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The Politics of Revision: The Third Women Writers Conference at the University of Kentucky

Ann Kilkelly Gavere and Sandra Y. Govan

The Third University of Kentucky Women Writers Conference, 2-4 April 1981, featured readings and writing workshops with Paule Marshall, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich, Ruth Whitman, Sherley Anne Williams, Mary Helen Washington, and a group of Appalachian women writers. The conference executive and advisory committees were made up of faculty, staff and students from various departments, and women from the community. Dr. Linda Pannill of the University of Kentucky Department of English chairs the conference committees and is the creator and director of the series.

According to feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich, writing, for women, is re-vision:

Re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from new directions, is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves.¹

Events like the annual Women Writers Conference at the University of Kentucky provide a forum for such re-vision by looking back at the cultural and literary past, at its assumptions and silences, and by looking forward to the creation of context and community within which women writers and scholars can survive and flourish. The implied contract of such meetings, according to Rich, "is really a pledge of mutual seriousness about women, about language, ideas, methods and values. It is our shared commitment toward a world in which the inborn potentialities of so many women's minds will no longer be wasted, raveled away, paralyzed, or denied."²

Looking back at women's history and literature, "entering an old text from a new direction," is to discover silence. Tillie Olson, fiction writer and essayist who read at the 1979-80 conference, claims in fact that every woman who writes is a survivor; and her book *Silences* testifies to the void that uncomfortably surrounds the female past and demands revision. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* argues similarly, posing a silent sister to Shakespeare, tracing the hypothetical emergence and later dispersion and suppression of her talents. Denied identities outside the definitions of the dominant male culture, women have had little "room," no space, few visible means to grow intellectually, to be writers and thinkers in a culturally validated way. Rich writes, "the entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over."³

The concern for speaking into that silence, of uncovering the assumptions and omissions that made it possible, is the heart of feminist writing. Gatherings of women talking about this past, about the double concerns of women and writers, of women-writers, begin to probe the possibilities of voice, of what Susan Griffin has called "the roaring inside her."⁴ The 1981 Women Writers Conference provided in a number of ways the re-vision Rich calls for, stressing the problems facing women scholars and writers, stressing even more the possibilities of new contexts and visions in which all women can work and flourish.

One form of such revision is the literal reexamination or reimagination of historical figures. Poet Ruth Whitman's book *Tamsen Donner* and the title poem from *The Passion of Lizzie Borden* imaginatively recreate the lives of two women involved in two well-mythologized, even notorious incidents from the American past. In each case, Whitman delicately fashions the quiet passion and pressure each woman faced and about which history has been relatively silent.

Literature and cultural history have given us a sensational bloodbath of a life for Lizzie Borden. The brutal and ultimately inexplicable events of her parents' murders have far overshadowed, in the movie, television, and journalistic treatments of them, the woman herself. Borden was acquitted by the jury, but appears guilty, or about to be guilty, in Whitman's version. Judgment of guilt or innocence, however, which has been at the center of popular interest, is not the focal point for the poet here, who shows us a woman who might have been painfully and horrifyingly

complex, and much more a victim herself than a victimizer. Whitman confounds judgment in a sequence of portraits of the sterility and repression at the center of Borden's small town life. She finds the turmoil and incipient violence of sexual repression:

The house has killed the girl she was.
Narrow, gray, grudging in windows,
bare of guests or laughing,

the parlor's only pleasure is to lay out
corpses or tell tales of each new
disease, step by fatal step.

What holds her there, eating pears?⁵

In the claustrophobic life of Fall River, Massachusetts, Lizzie's "sprung and spiralled wrath/won't uncoil till she's invented death." Which, "feeling hallelujah in [her] hips," she does. The last line, "she raises the ax," leaves the poem at a pitch of tension. In this context, the murders are perpetually about to occur, for Whitman leaves the reader inside Borden's pre-murder state. Here, guilt or innocence does not matter, as any such interpretation would close the event too simply. Through the empathetic seeing into Borden's consciousness, through the poem's insistence on complexity, there emerges a probing of society's responsibility for that event. Therefore the poem, rather than providing the answer to legal or moral questions, raises other and deeper questions: who is victim, who victimizer? How does one measure guilt, measure the horror of a life of a thirty-three year old school mistress who ate pears the day of the murder? How does such a life twist in rage and frustration on itself? On others? It is Whitman's vision of the woman's complexity, of the trapped and raging life inside her, that revises the event and shocks the reader out of a normal closed complacency.

Tamsen Donner re-creates the imaginative life of the wife of George Donner, head of the famous doomed westward expedition. After a string of disasters, numbers of the Donner party succumbed to death and others to cannibalism. That desperate partaking of human flesh has, of course, been the central fact around which the incident has been viewed. As with Lizzie Borden's story, generalization and interpretation have covered, blurred, and

probably distorted the little evidence left of the specific humans who took that journey. Whitman reenacted the cross-country trip, traveling the Donner path and recording her own impressions of it. Since Tamsen Donner's journal was lost, and all that remains about her is a few letters, the poet reconstructed the woman's journal imaginatively. The result is the volume of poems, a perfect fusion of Whitman's journalistic record of Tamsen Donner and the poet's own felt experiences. This blend gives the book its particular quality. The voice is a shifting valance informed by a presence that is historical and detached while at the same time womanly and deeply personal. In this poem of whole cloth, Whitman literally traces the Donners' path to California and figuratively etches the process by which one woman, perhaps all women, strip down to essentials. The quiet suffering and lyrical grace of Tamsen Donner's words revise a historical view that has given little attention to the delicate weavings of a woman's life. Again, Whitman's complex seeing gently mocks and bloodlessly violates the sensational nightmare incidents that have been passed down to memory.

On the Continental Divide, the poet/narrator sees the land mirroring itself, the self mirroring the land, the self mirroring the self. The land, her aspirations, stretch exactly before and behind, "an end and a beginning:"

But no love is so final merely
having traced ourselves back to our
Atlantic beginnings
we change from source to source
.....
now hesitant among the mountains
we pass across the invisible boundary
that divides self from self
and move forward heartlong towards the other sea
a twin
a mirror of ourselves⁶

The narrator appropriately sees the geographical landscape as a metaphor for the self in a state of transformation. The crossing, for the Donner party, was the beginning of the downward progress into darkness and privation that marked the last half of its journey. For Tamsen Donner, the "heartlong" movement was a stripping away of their former "civilized" life, their safety, their held images

of themselves, and, finally, of each other. For the poet, the fusion of historical and personal record represents the passing of boundaries between poet and narrator, self and self's creation, perceiver and perceived, between history and present moment.

Whitman's poems, although unrhetorical, concrete and unpolemical, nonetheless undertake a precise and detailed kind of revision, one that reminds us how easily the textured complexity of past event becomes closed story. In keeping such lives as Lizzie Borden's and Tamsen Donner's open, Whitman shows us that multiple vision is not only possible but necessary. Thus the common singleness of interpretation that has done women and other minority groups so much damage is subtly, quietly challenged.

Ethnic women writers deem it even more crucial to revise the past and force a coherent truth from a patriarchal system which has heretofore jeopardized them by virtue of sex and race. While dealing with the same fundamental issues as Whitman, the three black women writers at the 1981 conference, Mary Helen Washington, Sherley Anne Williams, and Paule Marshall, took up re-vision along a broader cultural and political spectrum.

Mary Helen Washington's lecture on Gwendolyn Brooks as novelist, "Plain, Black, and Decently Wild: The Heroic Possibilities of Maud Martha," and the panel presentation which followed, made obvious the possibilities for criticism inherent in revision. The reexamination of cultural assumptions and the re-creation of history—literary and social—are salient touchstones for Washington. A scholar and the editor of two essential texts incorporating classic and contemporary stories of and about black women, Washington is also an acknowledged feminist critic.⁷ Her credentials as a critic allowed her to ask crucial questions of both the Afro-American literary canon and its proponents and the white feminist scholarly community which too frequently has excluded black women from its discussions of feminist theory.

The questions Washington posed underscore the necessity for revision and redefinition, for a closer look at the assumptions which undergird literary politics. Addressing the sexism in the Afro-American literary canon, Washington asked: "Whose history is literary history? How did black women, equal sharers in the labor and strife of black people, get lost in their literary history? Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist, always represented, or nearly always represented as a

black man? How did the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?"⁸ Clearly, the intent of the questions is to confront the issues of willful omission, willful neglect, and willful distortion of the roles assumed by black women and to contest the diminished status accorded them by literary historians and critics, white and black.

The undervaluation given important texts bridging the Afro-American and feminist literary traditions is, in Washington's view, neither "accidental nor coincidental." Books like Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy*, Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, or Gwendolyn Brook's matchless *Maud Martha* revolve around the sensibilities of a black female protagonist and her quests for identity, success, fulfillment. That they have been ignored, Washington posits, is a result of "the repression and inhibition of the black woman's voice by a tradition that is psychologically, metaphorically, culturally, and institutionally male." The male hegemony in Afro-American letters dictates reassessment and restructuring to establish a more gender conscious base. The present critical context is too narrowly focused; it disinherits black women because it is unfamiliar with, or perhaps refuses to acknowledge, the expression of experiences, strivings, symbology, artistry, and articulation of needs and goals in forms different from those of men.

In traditional literary historiography black women have been victimized by sexism and racism operating in tandem. Ironically, in the gender conscious white feminist community, black women are jeopardized by a latent racism. Admitting her distaste for a "segregated" criticism, Washington nevertheless concedes that a racial dichotomy exists within the feminist community. "Some of the most important feminist theorists have left black women out of [their] discussion and so we have a lot of feminist theory where we are presented as 'the other' or sometimes ignored totally." Denying the black woman by ignoring her life, her deeds, her perceptions and the validity of her experiences, compounds the ethical problems in the development of a heralded new criticism geared toward addressing silences and filling voids left by other critical approaches.

Washington suggests that there needs to be a "critical dialog" between white and black women. Such a dialog could foster a more

balanced feminist vision and prompt a reexamination of assumptions which, unchecked, perpetuate the racist/sexist status quo. But such a dialog presents its difficulties.

For instance, it is given that black and white women writers may approach a common subject matter, women's lives, from different perspectives. These perspectives are perhaps informed by cultural identification, cultural bonding. Tracing and re-creating an imaginary yet tangible life for Tamsen Donner is central to a Ruth Whitman. Resurrecting and salvaging the reputation and the works of Zora Neale Hurston is central for an Alice Walker. In the creation of characters, in the attitudes revealed in fiction or poetry, in the emphasis which shapes a prose piece, there are going to be "substantial differences between white and black women writers" because each is moving from a perspective appropriate to the material. Few would dispute the creative writer's right to claim and mine her own artistic territory. However, when the subject matter shifts to feminist *theory*, to critical constants using a feminist framework, the problem of meaningful dialog becomes more acute. There is little reciprocity between white feminists and those of color. Washington indicated that while white feminist theoreticians like Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen have been "essential" to her thinking, in general, white feminists have ignored the commentary of black feminists. The influence must be reciprocal. White feminists should find the critical perceptions of Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Sherley Ann Williams likewise "essential" to their thought, if feminist criticism, feminist theory, is seriously committed to revision. As Washington concluded, total separation of critical exchange is not valuable for blacks or whites.

Paule Marshall and Sherley Anne Williams, co-panelists with Washington, each a creative writer and a literary critic, also addressed themselves to the issue of revision, specifically focusing on an Afro-centric criticism, a separate black feminist criticism and a unified feminist criticism. Marshall observed that the dichotomy in the scholarly feminist community was but a reflection of the racism persistent in American culture.

"America is," says Marshall, "an essentially racist society, where there are, whether we want to admit it or not, two cultures, two peoples existing within this republic." Racism has impinged on the artistic and the critical community, affecting the ability of those communities to render honest judgments or, in some instances, to approach works from a different tradition without overt bias.

Marshall, therefore, felt a separate black critical canon, conscious of both racism and sexism, is required. Black and white women writers may well meet at intersecting points, illustrating common strivings that many women share, but what is still necessary for black writers is a receptive critical forum. Marshall asserts that given a society which "in its head, its acts, its deeds is separate and divided," the need for young black critics who can "look at our work without the standard bias" is essential. On this point Marshall is adamant. "Let us develop our own black critics, our own criticism, our own literary history. We do desperately need young black critics who will look at the writings of black women writers with a kind of objectivity and scholarship that the writing deserves."

Sherley Anne Williams responded to the issue of a separate black feminist criticism pragmatically. Agreeing with Washington that dialog between black and white feminist critics should develop, she proposed a distinct functional role for the Afro-American feminist. In her view, the black feminist should be the mediator between feminist theory and the community of Afro-American women. That community can then rely on the black feminist to point out the flaws and omissions in general feminist commentary or to point to the places of convergence. A more crucial function which the black woman critic must assume is that of interpreter for black women writers. Williams explained this conception in concrete terms:

There are certain patterns, certain nuances of experience, of living that are, because we do as Paule [Marshall] says live in two separate cultures to a large extent, just unavailable to other people outside of that experience. And, if we don't have the people that know the experience both as a kind of lived thing and also as an intellectual experience, then those nuances are always going to be missing from the criticism and therefore missing from the tradition.

Williams noted that while Washington's model of the "self-invented woman" is a healthy idea for seeing one's self anew, she also felt that "you don't want to keep continually reinventing yourself." The black feminist critic, in partnership with the black woman writer, assists in the process of invention and definition. Once the definition is established, the critic and the writer assume the responsibility of assuring the integrity of the definition. Stereotypic

images of black women have been laid to rest, unmourned; images of multi-dimensional women, some reclaimed from past works, some new, are being sculpted in their place by writers and critics alike.

The difficulties to surmount if new critical assumptions are to be installed are obvious. The quiescent racism embedded in the feminist community must be acknowledged and expelled; the subtle misogyny present in the Afro-American literary canon must be acknowledged and then excised. Revision is an even more pressing overt, definitive, political act for the black or ethnic woman writer than for the white. Art, race, and sexual politics clash in more than one arena. The echoes of that clash reverberate in literary criticism and in the literature itself. Politics, on all levels, suffuses Afro-American life and writing.

It is precisely this kind of politically-informed gender consciousness that led Williams to the following observation. In too many writings by black men, with the exception of some early works from older writers like James Baldwin or John A. Williams, black women are most notable by their absence. When present, they appear as derogatory stereotypic images—the domineering woman, the castrating bitch. Williams saw the tradition as flawed by “an absence about men and women in relationships.” In the literature, she argues, there are “men in contests with the white world, trying to wrest their masculinity from it; and now [there are] women in contests with various kinds of things, trying to wrest some positive self-definition for themselves out of these confrontations.” Williams noted the rarity with which Afro-American fiction or poetry reflects black men and women “in any kind of relationship, any effort at working through what are in fact mutual problems.”

In arguing that the literature must mirror and reflect representational relationships, Williams fingered the knot of a paradox. Noting the absence of viable relationships and stipulating that “one of the major things any art does is to reflect what is there to be reflected,” Williams arrived at a conclusion which does more than indict a literary tradition—it links the literature to a crucial conflict within the Afro-American community as a whole. The omission of viable relationships, Williams contends, “stands at the center of those traditions and at the center of our lived experience.”

For Williams then, revising the literary tradition would by extension include revision of the social contract between black men

and women. Two of her stories, "Tell Martha Not to Moan" and "Meditations on History," are examples of how she chooses to exercise regenerative power. Each story depicts a healthy relationship between a woman and a man which is enduring and honest despite the destructive capacity of the surrounding environment. And in each, the female protagonist articulates her point of view, by statement or action, from the core of her experiences. Those experiences are saturated with a sense of what it is to be black and woman in white America.

Paule Marshall's novels, particularly her *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and her forthcoming *Praise Song for the Widow* are also in contrast to the trend of omitting black women. *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* depicts a marital relationship, a family relationship, and a community relationship. At the center of the work stands Selina Boyce, youngest daughter of West Indian immigrants, Deighton and Silla Boyce. Thought at first to be her father's child because as a youngster she empathizes with his unfulfilled dreams, Selina matures and develops into a daughter more truly the child of her mother, a woman of resolve and determination in a demonstrably hostile environment. Eventually, Selina emerges as her own woman, dealing with the world she must live in. Through the novel's richness, Marshall details a complicated interwoven set of relationships. Whatever marital problems Deighton and Silla Boyce have, their interaction as a couple is rooted in authenticity. Each is representative of the men and women who find themselves constantly contending with what Williams termed a "mutual problem," how to see the world, how to wrest satisfaction from it. Whatever their flaws or strengths, the Boyces are fully rendered characters rather than caricatures of male/female antagonism.

The insistence of creative writers like Alice Walker or Williams and Marshall that fully fleshed women and men are central to their works still cannot redress the lack of viable images of black women in the literature. Mary Helen Washington attacked the problem of "absence," of inadequate portrayal and of insufficient readings of existing portrayals at a highly vulnerable point, the critical tradition. Her lecture, "Plain, Black, and Decently Wild," analyzed both the heroism of Gwendolyn Brooks's ordinary woman, Maud Martha, and the male critic's difficulty in perceiving a woman like Maud as heroic. An inherent part of the problem is embedded in language. A female protagonist on a quest, a woman who voices her search for her own power is considered "feminine." Washington

argues that such a character is "conceived of as 'heroine' in the restricted sense of being a model only for women, not the universal hero." And yet, Maud Martha is an heroic character. She victoriously wrestles with the conviction of an entire society that because she is dark and without long hair she is of no value. She rebels against the accepted cultural norms that marriage is fulfillment or that children are the ultimate satisfaction. She confronts everyday racism and conquers it with the armor of her everyday sense of her own humanity.

Another dimension of the problem confronting the critical tradition, apart from the ingrained language bias, is a refusal to see that failure to recognize the heroic voices of black women in conjunction with those of black men plays havoc not only with literary criticism but with the actual historical record. Black men *and* women rode underground railroads. Black men *and* women were abolitionists. Black men *and* women went North and West with each succeeding migration of black people out of the South. Black men *and* women confronted racism, sexism, economic and psychological assault on the job and in the streets. Black people adopted survival strategies.

Washington's presentation, using the critical treatment accorded *Maud Martha* as the focal point, broke a long unhealthy silence. The questions she addressed to the shapers of the Afro-American literary canon and those she and her co-panelists directed to the feminist community were questions critical of past assumptions, questions which in essence challenged integrity, and questions which demand a response. By exclusion from literary historiography and feminist historiography, the voices of black women were almost lost. This kind of silence can no longer be tolerated by the writers, readers and critics who expect to shape a new context for women and writers and their respective communities.

Such new contexts may move writers towards Rich's "dream of a common language."⁹ To discover and uncover commonality is the labor demanded of all women who would understand the past to know themselves. Marge Piercy's passionate reading of a poem about abortion during this year's conference brought the necessity for consciousness and action to a focal point. Reacting to a loudly responsive audience, Piercy insisted, "If you feel that way, do something about it!" Adrienne Rich, during her reading, enjoined the women present to "Read. Read everything." Emerging



Writers at the Third Women Writers Conference. From left to right: Sherley Anne Williams, Paule Marshall, Mary Helen Washington, Adrienne Rich. U.K. Photographic Services.

powerfully from all the information shared and turned over at the April Conference was the call to fuse art and politics, to *know* and identify the culture one writes from and to be adamant in reclaiming the past and the present.

The fusion of art and politics eschews American culture's traditional separation of public and "objective" from private and "subjective," and is a form of re-vision that creates new contexts from new assumptions. This form of re-vision marks Marge Piercy's fiction and poetry. Piercy's most recent novel, *Vida*, is the story of a fugitive, a woman serving a radical political cause, who is hunted as a subversive. She works with an underground system which struggles perpetually to undermine the white, conservative, sexist/racist world's hold on power. The metaphor of the fugitive powerfully concentrates the larger sense of woman who has always been outside history, makes concrete her role as the underground, unseen and silent manipulator. *Vida* has given up all the accoutrements of "normal" life. Cut off from her husband, her family, her natural landscape, her name (she is called "Peregrine" on the inside), even her own body (she must dye her beautiful red

hair black), she has revised her own being, reinvented herself in order to survive and change a world whose very nature threatens her being.

Piercy's other novels also present women who are fugitives from the world and themselves. *Small Changes* describes the growth towards defined self of a young woman who is driven out of a conventional and brutalizing marriage. *The High Cost of Living* centers on a young woman isolated by her profession and her lesbianism. *Woman on the Edge of Time* alternates a science-fiction utopian fantasy world with the brutally limited present wherein Consuelo, the main character, is confined. In each novel, Piercy sees woman as fugitive, outlaw, separated from her world and from growth inside it by that which truly constitutes her strength—her womanhood. All characters search for relationships and the seemingly simple power of exercising their own being. In the novels, no cheerful view of such a possibility is offered, but movement forward is sometimes possible, often through the community and support network provided by other women. As a writer, Piercy recognizes, and her central metaphor of the fugitive testifies to the fact, that the individual who is forced outside, black or white, male or female, *must* live politically. That is the present.

Piercy's poetry, however, constantly envisions the possibility of "Living in the Open," the title of one of her volumes. The future holds "No more trade-ins or betrayals, only the slow accretion of community, hand on hand."¹⁰ Such community, the context all these women writers want to create, seems a simple thing: cultural and literary validation giving women a claim to their own voices:

To try to tell what you feel and want
till sometimes you can even see
each other clear and strange
as a photograph of your hand.¹¹

Re-vision retrieves memory lost to single-minded interpretation, poses alternate assumptions about history and literature, means seeing and seeing again, moving toward an assertion of values in which each individual has voice.

Such aims are large, perhaps unrealistic. But conferences where women meet and share ideas with each other and with the larger university community, bring in their very format multiple vision and possibility.

NOTES

¹Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), p. 46.

²Rich, p. 67.

³Rich, p. 44.

⁴Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

⁵Ruth Whitman, *The Passion of Lizzie Borden: New and Selected Poems* (New York: October House, 1973), p. 14. Whitman's title poem opens with remarks from Borden's inquest testimony (Fall River, Massachusetts, 1892). Miss Borden testified that on the day of her parents' murders she stood in the hottest part of the barn eating pears, a kind of horror that Whitman and earlier writers found bizarre and fascinating.

⁶Ruth Whitman, *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Alice James Books, 1977), p. 37.

⁷See Mary Helen Washington's *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories By and About Black Women* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1975) and *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1980).

⁸This and all subsequent quoted commentary from Mary Helen Washington, Paule Marshall, and Sherley Anne Williams is taken from remarks during Washington's lecture, "Plain, Black, and Decently Wild: The Heroic Possibilities of Maude Martha," and the panel discussion which followed. Women Writers Conference, University of Kentucky, April 1981.

⁹Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

¹⁰Marge Piercy, *Living In The Open* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 48.

¹¹Piercy, p. 46.