preserve black tradition and culture.

Morrison's exploration of the dynamics of troubled families is at the heart of all four of her novels and suggests her continuing concern with the renewing of old strengths from the past in relationships between generations and between the sexes. It is not difficult to see that Cholly and Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* have been damaged by societal forces outside the family and that they, in turn, destroy their little daughter, Pecola; but, in contrast, Morrison more subtly presents the MacTeer family, through the eyes of Claudia, who tells the story, and her sister Frieda. The MacTeers, though also poor and living in the same housing complex, manage to provide discipline and love. These children are not concerned with empty dreams fostered by white commercialism and symbolized by the Shirley Temple doll that Pecola hopes to look like. Only briefly are they tempted by a venture into selling marigold seeds, none of which that year can flourish, as Pecola's baby born of incest cannot grow. Similarly one sees Hagar in *Song of Solomon* dying after a frantic search for commercial products she believes can make her lovable to young Macon Dead. But Morrison disturbs audiences at her lectures when she attributes Hagar's death, not to the futile shopping trip, but to her having been brought up in the household which has for three generations had no continuing male presence. It is evident in both of these cases that Morrison analyzes and dramatizes the complex problems she observes in the Afro-American family and community, but that she stops short of supplying ready answers to them. Consequently, she cannot provide the positive endings or even full resolutions to the tragic conflicts, resolutions that the reader might expect.

II

Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison in their fiction and in their critical statements stand conspicuously between, on the one hand, the traditional black writers and critics of the twentieth century in America, who view realistic documentation of black life as requisite to authentic black fiction, and, on the other hand, the important new black writers who have turned to speculative fiction, science fiction, and futuristic fiction and produced a new imaginative vision of black culture and history. Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison in their own fiction and in their critical discussions still emphasize the need to focus on the facts of black history and of present problems in the black community and family. However, they have steadily enlarged their concept of reality in fiction to include myth, folklore, and fantasy, and they have influenced younger black writers to do so.

Since 1900 a large number of Afro-American critics have assumed that black literature originates in a writer's explicit social purpose and racial consciousness and that it celebrates black community life, calls attention to the attainments of admirable black characters, describes the oppression of black people in America, and challenges readers to respond to this oppression. Some have included under the term "black literature" only novels and stories that adhere to an almost reportorial realism. For instance, as recently as 1981, Donald B. Gibson (*The Politics of Literary Experience*)⁸ listed criteria for the critical evaluation of black writing. These criteria resemble those of traditional black critics as well as those still used by many of his contemporaries who gained prominence in the mid-1960s in the emerging Afro-American Studies programs in universities and by those who figured slightly later in Black Arts, Black Cultural Nationalist, and Black Aesthetic groups. In *The Politics of Literacy Experience* Gibson includes within his discussion of black fiction only those works which emphasize a particular time and place, are "explicitly social," and have as their purpose the presentation of blacks as social beings in a specific environment in order to sustain or to change the values implicit in a specified milieu. He acknowledges that imaginative literature never simply sets forth sociological data, but he believes that the quality of universality is not a compelling criterion for affirming a work of fiction to be "black." Emphasis

on universality allows readers, Gibson would argue, to distance themselves from the "particularities" of Afro-American social reality. Thus, for him, if a writer emphasizes myth, psychology, allegory, archetype, and symbol more than the observable details of social reality, the essential "social referent" becomes attenuated. For similar reasons, Gibson prefers that black authors employ a direct style and avoid paradox, irony, and ambiguity in their representation of a given society at a given time.

Critics who approach fiction using criteria similar to these often assume that realistic fiction provides, to a degree, a social and cultural history of black people, and that, in so doing, these narratives effectively imply positive or negative judgments on a particular society at a particular time. The methods of such critics consequently parallel those of the research historian or the sociologist who gathers and quantifies data in order to support categorical generalizations while taking into consideration changes in specific geographical, historical, or racial situations. Evaluating literary texts with social science methodology seems logical, if they are seen primarily as agencies of power in the struggle to change society.

Mary Helen Washington, in the preface to her collection of short stories by black women, *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975), speaks of the parallels between the situations of the young black girls in the stories and those of their prototypes in actual life.⁹ Thus the stories, Washington points out, confirm certain common observations by social scientists—namely, that black American girls, in general, lead unprotected lives, are highly vulnerable to powerful forces that surround them, and reveal a surprising capacity to gain maturity and stability because of their harsh experiences and their capacity to take risks.

A similar set of principles dominates the more extended and systematic study of realistic black fiction as social criticism produced by Trudier Harris in her first book of criticism, *From Mammies to Militants: Domestic Workers in Black American Literature* (1982).¹⁰ In a study of black authors from 1900 to 1930, she analyzes verisimilitude of character and situation in their novels, in order to discover their historical, social, psychological, and political origins and implications. From the presentation of black domestic workers in the novels, Harris considers the choices of behavior open to each and speculates about the degree of satisfaction the characters seem to experience in their work and

social milieu, e.g., were the Southern domestics happier than the Northern? were the more aggressive ones happier than the passive? Though she praises some books for their validity in representing social milieu, she praises others for complexity of character portrayal, a quality which makes her conclusions necessarily more ambiguous for a critic whose basic method requires that judgments be based on verisimilitude. Even when she selects specific characters and issues for concentrated analysis, Harris presents a balanced discussion of the novels as aesthetic entities.

In her assumption in her first book that black fiction possesses strong social value when it is specific to a time and place and is unswervingly realistic, Harris imposed some limitations upon herself that she avoided in her two later books: *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (1984) and *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (1985). Harris's expectation that black fiction must adhere to strict verisimilitude gives way after her first book of criticism to an extension of perspective that allows her to analyze works of art more fully and to discover less tangible traditional, psychological, and archetypal truths about the black experience as it is shaped aesthetically in the art of fiction. In the last two books she identifies real-life referents for the situations and characters in the novels less specifically, and she more often considers the novels on the basis of their implied truth about the black situation, which is communicated through symbolic or metaphorical extensions to the situations and characters presented in the fiction. Of particular interest in Harris's second book are her detailed analyses of the male character's fear of lynching or castration as parallel to the female's fear of rape. She thus calls attention to thematic parallels in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, though Wright overtly acknowledges the fears of his character and Morrison masks these fears. In her third book, instead of judging Baldwin's novels by the accuracy of their characterization of the religious black women, Harris shifts her focus and discusses society's influence on the mind and art of Baldwin as it affected his imagination and shaped his portrayal of female characters.

If one sees in Harris's books a gradual moving away from the tenets of Gibson regarding a strict verisimilitude, one discovers a far greater tendency among other black critics to praise a newer kind of black literature which makes no attempt to assimilate a recognizable social milieu. A considerable portion of black fiction

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in the last two decades is of a speculative nature and has moved radically away from realism into science fiction or to the utopian or dystopian genre. Some of these writers would seem to possess a serious political purpose in their writing on matters related both to race and sex. For example, Octavia Butler's novels clearly communicate a strong commitment to feminist concerns in her choice of black heroines of great strength, and she recognizes the enlargement of her vision by her attention to black history. But these concerns are incidental to the more speculative universe that predominates in her fiction. As the characters in her books move easily across centuries and across many lands where the scattered African blacks established their cultures in new geographic locations, the Black Diaspora gains significance for the popular reader, largely because the author is no longer bound by the restrictions imposed upon her by a strictly realistic method. In such speculative fiction, the black writer claims freedom to gain psychological distance or objectivity, to speculate, to ask leading questions about race and reorganization of society, to move at will in the realms of fantasy, and to articulate an apocalyptic vision.

Where, then, do Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, as fiction writers and critics, fit into this current situation—one where many traditional and politically oriented black critics still consider strictly realistic work as the only authentic "black" literature, but where more innovative critics are moving away from criteria similar to Gibson's to praise creations that depend on psychic fantasy, speculation, allegory, and symbolism?

The shift in Harris's movement from her preoccupation with strict verisimilitude in her first book of criticism toward a fuller concern with an enlarged concept of realism in the last two books—a concept that includes the value of metaphor, symbol, myth, legend, folklore, and superstition—parallels the progression one sees in the novels of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison and in Margaret Walker's successive revisions of her only novel. Alice Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, in its concentration on the dehumanization of the three generations of a family by share-cropper exploitation, alcohol, malnutrition, and domestic violence, almost exclusively details graphic realism—much of it seen through the eyes of isolated and deprived children. Toni Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye*, uses symbolically the Shirley Temple doll and the marigolds that cannot flourish; otherwise, it presents a straightforward realistic narrative through the

eyes of a child who cannot comprehend the tragedy she relates. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* was heavily weighted down with her conscientious inclusion of slave narratives heard from her grandmother as a child and by her exhaustive doctoral research into slave history and problems of the displaced blacks after the Civil War. As she successively produced later manuscripts of this novel over a period of some twenty years, she lessened historical detail but never removed symbolic and folklore elements, such as the owl's prophetic and mysterious foretelling of the death of Vyry's mother in the first chapter. She added the epigraphs that head the chapters and are taken mostly from folk songs and spirituals, and she allowed the novel to move more naturally into distortion, exaggeration, and sudden disproportions—as when the long-suffering Vyry finally throws kitchen pots and pans at her husband and when she suddenly tears off her dress to reveal simultaneously to the long-missing Randall Ware, father of two of her children, and to Innis Brown, her husband, the naked and badly scarred body that they supposedly have never seen because they could not acknowledge the horror of the disfiguring beating she suffered after she sought freedom as a young mother. In their later books, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison similarly shock the reader with dramatic changes in the perceptions of the point-of-view character. Morrison, for instance, shocks the reader with the sudden terror Milkman Dead experiences as he lies in apparent passivity with Hagar's knife at his throat and, again, as he is pursued in the forest by Guitar near the close of the novel. Walker masterfully changes the worlds her characters live in by altering their perceptions drastically at different points in the novels *Meridian* and *The Color Purple*. We see multiple "realities" as Meridian Hill, Truman Held, and Lynne Rabinowitz themselves change in the course of *Meridian*. In *The Color Purple*, as Celie moves out of her isolation through her kinship with Nettie and then gradually with Sophia, Shug, and Squeak and eventually with African tribes, her perception vastly widens. More dramatic are the sudden enlargements of her consciousness as a new reality strikes her. This is true, for example, when she discovers Nettie's letters, which Albert has hidden from her for years, and she almost loses control of her senses in her murderous intent; when she approaches euphoria as she becomes an entrepreneur expressing her creativity in the production of multi-colored pants of every conceivable design; and, again, when she celebrates with God the joyful reunion at the

close of the book. By the end of *The Color Purple* no reader worries about Walker's adherence to one particular realism, because what is real is the experience of Celie as she herself perceives reality. The basic reality that underlies the novel is Alice Walker's conviction that black people survive by growth through kinship (and eventually intimacy with all creation and people) and by the ability to change.

Because Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison all have moved in their careers from a relatively direct and reportorial presentation of the situation of blacks in their first fiction writing to a more imaginative and innovative treatment of the realities of black lives and black culture, they do not quite fit the criteria that Gibson and other critics propose for the development of serious social purpose through the realistic novel. On the other hand, they remain far removed from the black writers of contemporary science fiction. They might in their blending of various approaches to the realistic—including contrasting and blending it with occasional fantasy—be viewed in the company of such predecessors as Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Carson McCullers in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and even *Reflections in a Golden Eye*; Eudora Welty in much of her work; and Flannery O'Connor at points in several of her works of fiction. They may also be seen significantly in comparison with those already successful younger black writers whom they have influenced, particularly Gloria Naylor and Jamaica Kincaid.

Probably the most intriguing and significant of the critical statements made recently on realism by the writers discussed in this paper is the comment made by Toni Morrison in which she states that she achieves "blackness" of an authentic nature not in an entire work but only at moments in her work.¹¹ It is only achieved at those points, she believes, where she has momentarily reached a perfect balance between actual fact and the imaginary or improbable element, the point where the real seems strange and mysterious and the supernatural seems familiar and perfectly natural. She would imply that realism does not insure authenticity in black literature, and that such authenticity requires a blending of the real and the unreal with the skill that makes a reader acknowledge for the moment the validity of the heightened or embellished reality—much as the unconscious mind accepts the experience of the dream.

III

In speaking of black women's creativity, the four authors considered here describe creativity differently from one another, but all would seem to suggest strongly (or to state outright) that it may be a human capacity bestowed at birth or soon thereafter and given in abundance especially to blacks or to women or, most notably, to black women. All insist that, if unused, such capacity dies but may be passed on to one's descendents. In their view, however, one can easily speculate that creativity is a gift dependent upon gender or race and that it assumes unique form in a black woman artist. They all recognize, as well-educated women, the need for education and wide cultural experience; and they all deplore the limitations that society sometimes places on black children, and especially poor black children. But their discussions of creativity seldom focus on social protest against repressive and unfair educational policies. Nor do they discuss the subjects dealt with in developmental psychology studies intended to measure differences in creative endowment, to encourage creativity in the performing arts, or to define the varied stimuli that may nurture the imaginations of children. Unlike these studies, their speculation is imaginative rather than scientific and objective. They question and suggest that spiritual influences of an inexplicable nature may be resources fully accessible only to blacks and to women. These critics do not become involved in the specifics of bio-genetic determinism or of environmental influence.

When these women discuss creativity, they reveal a fascination with those who feel that they possess unexplainable or undefinable powers. These writers often comment on magic and mystery; they evince a belief in a "sixth sense"; some reveal a preoccupation with ancestral memory; and some even think that an African or Indian ancestor may, under favorable conditions, visit them. Some feel they can receive messages of whispered poetry or of ideas in dreams as they sleep or listen quietly at night to the whispering of an African goddess; and several feel they can keep in touch with a deep reservoir of universal and timeless ideas, images, and memories lying unformed and unorganized deep within the female psyche. (I have already mentioned Audre Lorde's writings developing this subject and its relationship to the belief that the writing and reading of poetry is essential to women's mental and emotional health and that it is related to an erotic principle.) Thus,

rather than apologizing for the stereotypical notion that blacks and women are in deep accord with the primitive and intuitive rather than with the rational, they celebrate the mysterious and ineffable forces that may exist in their psyches, and they imply that the writer (particularly the poet) may fortunately share with the black musician a sense of being possessed by "spirit" that inspires innovative and spontaneous expression.

In spite of this general willingness to "suspend disbelief," these women artists, who are also intellectuals, agree that art cannot be created effortlessly, without the engagement of the mind and the disciplined cultivation of specific skills. Creativity in the black woman—whether one thinks of the writer, the quilter, the gardener, or the cook—disappears if it is not sustained by disciplined imagination and by a conscious immersion in the realities of one's ethos and culture. Audre Lorde, in a dialogue with Adrienne Rich, defended her theory of women's ability to experience strong emotion which can be converted to significant poetry, but she also emphasized the role of thought and logic in artistic design and expression. She reiterated her distrust of rationality as such and of "circular, academic, analytic thinking"; but she also made clear that feeling and thinking are for her as artist complementary elements or processes, and she acknowledged that "Rationality is not unnecessary. . . . It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. . . ."12

Just as pointedly, Toni Morrison, in a 1971 *New York Times* review of three black anthologies, commented on the "deluge of writing" which blacks were then producing, having by that date extricated themselves from "obsession with whiteness."¹³ Morrison thought this flood had rushed forth from the emotions engendered by a "monumental struggle for psychic liberation" in the 1960s. She felt that the writing was symbolic of the release of blacks from constraints of convention to engage now in less prescribed forms of artistic expression. But she also indicated more soberly her hope that she would see develop "a process of becoming, a process of establishing criteria, and determining authenticity." For Morrison, then, the inspiration that frees the spirit to write must find its fruition in a frame established by processes of a rational sort and by valuing tradition in literature and history.

Margaret Walker, after her long struggle to complete her doctorate, in a speech before the National Urban League in New Orleans in July 1968, made one of the first critical statements by a

successful black writer to emphasize the superior value of spontaneity and innovation in black music and literature in comparison to a more conventionally organized and patterned sort of creativity. In doing so, she maintained that the innovative element is the one most characteristic of black creativity, and for her this element—soul or spirit—springs from the intuitive and emotional, and perhaps the subconscious, rather than from the intellect and the conscious mind. She asserted that this special sort of creativity does not operate to set the black people apart, but it constitutes their great or special gift to our civilization as a whole:

. . . we know that the essence of life is in the Spirit. . . . Call it soul if you wish, but it is our great gift and a part of our black heritage. We declare it worthy to offer on the altars of the world toward the enduring philosophy of a new and necessary humanism.

Our music and Art, our literature born out of our folkways and folk-beliefs are also part and parcel of this cultural gift and heritage. Like Religion, the Poetry of a People, their Art, Songs, and Literature, come from the deep recesses of the unconscious, the irrational, and the collective body of our ancestral memories.¹⁴

Margaret Walker has commented that she studied materialist philosophers for years before she renewed her own creativity by returning to the values found in folk culture, folk songs, myth, legend, mystical experience, and folk superstitions. In her more recent interview for Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers At Work*, she revealed her impatience with conventional culture, observing that she might be "a crazy, foolish, superstitious woman" who has "fooled with astrology for forty years."¹⁵ She now feels that writers are open to all kinds of spiritual impressions and influences that will determine the nature of their work, a view she develops in her not yet published book, *The Demonic Genius of Richard Wright*. She says of Wright, for example: "It's more than an idea of devils. It's the idea of creativity coming out of anger, madness, out of frustration, rage."

Margaret Walker and Audre Lorde share many conceptions about the essential feminine quality of black women's creativity. Walker said that she cannot conceive of a god who does not embody a female as well as a male principle. Audre Lorde, of

course, believes in the help she receives from the goddesses Mawa Lisa and Afrekete, who speak to her as she sleeps. Both women discover relationships between biorhythms and the continuous cyclical change that enlivens for them the world of nature, and both women interpret this correspondence between themselves and the cosmos as clear evidence of a feminine dynamic at the basis of the universe. Walker voices such an idea in a typical passage: "I think the cycle of life has much to do with the creative impulse and the biorhythms of life must certainly affect everything we do. Creativity cannot exist without the feminine principle."¹⁶

A major difference between Lorde and Margaret Walker lies in their theories on the relationship between spiritual creativity and suffering. For Margaret Walker, pain, especially that deriving from prejudice and injustice, diminishes the humanity of both the perpetrators and their victims. Therefore, hunger pangs, racism, and sexism, Walker says, destroy imagination, love, and intellect—especially in vulnerable school children. Lorde, on the other hand, asserts that experience of pain is essential for human growth, psychological maturity, and emotional sensitivity. Women, especially black women, she comments, not only possess a "sixth sense" or intuitive sensitivity but also a capacity for endurance gained through their personal experience and from their ancestral tradition. While she describes visitations from goddesses or the Black Mother as possible sources of inspiration for the black woman artist, she refers more often to the images of a vessel or a well, deep within the psyche, that holds—unsorted and confused—the treasures of ancestral memory, of the primordial emotions, and of the relentless urges to express these emotions, whatever the cost.

In a letter to Mary Daly, a white feminist and author of *Gyn/Ecology*, Lorde emphasizes the universality of the phenomenon of the presence of innate creativity among women. She clearly includes white feminists as well as black, as she writes to Daly about women's special psychic resources in such pertinent statements as these:

Each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling.

Mary, I ask that you remember what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself that aids your speaking.

The women's place of power within each of us . . . is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.¹⁷

Alice Walker's descriptions of the spiritual assistance that she herself received as a writer relate, in part, to her belief in a "vision of history" as essential to good creative writing. As Morrison speaks of the value of the ancestor figure in her fiction to provide for her a sense of the timeless and of the continuum of black culture, Alice Walker speaks of a more general ancestral memory that gives to her an increased sense of the reality of the past and even makes it possible for her to receive supernatural "good visitations" from the kind of "benevolent" ancestor of whom Morrison speaks. In Alice Walker's case, she speaks of visitations from her long-dead ancestors, some of whom she assumes to have been Cherokee Indians. When she wrote *Meridian*, she experienced such visitations from a Cherokee man who offered her help as she sought to develop an "Indian consciousness" to serve as a kind of sub-text to the novel.¹⁸ At that time, she says, she knew no Indian, other than this long-dead individual. Somewhat similarly, but much more comically, she tells a story of her difficulties in beginning *The Color Purple*. She makes many concessions to the characters as one by one they come to live in her household but are too stubborn to speak to her or to each other. The short essay, "Writing *The Color Purple*,"¹⁹ is in itself a fable that attests to Walker's belief in the necessary establishment of kinship and then of intimacy with those outside oneself as one becomes fully immersed in one's culture. Here she finds kinship even with imagined characters as they become her family for a year, and she establishes a wide sense of intimacy with a black culture in Africa through the letters she and Celie receive from Nettie.

If we are impressed at this point in literary history and in black history by the sense of imaginative and critical freedom and authority in the voices of these four women, we are also impressed by the urgency that characterizes their racial and literary commitment and their courage and endurance. Margaret Walker speaks of the "clash" between her ideals and the sordidness around her that "keeps me struggling on the battlefield." Audre Lorde speaks repeatedly of the terror a woman writer feels when she makes herself vulnerable by sharing her inmost thought and emotion, but she observes that when her cancer was discovered, she experienced less fear of death than a feeling of despair at

having left unsaid so much that lay hidden within her. Alice Walker speaks of her fear that blacks will die spiritually because their own culture and historical vision has been "amputated" from their lives. Toni Morrison says one who "bears a culture" suffers a "terrible" burden, but speaking of "authentic blackness" in literature and criticism, she told Mari Evans, "It is my struggle to *find* that elusive but identifiable style in the books. My joy is when I think that I have approached it." To our benefit, such unstinting search has sustained and nurtured all four of these distinguished writer-critics.

We see in their discussions of the mysterious nature and origin of creativity in black women writers a similarity in many respects to their movement toward greater use of resources such as wonder, mystery, and magic in their fiction and poetry, although their creative writing has remained predominantly realistic. Probably no single theory explains a writer's growing preoccupation with symbolism, archetype, and myth nor the willingness to speak publicly and seriously of primitive folk belief and predominantly intuitional sources for significant art. Andrew Lytle in "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process"²⁰ suggests that in times of radical and rapid social change the artists tend to merge observable fact with myth and archetype, signifying their need to return to sources of spiritual strength when previously accepted values weaken, when tradition and religious faith diminish in authority, and when religious rituals no longer move the hearts of a people. Symbolic images allow the writers and critics to gain psychological distance from their more immediate experience in a sophisticated society, to consider social relationships objectively, to pose probing questions, and to lead readers and other artists into capacious imaginative realms of discovery.

Lytle's comments may be pertinent to the growing inclusiveness revealed in the literature and criticism written by these four women. They do not turn away, *per se*, from the realistic portrayals of black culture and the intellectual analysis of it, and they remain preoccupied with the problems of black society. They, nevertheless, insist that the complexities of culture, language, race, sexuality, spirituality, politics, and literature, and the interrelationships of these problems be more fully recognized. They have revealed in their art and critical statements an appreciation of black music and folklore, and they have drawn impressively from world history, comparative religions, Biblical parables, Greek

tragedies, Cherokee philosophies, and African novels and poetry in their writing. In nurturing their creative spirit and their critical understanding, they have assimilated into the work virtually every possible range of their individual experience as contemporary blacks and as contemporary women. All identify themselves, to a degree, both as a "Sister Outsider" and as an individual "free on the mountain," and they richly illustrate in their work the complications and the reverberations of these conflicting but ultimately complementary impulses.

NOTES

¹Eudora Welty, "Working and Analyzing a Story," 1955, in *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Random House, 1970) 107.

²Margaret Walker, "On Being Female, Black, and Free" in Janet Sternberg, ed., *The Writer on Her Work* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 95, 100-101.

³*Black World* (January 1968): 23.

⁴Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984) is source of essays and letters cited. For other pertinent autobiographical material, see *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1962).

⁵Michael G. Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: the Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), ix-x, 157-76.

⁶Audrey T. McClusky, "A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Women Studies in Indiana* 8 (April 1984): 1-3.

⁷Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor As Foundation," in Mari Evans, *Black Women Writers, 1950-1980* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 344.

⁸Donald E. Gibson, *The Politics of Literary Experience* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 10-13.

⁹Mary Helen Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), xiii-xiv.

¹⁰Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984); *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1985).

¹¹Evans, 342.

¹²Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

¹³Toni Morrison, review of J. A. Williams and C. F. Harris, *Amistad II*; Joseph Okpaku, *New African Literature and the Arts*; and Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* in *New York Times* 28 February 1971.

¹⁴Margaret Walker, "Religion, Poetry, and History" in Floyd Barbour, *The Black Seventies* (Boston: Horizon, 1970), 290-291.

¹⁵Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 194.

¹⁶Sternberg, 96.

¹⁷Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

¹⁸Tate, 178-79.

¹⁹Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 355-360.

²⁰Andrew Lytle, "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process" in *The Hero With the Private Parts* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1966), 178-192.