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**Can the Imperialist Read? Race and Feminist Literary Theory**

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## Summary

Since the mid 1980's it has been unthinkable for white feminist literary critics to neglect race in their theoretical work. Strong challenges from black feminists have been effective in placing race high on the critical agenda. No longer is the kind of exclusivity that marked early (white) feminist literary theory possible. However, despite the evident commitment to addressing the race question in their work, the black feminist challenge has been greeted with a considerable degree of anxiety by white feminist critics. I suggest that the main source of anxiety is a failure to square the pressing need to 'include' race on the feminist agenda with doubts about straying into what is perceived to be black feminist territory. In other words, white feminist critics have yet to resolve their relation to the black feminist project. This anxiety has meant that a concern over the notion of exclusion has given way to that of appropriation. This has tended to place the white feminist reader in the paralysing position where there seems little available ground between the twin poles of exclusion and appropriation. Typical questions that have arisen out of this dichotomy are: should white feminists teach black women's writing? Should white feminist critics produce critical readings of texts authored by black women? Can white women readers read black women's writings without imposing onto them their own critical agendas? Is a non-appropriative reading relation possible? How should white feminists deal with the fact of their own race privilege and what bearing does this privilege have upon the readings they, potentially, might produce?

This project examines some of the ways in which white feminists have attempted to address their relation to the race question in feminist literary criticism. Over the space of six chapters I focus on a number of specific reading strategies offered as positive critical interventions. My main contention is the impossibility of a guaranteed anti-imperialist theory or reading position. I also argue for the necessity of asking the question: whether the imperialist can read, as a complement to that of whether 'the subaltern can speak'. Chapter 1 questions the white feminist ambition of arriving at the truth of the black text as a means of decolonising the text. Through an examination of the Rodney King events some of the perils of appeals to pure seeing are highlighted. Chapter 2 explores the implications of white feminist abstention from the race debates. Chapter 3 looks at the issue of identification as a basis for reading. Chapter 4 questions the identifications that inhere in applying theory to a text. Chapter 5 challenges the use of contextualisation as a source of textual limits. Chapter 6 examines the limits of self-reflexivity as an anti-imperialist method.

## Introduction: 'How to Own Your Own Body and Love Somebody Else'

In an interview with Salman Rushdie Toni Morrison identified the following question as crucial to an understanding of the acts of violence perpetrated against the beloved in both *Beloved* and *Jazz*<sup>1</sup>: 'How to own your own body and love somebody else.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, Morrison is interested as a writer in the question of agency in the light of a life lived 'under historical duress'; in how one, in the aftermath of slavery and reconstruction, 'inhabits the flesh that now is yours.' In the novels, the love of both Sethe for her daughter and Joe Trace for Dorcas is devastating and results in death. Each kills the beloved. Sethe to, paradoxically, protect her 'best thing'(p. 272), to prevent her from entering slavery; Joe Trace to 'keep the feeling going' (p. 3). In addition to constituting an important theme of the work,<sup>3</sup> the phrase ('How to own your own body and love somebody else'), I would argue, is suggestive as a way of thinking about the critical relation between reader and text

If criticism can be defined as an act of love<sup>4</sup> the question of reading becomes one of how to read without either surrendering the reading self to the other text, losing oneself in the specificity of another's discourse<sup>5</sup> (as does Sethe in her pathological relation with *Beloved* in the latter stages of the novel. 'The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became', p. 250) or else killing the text, freezing it in a theoretical relation, rendering it the screen for one's own projected critical desires. As a client of Violet Trace puts it 'Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time' (*Jazz*, p. 15).

But up there on Lenox, in Violet and Joe Trace's apartment, the rooms are like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. And a dead girl's face has become a necessary thing for their nights. They each take turns to throw off the bedcovers, rise up from the sagging mattress and tiptoe over cold linoleum into the parlour to gaze at what seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold unsmiling girl staring from the mantelpiece. If the tiptoer is Joe Trace, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the

face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from his sleep hungry for her company. No finger points. Her lips don't turn down in judgement. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tiptoeer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail face of someone who picks up things lying on other people's dressers and is not embarrassed when found out. It is the face of a sneak who glides over to your sink to rinse the fork you have laid by her plate. An inward face - whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, because I am looking at you. (*Jazz*, p.12).

The frozen image of the dead girl is available for the meanings each looker projects onto it. Likewise the literary text is potentially receptive to the projected meanings of the critic.

This question of reading or the relation of reader to text has acquired a certain degree of urgency within the field of feminist criticism over the last ten or so years. Following challenges in the early 80's by black feminists it has become increasingly necessary for white feminist critics to address what has been termed the 'race question'<sup>6</sup> in their theoretical work. As Deborah McDowell points out, often it has been the case that feminist criticism '...perpetrated against the Black woman writer the same exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars.'<sup>7</sup> However, while the current feminist consensus is that the kinds of Eurocentric omissions found in 'early' attempts to construct a feminist canon are entirely, to quote one critic, 'unforgivable'<sup>8</sup>, the black feminist challenge has been greeted with a considerable degree of anxiety by white feminist theorists. The prime source of this anxiety being, on the one hand, the pressing need to 'include' race on the feminist agenda and on the other, doubts about straying into what is perceived to be black feminist territory. In other words, a concern over the notion of exclusion has given way to that of appropriation. What is more, the concern over the possibility of appropriation, or colonialism, or imperialism, to use some of a number of codewords,

has tended to result in the paralysing position where there is little available ground between what are seen as the twin poles of exclusion and appropriation. Typical questions that have arisen out of this dichotomy are; should white feminists teach black women's writing? Should white feminist critics produce critical readings of texts authored by black women? Can white women readers read black women's writings without imposing onto them their own critical agendas? Is a non-appropriative reading relation possible? How should white feminists deal with the fact of their own race privilege and what bearing does this privilege have upon the readings they, potentially, might produce? In short, how to own your own body and love somebody else.

This project takes as its main concern the relation between the white feminist reader and the black or race-different woman's text. This was not my original focus. Rather I set out to examine black women's testimonial writing in the context of the debates around the status of postmodernism in feminist literary criticism. As my research progressed it became increasingly clear that my own relation to the texts, as a white feminist reader, could not be assumed. As there was more than a degree of self-consciousness apparent in white-authored feminist criticism of 'black' texts it was inescapable that I would examine my own position. As I progressed in my self-examination it became more and more clear that I was entering profoundly complex territory. What began as a part of my introduction expanded into a thesis. In his entertaining collection of essays psychoanalyst Adam Phillips contends that obstacles, barriers to comprehension, should be treated 'as the way rather than as something in the way.'<sup>9</sup> With this insight what began as an exercise in critical hurdling turned into a sustained examination of the nature of the problems themselves. The barriers became in themselves interesting.

### **Outside the Frame: White Feminists and Black Feminist Criticism**

In her poem 'Frame'<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich depicts a scene that resonates with the current scene of feminist criticism. The narrative of the poem concerns a black woman who,

waiting for a bus, decides to shelter from the wind in a newly constructed part of the university she attends to study organic chemistry. She is apprehended by a white security guard who telling her to move on refuses her explanation for why she is there. He returns with a white police officer.

. . . Then she starts  
to leave into the windraked night but already  
the policeman is going to work, the handcuffs are on her  
wrists he is throwing her down his knee has gone into  
her breast he is dragging her down the stairs

Intermittent in the poem is the voice of the narrator, who, whilst trying to witness the violence of the scene that unfolds before her, is nonetheless compromised by her position outside the frame.

*I don't know her. I am  
standing though somewhere just outside the frame  
of all this, trying to see*

The poem problematises the position of the white woman as witness: while she is watching the scene she is also outside of it.

*I am unable  
to hear a sound of all this all that I know is what  
I can see from this position there is no soundtrack  
to go with this and I understand at once  
it is meant to be in silence that this happens*

The Other woman is silenced by the racist male authority figures who construe her as 'trouble', as trespasser. And yet, even as the narrator attempts to amplify the voice of the black woman, she remains spoken for, silent. The separation between the two women is manifest.

in silence that he pushes her into the car  
banging her head in silence that she cries out  
in silence that she tries to explain she was only

waiting for a bus

[. . .]

in silence that in the precinct she refuses to give her name

in silence that they throw her into the cell

in silence that she stares at him

straight in the face in silence that she sinks her teeth

into his hand in silence that she is charged

with trespass assault and battery in

silence that at the sleet-swept corner her bus

passes without stopping and goes on

in silence.

Despite the intensity and insistence of the witnessing voice the omniscient narrator cannot connect with the subject of the poem. The sense of separation, of the division between the women is palpable. The poem thus enacts the failure of the frame to render the Other woman articulate. The objective view cannot allow the subaltern to speak.

Just as the narrator appears to be witnessing the scene from behind glass so the position of the white feminist critic often appears to be one of profound separation from the text she is trying to read. In many ways this division is a manifestation of the anxiety among white feminist critics about their relation to the project of black feminist criticism.

How can I read Toni Morrison's or Alice Walker's or Buchi Emecheta's work without encroaching upon black feminist critical terrain, the argument goes? How can I take on board the black feminist challenge without appropriating black feminist space? The white feminist critic it seems is 'just outside the frame', staring through the glass of black feminist criticism.

There has been some debate as to whether white feminists can participate in black feminist critique ranging from positions such as bell hooks' which question the

value of white feminist interpretation of black writing<sup>11</sup> to Valerie Smith's which questions the potential essentialism of a separatist black feminism:

It is not my intention to reclaim the black feminist project from those who are not black women; to do so would be to define the field too narrowly, emphasising unduly the implications of a shared experience between "black women as critics and black women's reality." Indeed, as the following remarks indicate, I understand the phrase black feminist theory to refer not only to theory written (or practiced) by black feminists, but also to a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class in modes of cultural expression<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of a 'welcome'<sup>13</sup> contribution to the project of black feminism on the part of white feminist critics is thus far undecided. That some white feminists have experienced this critical situation as a dichotomy (how to 'include' race on the agenda at the same time as respecting black feminist enterprise) is more an indication of a flaw in their thinking than of black feminist ambivalence. As will become clear throughout this study, this thinking is founded upon the mistaken view that conflates the so-called race question with black feminist theory and criticism; that in order to talk about race you have to 'do' black feminist criticism. This in turn is premised on the belief that race pertains solely to 'blackness' and that white is not a raced category. What escapes the formulation race work = black feminist criticism is the idea that white constitutes a raced identity and to engage in critical work on the subject of race is not necessarily to appropriate black feminist space. Put differently, white feminist participation in race work is not conditional upon gaining entry to the 'enclosure' of black feminist criticism<sup>14</sup>. So-called feminist criticism (i.e. feminist criticism supposedly without race) is always already raced whether this is acknowledged or not; the absence of any mention of race in white-authored criticism does not mean that it is somehow free of racial inflection and influence.

Similarly flawed is the construal of the white feminist task as, necessarily and singularly, one of 'including' texts by black women as a means of addressing the black feminist challenge. While it is the case that white feminist practice was often exclusionary and neglectful of black writing it is short sighted to imagine the answer as one of merely adding those excluded works back in to the already constituted feminist canon. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar have commented:

In arguing that most contemporary feminist theory does not begin to adequately account for the experience of Black women we have to acknowledge that it is not a simple question of their absence, consequently the task is not one of rendering their visibility.<sup>15</sup>

The excessive interest in the racially Other woman produced by an 'inclusion' approach to the race question is profoundly limited as a way forward in that it perpetuates both the neglect of whiteness as a racial designation and the construction of the black or race-different text in a permanent relation of otherness to the white feminist reader.<sup>16</sup> If not accompanied by a critique of the social construction of whiteness the pursuit <sup>of</sup> the race-different text or woman in terms of understanding (the two are sometimes conflated) serves mostly to consolidate the white feminist self: 'the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow'<sup>17</sup> White feminist thinking about race necessitates some theoretical consciousness regarding the way in which any knowledge of the Other is framed.

### **Can the Imperialist Read?**

It is with this in mind that the critical attention of some white feminists, recently, has switched to the reading self. Elizabeth Abel, for example, interrogates specific reading strategies as a contribution to the task of discerning 'the politics and potential of white feminists' critical intervention'<sup>18</sup> in the race and reading debate, while Minrose C. Gwin investigates the possibility of a particular reading relation or theory for the white feminist reader of the black woman's text.<sup>19</sup> The question of whether the subaltern can speak is considered alongside that of whether the imperialist can



read, as it were. This turn to critical framings and theoretical methods is one recommended by Henry Louis Gates Jr. who, in his introduction to *'Race', Writing and Difference* states:

We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the *languages* we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other. Similarly, we must analyze the language of contemporary criticism itself, recognising especially that hermeneutic systems are not universal, colorblind, apolitical, or neutral.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Abel scrutinises white-authored feminist criticism in order to expose the ways in which 'different critical discourses both inflect and inscribe racial fantasies' (p. 477). The criticism of criticism would seem to offer a way for white feminists to contribute to the race debate without compromising black feminist space. Equally, the focus on white critical activity forces the acknowledgement of white as a racial, albeit unmarked, identity.

However, although I endorse and practice close focus on critical writing in this study (following Abel I examine specific white feminist reading strategies in each chapter) such a project is by no means unproblematic. Richard Dyer is cognisant of some of the problems of focusing on whiteness in his recent book, *White*:

My blood runs cold at the thought that talking about whiteness could lead to the development of something called 'White Studies'. . . I dread to think that paying attention to whiteness might lead to white people saying they need to get in touch with their whiteness, that we might end up with the white equivalent of 'Iron John' and co, the 'men's movement' embrace of hairiness replaced with strangled vowels and rigid salutes.<sup>21</sup>

From encouraging the performance of guilt to using the opportunity to 'talk about what in any case we have always talked about: ourselves' to the 'me-too-ism'

produced by the perception of being left out of critical trends that favour the margins, the focus on whiteness could serve to reinforce rather than dismantle racial domination: 'The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less, to make a show of reinstating it, when, like male power, it doesn't actually need reinstating).' (p. 10). Nancy K. Miller has expressed concern over the growing trend of white feminists attacking other white feminists<sup>22</sup>; playing the 'race' card to score political points against each other. My own reading of this phenomena is that, given the manifest anxiety displayed by white feminists on the subject of race, the practice of white self-criticism gives the illusion of safe territory. The spectacle of white feminists accusing other white feminists could also be read as public displays of political correctness; a way of signalling to black women that 'we're all right really'.

In choosing the focus of this project I have no intention of either producing a spectacle of 'right-on-ness' or of contributing to something called white feminist criticism. In recommending the examination of white-authored criticism there is the danger of imagining the feminist critical field as dividing neatly along what Spivak has termed chromatic lines: black feminists and white feminists each doing their own theoretical thing.<sup>23</sup> Not only, as Paul Gilroy notes, is it insufficient to reduce race relations to the binary of black and white, it is also false to attempt to resolve the race question by founding separatist racial projects. In addition to reinforcing an authority of experience position (only black women can talk of black experience, only whites can talk of white etc.)<sup>24</sup> such a separation belies the multiple mediations of race categories. June Jordan remarks in interview with Pratibha Parmar:

I think there is something deficient in the thinking on the part of anybody who proposes either gender identity politics or race identity politics as sufficient, because every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or embody and more than whatever gender category we fall into.<sup>25</sup>

What is more, even if the division was adequate, the fantasy of black and white feminists each working separately with the view of coming together in some utopian

moment of equality glides over the complex interrelatedness of racial constructions: the complicity of white and black as ideological forces.

To recommend white self-criticism is less to enforce a policy of separate development than to begin the project of assuming responsibility in the field of racial difference. It has been too long the case that black and other 'raced' women have shouldered the burden of dealing with race alone. Audre Lorde comments:

Black and Third World women are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.<sup>26</sup>

White feminist critical attention to race (both in terms of self and other) is then long overdue.

To recommend the study of white-authored feminist criticism is not either to suppose that whiteness and white writing has an essence which is to be finally understood through close examination. One of the problems of theorising whiteness is its elusiveness: discussions about white racial identity are renowned for their ability to slip into discussions about gender, class, culture.<sup>27</sup> This has led some critics in the direction of a deconstructive approach.<sup>28</sup> Whereas a deconstructive take on race, with its emphasis on its ideological constructedness, is helpful in dislodging biological, essentialist racist discourses,<sup>29</sup> in the case of thinking about whiteness, caution needs to be exercised. The deconstruction of race from the point of view of whiteness makes whiteness disappear, immaterial. Such a position colludes with the ideologically dominant notion of whiteness as nothing; the race conversation is rendered more comfortable for the white critic. Given this, I would argue that whiteness constitutes 'something else you have to figure in before you can figure it out.'<sup>30</sup> As Ruth Frankenberg puts it . . . it may be more difficult for white people to

say 'Whiteness has nothing to do with me - I'm not white' than to say 'Race has nothing to do with me I'm not racist.'<sup>30a</sup> White people are too unused to thinking about their own whiteness to risk dispensing with it in a flourish of poststructuralist logic.

### **The Benefits of Crisis**

None of this is to suggest an already delineated project; a fully determined set of tasks. Nor is it to suggest a form of critical intervention founded in the ambition of faultlessness. In examining a range of white feminist reading strategies in no way do I intend to imply a model of hyper-correction, or final position of 'getting it right'. The issue that I keep returning to throughout this study is the impossibility, indeed undesirability, of an automatic or assured anti-imperialist, anti-racist theory or method. One of the problems I identify in white feminist discourse on the subject of race is the tendency to seek out innocent spaces, uncompromised ground upon which to situate discussion. In chapter 1 I draw out some of the implications of what I identify as a dream of the end of reading that haunts white feminist thinking<sup>31</sup>. The purging of white critical methodology for traces of racism/ethnocentrism is to attempt to reinstate innocent ground, to hope to achieve a position where reading is no longer necessary, where the 'true-text' speaks for itself. The pursuit of this safe territory, I argue, paradoxically introduces regressive effects into the criticism.

The search for an anti-imperialist reading position also runs the risk of constituting what Spivak has termed a 'too-quick answer.'<sup>32</sup> In the place of a continued commitment to race work in criticism the anti-racist theory represents an attempt to dispense with what is construed as the 'problem' of race. In direct opposition to this Spivak recommends that the so-called problem not be 'solved' too quickly (the solution would be, in any case, illusory) but rather 'kept alive' (p.239) Indeed the constitution of the 'black' text as a reading problem for the white feminist critic, whose task it was to find a theory to surmount the perceived racial barrier, is

itself a problem. Ann Russo details the difficulties that ensued when in her rape crisis training black women were added on as special cases 'The result was that potential women-of-color callers were made doubly other and considered 'problems' in terms of how we white women would approach them',<sup>33</sup> The ethnocentrism that inheres with the construal of 'race' as a barrier to (white) understanding remains unchallenged. Given the tendency for slippage in white-led discussions on race-related issues the challenge of keeping them alive should not be underestimated. This is not to authorise an anti-theory position nor to recommend critical promiscuity, a thoughtless eclecticism. Instead it is to acknowledge a degree of openness in theoretical race work. Pierre Bourdieu refers to Wittgenstein's criticism of concepts that are 'too well-constructed':

Concepts can - and, to some extent, must - remain open and provisional, which doesn't mean vague, approximate or confused: any real thinking about scientific practice attests that this *openness* of concepts, which gives them their 'suggestive' character, and thus their capacity to produce scientific effects (by showing things that have never been seen before, by suggesting research that needs to be done, and not just commentaries), is the essence of any scientific thought *in statu nascendi*, in opposition to that completed science that provides mental pabulum for methodologists and all those who invent, once the dust of battle has settled, rules and methods that are more harmful than useful.<sup>34</sup>

Overly wrought concepts and theories can promote closure, doubt and even crisis, on the other hand, can break up what can operate as an 'intellectual holding company' (p. 37) Other critics have emphasised the productive nature of theoretical insecurity. Peggy Phelan, for example, stresses the 'generative powers of doubt and uncertainty' whereas Paul Gilroy sees 'crisis as a combination of danger and opportunity'.<sup>35</sup> In light of the propensity for white feminist critics to seek out the too-quick answer this project stakes its commitment in an attempt to keep the race question alive in feminist criticism. In examining theories and strategies of reading black women's

writing I single out those places in the criticism that pose themselves as solutions. If this study reads as more than a little frustrating, with its persistent undermining of white feminist readings, this is a deliberate effort to undermine any recourse to transcendental solutions. I repeat my contention that there is no automatic or assured anti-racist theory or stance to be had in relation to the 'race-different' text. My self-assigned task then is more one of drawing attention to, even exacerbating, the crisis of authority in white feminist criticism than of offering solutions. In doing so my purpose is not to find fault in each approach in order to produce a list of pros and cons, a balance sheet or final adjudication but rather to trace through what Trinh Minh-ha refers to as lines of evasion,<sup>36</sup> I hope thereby to drive a wedge into the race question in white feminist thinking thus ensuring its continued consideration.

With this I am by no means exempt from the criticisms I make of others. This study is as marked by the symptoms of crisis as the texts I expose to scrutiny. In her essay 'Notes Toward a Politics of Location' Adrienne Rich allegorises her struggle for critical accountability in terms of a bee 'stunning itself against windowpanes and sills'

It is looking for what it needs, just as I am, and like me, it has gotten trapped in a place where it cannot fulfil its own life . . . . And I, too have been bumping my way against glassy panes, falling half-stunned, gathering myself up and crawling, then again taking off, searching<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, this study is marked by its own glass partitions: refusals, repetitions, and errors of thinking. The crisis of white feminist authority that I have identified in these pages is one that marks my own critical intervention. There are times when the repetition of the error diagnosed has been unavoidable. To admit this is less to confess it in advance than to attempt to mark the limits of my thinking at this time. While this is no cause for celebration (an excuse for studied ignorance) I am in agreement with Spivak that one of the crucial tasks for the First World or hegemonic critic is to confront the limits of her knowledge. What follows shares in the crisis as

much as it attempts to describe it and thereby marks one beginning in the project of unlearning one's privilege as one's loss.<sup>38</sup> To paraphrase Adrienne Rich white-authored feminist criticism has got itself trapped in a place where it cannot fulfil its own life. While the way out may not yet be evident to stay still is not an option.

I have organised my discussions as follows. In chapter 1 I examine what has been termed the Rodney King events, and the ways in which they connect up with issues in feminist criticism. In particular, I highlight the violent potential of white interpretation, in addition to discussing a recurrent distinction that is offered by many white feminist critics in their work on race-different texts between reading and seeing. I argue that this distinction operates not only to foreclose discussion around race for white critics but also that the ambition expressed by many theorists, to *see* texts by black women writers, for example, *as they really are*, rather than reading and hence, so the argument runs, distorting them, functions, albeit unwittingly, to introduce a series of oppressive effects, into their work. However, I am equally critical of solving this problem through the simple assertion that there are only readings. In particular, I question Judith Butler's notion of 'aggressive reading' as a means of countering the jury's verdict at Simi Valley.

Regarding the question 'Should White feminists teach/theorise black women's writing?', I explore the implications of answering in the negative in chapter 2. Consequently, I examine the proposal that to use Spivak's formulation, 'only the native can know the scene' in critical and pedagogical terms. I conclude by challenging the anti-imperialist ambition of this strategy through a discussion of the nature of cultural authority.

Chapter 3 examines the limits of readerly identification. I argue that the creation of universal ground on the part of the white feminist/woman reader as a basis for reading the race-different text acts to construct that text according to white preoccupations. So that what is produced is less an affirmation of universal

sisterhood or womanhood than a projection of white desire. My discussion is structured around the notably difficult subject of female genital mutilation, taking Mary Daly's *Gynecology* and Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks* as examples of identificatory reading practices.

Chapter 4 takes up the use of theory as a displaced form of textual identification. Through readings of Toni Morrison's novels I question the simple application of a theory to a text emphasising the costs of particular framings of the author's work. Following this I argue that the tensions in the criticism I examine between the literary and the social, history and the imagination, the semiotic and the material, for example, constitute an important theme in Morrison's work. I then offer the figure of the witness as an alternative means of reading.

Chapter 5 challenges the idea that a text's context is readily determinable. Appeals to context are often used as a means of solving the question of appropriation. White feminists are implored to respect the context of race-different texts, to take account of their locations, of where they are coming from. The abiding image is of a text placed in its correct container or shell, so to reveal its true significance. The problem with such appeals to context is that questions of representation are jettisoned in favour of solving what the text is supposed to mean. The question, for example, of the textuality of the context is glossed over. One of the effects of this conceptualisation is that it dispenses with the need for further reading, once the text is put in its proper, original, place any further examination is redundant.

Chapter 6 explores the critical stance of self-reflexivity. In some ways the gesture of self-reflexivity is an extreme form of contextualisation, in that what is placed in the interpretative picture is the scene of critical production itself. What is sought in this mode of criticism is a fuller representation of where the various meanings attributed to a given text come from. Following the assumption that to be a white reader is to read from a particular (i.e. race-dominant) position attempts are then made to declare this by way of pushing against or neutralising this dominance. Various claims are made for self-reflexivity as a means of decolonising the text, my



point is to emphasise the potentially problematic nature of this enterprise when the reader is white and the text black or 'raced'.

I conclude by examining the proposal of 'non-innocent' criticism as articulated by Jane Flax and Donna Haraway.<sup>39</sup> While I accept the arguments for the abandonment of the pursuit of innocent ground in feminist criticism I argue critical or theoretical innocence, like seeing or essentialism, cannot be dispensed with, banished, outlawed, through pronouncement or decree. To privilege politics, as is the case in Jane Flax's essay, is not to automatically counter claims of innocence. Non-innocence or politics or reading needs constantly to be re-asserted, not merely declared.

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987); *Jazz* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Salman Rushdie, *The Late Show*, BBC 2, June 1992.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Nicholls, 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison' in *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by Sue Vice (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992) for a development of this as a theme.

<sup>4</sup> See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993): 'The work of theory, under current economic conditions can only be, for most of us, a labor of love. Insofar as love is a labor, a trying, an essay, it like theory, cannot be anything than an offering, a giving of what one does not have, a description and a transcription of what one cannot see or prove with visible evidence' (p. 32). See also Hélène Cixous, *Reading With Clarice Lispector*.

<sup>5</sup> See Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) 'Clinging to the specificity of the other's discourse involves the risk of loss of identity, loss of self, alienation, death.' (p.102).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy K. Miller, in Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller, 'Criticising Feminist Criticism' in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 349-369 (p. 364)

<sup>7</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 186-199 (p. 186).

<sup>8</sup> Eva Lennox Birch, *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 88

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Frame', in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. by Paul Lauter, et. al (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1990), pp. 2416-18.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Abel points out 'some of the strongest questions about, if not unqualified opposition to white feminist readings of black women's text have been posed by bell hooks. See for example, bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], 'Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism,' *Inscriptions*, 5 (1989), 159-62; 'Feminism and Racism: The Struggle Continues,' *Zeta* (1990)' Elizabeth Abel, 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation', *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1993), pp. 470-498 (p. 477).

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Smith, 'Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the "Other"' in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. by Cheryl A. Wall (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 38-57 (p. 39).

<sup>13</sup> . The idea of a 'welcome criticism' comes from Larry Neal. Michael Awkward explains: Neal uses this phrase during an interview conducted in 1974 to describe interpretative acts by whites that reflect 'some understanding of [black] cultural source and . . . of the development of a critique that allows you to discuss your [Afro-American] literature and to move it forward, to a higher level . . . a more serious level on its own terms . . . on terms that are fresh and new' For Neal, the ultimate sign of critical competence lies not in the race or face of the critic, but, rather, in the work that critic produces. Noting the existence both of persuasive, informed white-authored criticism and of fatally misinformed black analyses of Afro-American expressivity, Neal insists that critical competence is

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gained 'by studying', by energetically investigating the Afro-American cultural situation and emerging critical tradition'

Michael Awkward, 'Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts and the Self-Referential Impulse' *American Literary History*, 2 (1990), pp. 581-606 (p. 583)

<sup>14</sup> There is also an assumption here that black feminist criticism is an already consolidated project and not a series of debates. Hazel Carby objects to such a construction: 'black feminist criticism [should] be regarded critically as a problem, not as a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions.' *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 15

<sup>15</sup> . Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 17 (1984), pp. 3-19 (p. 4)

<sup>16</sup> . See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 196-220

<sup>17</sup> . Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, pp. 66-111 (p. 75).

<sup>18</sup> . Elizabeth Abel, p. 477.

<sup>19</sup> Minrose C. Gwin, 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or . . . The Necessity of Being Other' *NWSA Journal*, 1 (1988), pp. 21-31.

<sup>20</sup> . Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'Race', *Writing and Difference* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

<sup>21</sup> . Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> . Nancy K. Miller, personal conversation, May 1997

<sup>23</sup> . See Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 412-420 (p. 416).

<sup>24</sup> . See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989) and bell hooks, 'Essentialism and Experience' *American Literary History*, 3 (1991), pp. 172-183 for an interesting example of the debate around the use of experience in feminist discourse.

<sup>25</sup> . Pratibha Parmar, Interview with June Jordan, *Spare Rib*, November (1987).

<sup>26</sup> Audre Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' in *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, Ca.: The Crossing Feminist Press, 1984), pp. 114-23 (p. 115)

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Dyer, *White*, and Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*.

<sup>28</sup> See Barbara Johnson's work, particularly 'Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston' *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 278-89. See also Elizabeth Abel for a critique of this aspect of white feminist criticism.

<sup>29</sup> . See the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. for examples of this. 'Race', *Writing and Difference* in particular.

<sup>30</sup> . Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 227-8.

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30a Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 6

31 . In an interview with Gayatri Spivak, Ellen Rooney states:

We seem to desire that what unites us (as feminists) pre-exist our desire to be joined; something that stands outside our own alliances may authorise them and empower us to speak not simply as feminists but as women, not least against women whose political work is elsewhere. . . . the drive to capture in word the essence of a thing ... is a dream of the end of politics among women ... a formal end to the discontinuities between women and feminisms. 'In a Word: Interview' in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2. In feminist literary critical terms this dream operates as one of the end of reading, an appeal to pure seeing.

32 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book' in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 237-266 (p. 239)

33 Ann Russo, "'We Cannot Live Without Our Lives": White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds, Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 297-313 (p. 302)

34 . Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. by Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 41.

35 . Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.171; Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 8.

36 . Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1989) p. 19.

37 . Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 210-231 (p. 211)

38 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, articulates the task of the postcolonial critic as one of embarking on 'the careful project of unlearning our privilege as our loss' *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990),p. 9

39 Jane Flax, 'The End of Innocence' in *Feminists Theorise the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 445-4 63; Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991)

## Chapter 1. Reading and Seeing: Truth, Violence and Rodney King

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the North, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy.<sup>1</sup>

(Frederick Douglass)

Most white people misread black literature, if they read it at all.<sup>2</sup>

(Catherine Stimpson)

In 1992 a group of twelve people, ten white, one Asian, one Hispanic, viewed eighty-one seconds of videotape showing a young black man being beaten by a group of armed, white police. On the night of March 3rd 1991 Rodney King drove through a set of red lights, broke the speed limit and almost lost his life. King, to borrow Houston Baker's words, 'suffered the complete weight of the law' which left him 'with a split inner lip, a partially paralyzed face, nine skull fractures, a broken cheek bone, a shattered eye socket, and a broken leg.'<sup>3</sup> One officer was reported to have administered forty-five separate blows, another to have stepped on King's neck so as to ensure he remained 'in compliance mode'.<sup>4</sup> Four of the officers on duty that night stood trial as a result of their actions. And yet, despite what seemed to be clear evidence of police brutality, the jury found in favour of the Los Angeles Police Department. In a reversal of the testimony seemingly offered by the tape and King's injuries, the perceived threat on the part of the jury was not the helmeted, upright baton-wielding members of the LAPD but the unarmed, prostrated, struggling man on the ground. Rodney King was, as one juror put it, in 'total control' of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

Not everyone who saw the tape drew the same conclusions. Both within and beyond the United States there was widespread, cross-racial, outrage over the verdict.

For those who failed to share the jury's view it was hard to see how, exactly, they managed to read the videotape evidence in the way they did. After all, wasn't it obvious what was happening? A black man is being beaten by white police. How could the man on the ground be seen as being in control; 'choosing' the moment he 'wanted' to be handcuffed, 'directing all the action'?<sup>6</sup>

In her essay on the Rodney King events, Judith Butler refers to the judgment as a 'feat of interpretation,' (p. 15) a phrase which suggests a certain perversity of vision, a willed blindness toward a more reasonable or even obvious arrangement of meanings. However, even as she uses this phrase, and even as she can write 'without hesitation ... 'the video shows a man being brutally beaten'...' (p. 16) Butler's essay is one among many, in the academic collection published as a response to the King events, to question the pursuit of the 'real' as a means of countering the jury's decision. Put differently, in raising questions as to how the jury was able to *see* (in that their reading presented itself as a seeing) a threat in a man surrounded by baton-wielding police, how such an interpretation was made possible, the degree to which alternative *seeings* are effective in dislodging the logic of the verdict (a *reading* passed off as a *seeing* now sanctified as *the* version of events) is itself questioned.

### **White feminist interpretation**

This issue of reading and violence, of radical misreading, finds echoes, perhaps unexpectedly, in debates over white feminist interpretation. Just as many saw the verdict at Simi Valley as a further act of violence towards Rodney King and by extension LA's African-American community, white feminists have become concerned with the potential for *violence* within their own acts of interpretation. Catherine Belsey, for example, explains her decision not to include Toni Morrison in her study, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* as coming out of concern about critical appropriation: 'I have a fear of appearing to colonise her work, or at least of seeming to pre-empt the work of African-American critics'<sup>7</sup> While some critics

invest in the idea of a positive outcome, the consideration of which forms the basis of this project, others are considerably less certain. Nicole Ward Jouve, for instance, in the preface to her book *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*, states:

Perhaps every white person should affix an authorial health warning to their texts. Something like 'white woman speaks with forked tongue'. It's not because you are aware of a danger, nor because you mean well that your words or actions do no harm. Hell is paved, etc. Writing is never innocent. White writing is less innocent than any other. As Gayatri Spivak has said, every First World woman's book is typed out on a word processor made cheap by the low-paid labour of a Third World woman. Natalie Sarraute used to say that the novel was in an 'era of suspicion'. Today, the politics of white interpretation is in an era of far worse suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

Following Ward Jouve, there are those who argue that a 'non-appropriative' relation is impossible, and that given this it might be better to say nothing.<sup>9</sup> Other feminist critics, however, although similarly suspicious of the latent violence of white interpretation, have sought alternative ways out of the exclusion/appropriation dichotomy. Proceeding from the same premise of white critical vision as distorted vision, however, the solution to the problem of appropriative reading, for a number of critics, is seen to lie in getting, somehow, to an uninterrupted view of the text. As with the case of Rodney King, where the belief that the evidence speaks for itself is difficult to resist, the critical goal for the white feminist critic, apprehensive of the distorting effects of her interpretive power, becomes one of seeing the race-different text *as it really is*. A distinction is thereby set up between reading and seeing where reading signifies alongside distortion, appropriation, and white, and seeing lines up with truth, non-appropriation, and black. The problem becomes one of reading at all, then, in that reading *is* appropriation in these terms: white interpretation of the black (authentic and true) text, for instance, is essentially driven by colonialist impulses.

To dispense with reading in favour of a *more accurate* seeing is not to

dispense with the difficulties associated with exclusion/appropriation problematic, however. In the same way that critics believe grounding discussion of Rodney King's assault in notions of the obvious to be a mistake I, too, hold the pursuit of the true 'raced' text to be an error. This is not to say, simply, that critics who formulate the question of racial difference in their criticism in this way are wrong, but rather that the wish for an uninterrupted view of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, can serve to introduce a set of unwanted effects into the criticism, so undermining its anti-imperialist ambition. Before turning to some examples of such effects it would be helpful to pause here to consider the perils of pure vision in relation to the King events.

### 'Look a Negro!'

To reiterate, on seeing the visual evidence of the violence against Rodney King (the tape and his physical injuries), it is hard not to resist the idea that somehow it speaks for itself, and that a sinister manipulation or twisting of the 'evidence' has occurred in order to produce the jury's verdict. Similarly, Judith Butler's description of the verdict as a *'feat of interpretation'* (p. 15, my emphasis) suggests interpretations of the event that are more obvious, less wrought. And yet, at the same time, Butler and others, in drawing attention to the ways in which the video evidence was interpreted by the defence, offer compelling arguments as to why any appeal to *pure seeing*, to the idea that the videotape constitutes a *transparent* record of a black man being beaten or that his body constitutes pure testimony of police violence, is of limited use in resisting the predominantly white jury's interpretation. In Butler's words:

It may appear at first that over and against this heinous failure to see police brutality, it is necessary to restore the visible as the sure ground of evidence. But what the trial and its horrific conclusions teach us is that there is no simple recourse to the visible, to visual evidence, that it still and always calls to be read, that it is



already a reading, and that in order to establish the injury on the basis of the visual evidence, an aggressive reading of the evidence is necessary. (p. 17)

In addition to arguing that every 'seeing' is in fact *always* a reading, which admits to the possibility of other readings, other orderings or interpretations of what passes as 'the real', Butler's suspicion of the visual as a foundation for knowledge is equally attributable to her assertion that 'The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful.' (p. 17). Indeed, for Butler, the very fact of the verdict is itself proof of the 'racially saturated' (p. 15) nature of what we, culturally speaking, claim to *see*: that it was possible for a jury to watch the amateur footage and see the police benignly carrying out their duty can only be the result of the victory of a prevailing racist ideology masquerading as 'common sense', a notion of pure vision, of a reading disguised as a seeing. As many commentators have pointed out, the defence attorneys were able to make use of what Butler terms 'a white racist episteme' (p. 22) in order to read the video evidence in a way that supported their claims. Apart from reproducing the tape as a series of frozen images, each interpreted singly by experts on prisoner restraint in terms of a 'technical discourse of institutional security'<sup>10</sup> which sought to ascertain whether, at this point, the assailant was in 'compliance mode' (the evidence of King's arm raised, to some viewers, in defence offering proof that he was not, that he still had 'access to his hands, access to his legs' and a 'visual sight of where the officers were'<sup>11</sup>), the defence drew upon a racist organisation of meaning that renders the black body as the site of *immanent* threat. As Butler points out, a passage from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin; White Masks* is explicit in showing the significance of this ideology, and is therefore worth repeating here:

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. . .Below the corporal schema I had sketched [there is] a historico-racial schema. The elements I had used had been provided for me . . . by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details,

anecdotes, stories. I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self to balance space, to localize sensations, and here I was called on for more.

'Look a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.

'Look a Negro!' It was true. It amused me.

'Look a Negro!' the circle was drawing a bit tighter.

I made no secret of my amusement.

'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Frightened!

Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears but tears had become impossible.<sup>12</sup>

For Butler this passage offers '...a description of how the black male body is constituted through fear, and through a naming and a seeing...' (p. 18) What is of particular significance is the way in which Fanon puts on display the paranoid structure of the white racist gaze. 'Look a Negro!'; the protagonist is at once named and contained through a visual reference. Its repetition, signal of the failure of the racial designation to contain its, from the perspective of the white onlooker, potential, indeed immanent, threat, gives way to the admission 'I'm frightened': the sense of threat toward the protagonist becomes transferred /displaced onto the white looker himself. This recalls a scene from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where this structure is even more explicitly drawn.

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood...The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with

them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Morrison articulates the intensely circular nature of white racist fear: the way in which white fear produces, through externalising itself as its own object, a self-fulfilling prophecy. The 'jungle' of 'whitefolk's' minds is projected out and made manifest in the external world through an act of reading where the actions of 'colored people' are constructed, *read* solely as confirmation of those original fears. To Butler, this notion of the paranoid structure of whiteness goes at least some of the way to explain the verdict. Given that the threat was perceived as King's very body ( in racist terms signifying chaos, disorder etc. ) the 'thin blue line' of the LAPD can be seen to be doing their duty in offering the white community protection against the apocalyptic potential his body represents. Some witnesses testify that King leapt out of his car laughing and dancing, 'grabbing his behind'<sup>14</sup>, an act that, to the racist viewer, represents a glimpse of that disorder, that chaos, that disrespect for white values, a glimpse of the 'screaming baboon', the 'red gums' of their own fear. Butler explains thus:

[King's] body thus received those blows in return for those it was about to deliver, the blows which were that body in its essential gestures, even as the one gesture that body can be seen to make is to raise its palm outward to stave off the blows against it. According to this racist episteme, he is hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver. (p. 19)

Indeed, the terms used by members of the LAPD in the witness stand are revealing in themselves. King's body was described in terms of weaponry; his leg 'cocked', his

arm held in 'trigger position', whereas description of the police action was conducted in a highly euphemised discourse; blows became the 'application' of 'departmentally approved' baton 'power strikes' for example.<sup>15</sup> According to this logic King ceases to be an individual caught violating traffic regulations and becomes instead a loaded gun, a violent event waiting to happen, a perception that the violence of the aftermath of the verdict was read to confirm. The prophecy of black disorder was fulfilled by the street violence that ensued in response to the outcome of the trial. To paraphrase Butler, the paranoid vision of the white racist episteme reaches full circle.

### **The Racist Structure of Seeing**

That such a racist organisation of meanings (made in the name of *seeing*) is possible is reason enough for Butler to distrust any appeal to pure vision. What is obvious for white people is not to be relied upon. The hegemony of a white racist episteme is such that to join in the squabble over who saw what is to compete on unsafe ground, to enter treacherous terrain. The complicity between white racism and visibility is total.

For when the visual is fully schematised by racism, the visual evidence to which one refers will always and only refute the conclusions based upon it; for it is possible within this racist episteme that no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence. (p. 17)

The history where seeing secures racial knowing is long and pernicious. From eighteenth century attempts to construct a 'geometry of beauty'<sup>16</sup>: a highly racialised enterprise which was based upon lines drawn from nose to ear and upper lip to forehead, the angle between which constituted a position along what became termed a *facial index* running from (black) prognathism to the (white) ideal represented by Greek statues, to more recently circulated ideas of racial distinction determining physical or mental aptitude the contract between racial knowledge and vision has been assured.

Such manifest distrust of the visual can also be found elsewhere. In her discussion of the work of performance artist Adrian Piper, Peggy Phelan outlines the unreliable nature of the visible as a basis for knowledge. As a light-skinned African American Piper is often mistakenly identified as white. One of Piper's 'performances' involves her handing out business cards to perpetrators of racist comments addressed toward her. On these cards is inscribed the following message:

Dear Friend:

I am black.

I am sure that you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.

Sincerely Yours,

Adrian Margaret Smith Piper.<sup>17</sup>

In this performance, Phelan argues, Piper makes explicit the complicity between visibility and assumptions about race: the common sense idea that race categories and visual markers such as skin colour should and do line up neatly together. With its statement 'I am black', when held alongside the 'visual evidence' of its presenters seemingly white skin, the card explodes the idea of the 'raced' body as transparently significant, as artlessly holding itself up for scrutiny by whites. In contradistinction to Fanon, here the look and its presumed knowledge and the racial designation do not match up. British/Guyanese writer Pauline Melville similarly confounds the notion of race as immediately readable, or rather as visible, in her essay 'Beyond the Pale'<sup>18</sup>. Also light-skinned, Melville 'causes confusion' (p. 740):

*England*. Over-eager hostess at dinner:

'Did you know Pauline was black?'

Bewildered silence. Forks poised halfway to mouths. *People politely swallowing the evidence of their own eyes*. Explanations. Sometimes they don't believe me. What am I supposed to do - wear the baptism certificate pinned to my lapel?<sup>19</sup> (My emphasis, p. 740)

As with Piper's calling-card, the visual evidence of Melville's skin colour jars against that of the statement pertaining to her blackness. And as with the card the visibility that secures racial knowledge is confounded. Having said that however there are distinctions to be drawn between the two texts or rather Phelan's reading of Piper and my reading of Melville.

Describing herself as 'the whitey in the woodpile' (p. 740) Melville depicts her racial heritage as multiple and various: Anglo-Saxon, on the side of her mother, African, Amerindian and European on that of her father. Within this confusion over racial origins and categories, this blurring of supposedly clear boundaries, however, the *intractability* of race classification is sometimes stressed and not, as in Phelan's reading, solely undermined. Having drawn attention to the implications of being 'the joker in the pack, able to turn up as any card' (p. 741), Melville details the case of a woman in Louisiana who, 'claim[ing] to be one-sixty-fourth part black', applied to change her racial status to Caucasian. Her application was rejected. As a response Melville considers the scenario of 'a visibly black woman replacing myself: 'Did you know that Charlene was white?' Put differently, the fact of racial markers such as skin colour refusing to line up with their appropriate designations, white skin = Caucasian, for instance, is not enough to explode either white power to enforce the ranking of differences or indeed the will to categorise itself. The securing of racial differences has long depended upon apparatus, tools, discourses other than skin colour. Richard Dyer points out in his study of the self-representation of whites in Western culture that facial features such as 'the shape of nose, eyes and lips, the

colour and set of hair, even body shape may all be mobilised to determine someone's 'colour'.'<sup>20</sup> With this it can be noted that both Jewish and Irish people have found themselves classified as black at various points in the last two hundred years<sup>21</sup>. And while these distinctions are still founded upon the idea of visible difference this is not to say that white supremacy can be explained solely in terms of a pre-occupation with the visible. Within Phelan's reading there is an over-investment in the political potential of disrupting the contract between race and the visible. Whereas Phelan interprets Piper's performance as dramatising the 'failure of the visible to represent race'(p. 98), and its politics residing therein, Melville's essay points up this failure ('White present, black past, a good position for breaking down preconceptions, stirring up doubt, rattling judgements, shifting boundaries and unfixing fixities', p. 740) in addition to highlighting other resources used to secure racial difference. The failure of the visual field to secure 'race' leaves Phelan wondering: 'If racial difference is not registered visibly, where is it located? Is it a free-floating signifier? How can one secure it?' (p. 98). These questions remain unanswered in the text. With this is the implication that the undermining of the visual field is radical *per se*. This over-investment in disrupting the visual minimises the complexity of Western racial discourse(s), and as such over-simplifies the project of any race politics. On the other hand, Melville indicates, albeit fleetingly, not only the history of human racial taxonomy but also its reliance upon discourses and tools other than 'sight'. Her great-great grandmother's baptism certificate, the implication of the persistence of 'one-drop rule'<sup>22</sup> in the case of the Louisiana woman, offer examples of the various mechanisms of racial oppression that have endured.

Having undermined the idea that 'race is what you look like' (p.740) Melville still faces the geneticist and cultural constructions of racial difference. Marek Kohn stresses the surpassing of the expert gaze by genetic science as a means of 'classifying the varieties of man':

External appearances are regarded as an illusion; true wisdom lies in seeing

beyond them, and beyond the superficial markers of race, to the genetic essence. (p. 47)

Disdaining the visual, genetics are in no way innocent for this. As Melville states the focus on DNA has multiple associations with 'the most pernicious of racists, imperialists and nose-measurers whose power rested on such graded distinctions' (p. 740). Kohn, too, is suspicious of the possibility for a benign knowledge based on genetic evidence. Discussing the Human Genome Project along with its partner study the Human Genome Diversity Project, an ambitious study which is attempting to map global genetic diversity, Kohn concludes:

. . . it may not be long before many of the examples become museum objects like the ancient skulls in the race galleries; the last traces of extinct peoples, preserved and organised so as to maintain their scientific utility. (p. 21)

And while Melville finds solace in the idea of cultural difference as a more fluid place for thinking racial difference, that it allows for a degree of self-determination 'we are more empowered to define ourselves' in that 'appearance matters less', the presence of 'the real world' nevertheless weighs heavy upon this capacity for self-determination: 'bureaucrats, civil-servants and form-fillers might choose to define us differently' (p. 741) All of which is to say that there are limits to which the highlighting of the disjuncture between racial signifier and signified disrupts the field of racial distinction. Confounding the visual equation of race and skin colour by no means exhausts the resources of a white supremacist view.

### **The 'Negro Exhibit'**

The idea of the 'raced' body as silently significant is taken up by Houston Baker in his essay on Rodney King. Troubled by the fact of King's silence throughout the events of the trial and the resulting rebellion (the few words he uttered



in the wake of the riots were supplied by King's lawyer and therefore, to Baker, are mere ventriloquism) he argues, through reference to Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative, that King was effectively denied his own interpretive power. And like the figure Demby in Douglass' account, King and (by extension) America's black population are 'scened and not heard' in the present day U.S. Denied a proper hearing, Baker links the display, the silent testimony, of King's injuries to the anti-abolitionist use of the black body to testify to the evil of slavery.

. . . the fugitive becomes the 'Negro exhibit.' She silently turns her back to the audience in order to display the stripes inflicted by the overseer's whip. Black's in white-abolitionist employ were required always to earn the right - by silent display - to tell their stories. (p. 41)

The idea that King's injuries speak for themselves, then, inadvertently intersects with an old cultural script in which the power of interpretation, of signification pertains solely to whites and the inert matter of signification to blacks. Hortense Spillers spells out the utility of this arrangement for those involved in the slave trade. Considered in law as 'real estate', chattels, property, the slave 'is perceived as the essence of stillness . . . an undynamic human state, fixed in time and space'.<sup>23</sup> However, as the law attempted to record or describe the order of things it functioned, simultaneously, as a mechanism for the transformation of 'personality into property.'(p. 78) This situation, the inscription of slaves in law as fixed and immobile, although not totalising<sup>25</sup>, produces a state of affairs where blackness is deemed to be frozen, essential, outside of the (human) realm of signification which in turn eases the traffic in human beings. Spillers also points up the persistence of this discursive arrangement in the notion of 'ethnicity' as it appears in Daniel Moynihan's notorious 1965 Report: 'The Negro Family: The Case For National Action',<sup>26</sup>.

'Ethnicity' in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the effects of the Eternal. We could say, then, that in its powerful

stillness, 'ethnicity', from the point of view of the 'Report', embodies nothing more than a mode of memorial time, as Roland Barthes outlines the dynamics of myth. As a signifier that has no movement in the field of signification, the use of 'ethnicity' for the living becomes purely appreciative, although it would be unwise not to concede its dangerous and fatal effects. (p. 66)

This sense of the black body as transparent text, static matter, that does *not* require reading in that its meaning is immediate, can be contrasted with a scene from Morrison's *Beloved*, where Paul D reads the testimony of Sethe's scars:

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palm of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, 'Aw, Lord, girl.' And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. (p. 17-18)

Reading Sethe's traumatised flesh, 'ridge and leaf', Paul D 'feels the pain her back ought to' (p.18). A scene which in turn can be contrasted in the novel with that of Schoolteacher and his nephews recording Sethe's 'animal characteristics'.

### **Race and Feminist Criticism: Reading in Truth**

For white feminist critics who seek to establish a non-appropriative basis for reading the work of black/race-different writers, the idea of gaining a clear view of the text is far from uncomplicated territory. Many critics, in addressing their own

'critical twistings,'<sup>27</sup> opt for a manner of interpretation that intends to expose the *truth* of the texts they read, that has as its goal *seeing* the text *as it really is*. An opposition is set up between (white) distortion on the one hand, and (black) fact on the other. Despite the best of such critic's intentions, my belief is that thinking along these lines constitutes a trap. In appealing to the idea of a final, true-text which lies obscured, even unseen, by the white reader until she obtains the right, 'politically corrective' lenses, white feminists introduce a series of politically regressive/undermining effects into their critical work. I wish now to turn to the consideration of two white feminist essays which deal specifically with the relation of white reader/black text by way of surveying this ground: Catherine Stimpson's 'Black Culture/White Teacher' and Minrose Gwin's 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or ... The Necessity of Being Other'<sup>28</sup>

Beginning with the statement 'Most white people misread black literature, if they read it at all' (p. 1) Catherine Stimpson's essay 'Black Culture/White Teacher' presents a catalogue of white critical offences against black writing. Briefly, 'the white ego insists upon control'; white readers 'use' black writing to 'satisfy their needs and notions'; they use it 'politically ... to earn credit from a would-be revolutionary future', emotionally 'for kicks, for a primitive energy lost or missing from their own lives' and finally for 'intellectual capital', to 'dig out information about an alien culture' (p. 1). Put differently, white ignorance of black linguistic traditions, African-American history, 'the idiosyncrasies, the idioms, the intricacy, and the integrity of black experience' (p. 2) produces a series of 'critical twistings' (p. 1) which pass for literary criticism. Depressing as this may sound, Stimpson does offer a way out for the white critic. In addition to taking a back seat, so to speak, by acting as a *supporter* of autonomous black critical endeavour: reading black literature; working 'to put black writers on reading lists and in libraries'; supporting 'magazines, publishing houses, and theaters which blacks control' (p. 7). It is recommended that 'The best questions for white readers to ask themselves about

black literature are those of fact' (p. 6). If whites are guilty of producing 'critical twistings' they can at least aspire to reading more accurately.

Minrose Gwin's 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts . . .' proceeds along similar lines through her examination of the trope of white women as breakers of promises in black women's texts. And like Stimpson the critical goal is one of fighting through all of the distortions wrought by 'race' to arrive at a clearer view:

I want to be able to really hear black women and to hear black women I must confront, and *read*, my otherness in their texts, however painful that may be. For, if I am ever able to become other to my own otherness in black women's texts, I must first be able to read that otherness truly. (p. 23)

Both critics offer a construction of the scene of reading where the white reader/critic, by virtue of her whiteness, is cut off from the *real* significance of the black text. For Stimpson, this significance is reachable in two ways. First, through accepting 'black authority of interpretation' (ibid), and second, by confining critical comments, if they are made at all, to the realm of the informal and the personal (ibid). The white reader must aspire to the achievement of *tentative description* if she is to overcome the critical obstruction of her whiteness. For Gwin the obstacle of whiteness is something to be *confronted* by the feminist critic. Only by working through the oppressive significance of whiteness can the critic succeed in granting the black woman's text/voice a proper hearing. As I take up the particularities of each argument further on in this project (Stimpson in chapter 2, Gwin in chapter 6) I will limit myself here to commenting on their shared ambition of arriving at the black text's true meaning.

In suggesting that white critics confine themselves to matters of fact when reading writings by race-different women, Stimpson's argument does not consider the complicity between appeals to fact and the achievement of dominance. As numerous critics have argued, in the last two hundred years, to say the least, many highly specific political, economic, cultural interests and investments have been swept under the rug of fact. Discursive 'transparency' has served to disguise what are

entirely interested motivations. Pierre Bourdieu puts it succinctly:

... dominant individuals, in the absence of being able to restore the *silence of the doxa*, strive to produce, through a purely reactionary discourse, a substitute for everything that is threatened by the very existence of heretical discourse. Finding nothing for which to reproach the social world as it stands, they endeavour to impose universally, through a discourse permeated by the simplicity and transparency of common sense, the feeling of obviousness and necessity which this world imposes on them; having an interest in leaving things as they are, they attempt to undermine politics in a depoliticized political discourse, produced through a process of neutralization or, even better, of negation, which seeks to restore the doxa to its natural state of innocence and which being oriented toward the naturalization of the social order, always borrows the language of nature.<sup>29</sup>

So, in terms of Stimpson and Gwin's ambition to establish fact as the positive grounds of a non-dominant reading relation, the collusion of transparency, neutrality, obviousness, innocence, with disguised interest and dominance is highly disruptive of their political intentions. In accord with Bourdieu's formulation, facts are intensely political entities which simply disguise or rather repress the always political interest at the heart of their production. The illusion of transparency serves to secure discursive authority: acts of description, as with statements of fact, exert an authoritative effect in that they aspire to show the world *as it is*.

Having prescribed a secondary, supportive and (by implication), *de-authorized* role for the white critic, who is to speak personally and informally with respect to black literature, Stimpson goes on to make a number of descriptive/authoritative statements. For instance: 'Nearly all black literature emanates an unusual energy.' (p. 8) 'Notions of identity are particularly complex in black literature' (ibid); 'Black poetry offers complex drama, and intricate new rhythms, syntax and diction.' (p. 9). This is not to say, merely, that Stimpson

contradicts herself, but more that the very existence of the contradiction raises a number of epistemological issues that are difficult to resolve. Not only do the discursive registers of the personal and the informal remain wholly undetermined (what is it to speak personally and informally about black writing for the white critic, what is sayable in personal and informal terms?), but also the critical aim of *tentative description* emerges as unrealisable within the terms of Stimpson's epistemological frame.

The strategy of white reader/critics relinquishing their own authority by confining themselves to statements of fact and description, however tentative, therefore, cannot succeed in the manner which Stimpson intends. If authority and transparency are mutually reinforcing, white 'descriptions' of black texts can never achieve the innocence to which they aspire. The discursive authority bound up with the notion of description allows that authority to reassert itself unhindered.

Indeed, some of the descriptions offered by Stimpson of black literature and its concerns can be construed as feeding directly into reactionary racial discourses:

Flexible yet structured, like a blues performance, black literature organises human experience for the sake of experience, vitality and consolation. It reflects a sense of ritual which is both sacred, for addressing the gods, and profane, for addressing the people. In contrast the official rituals of white America seem metallic. Either they celebrate death (the medal ceremonies in the Rose Garden) or technology (the rocket launchings). (p 10)

The opposition between, on the one hand, a vital, life-affirming, sensual black literature and an alienated, morbid, life-denying white literature on the other is a construction that inheres in many white feminist 'descriptions' of black women's writing. Susan Willis has been criticised on the grounds of her idealised portrait of African-American women's novels as 'unambivalent voices of resistance' to commodity culture<sup>30</sup>, as sources of a pre-capitalist, unalienated vision, for instance. Gabrielle Griffin too, makes a similar racialised distinction between black and white

women's writing: 'The world of white middle-class women's fiction ... presents the fiction of a mind without a body or of a mind which dominates the body' (p.25). 'Out of touch with her body', the work of the white woman writer is contrasted that of black women and is seen not only as vital energetic but to embody life itself. Richard Dyer traces some of the history and implications of this association of whiteness and death in *White*. Connecting the relation of whiteness and death to transcendence, spirit and redemption, Dyer stresses the double-edged nature of whiteness as 'nothing'. In a discussion of Melville's *Moby Dick* it is shown how white, with its connotations of blank and empty, is the source of a profound fear which like its object is boundless: '. . . to be white is to be a thing of terror to oneself' (p. 212). It is this double-edgedness that is precisely connected to the construction of black as a source of life and vitality. As Morrison puts it in *Playing in the Dark*:

There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called 'the power of blackness', especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysically and social fears, problems and dichotomies could be articulated<sup>31</sup>.

Black life pays for white death. In giving responsibility for matter and the body to blackness, whiteness achieves, indeed secures, transcendence, whilst maintaining a connection to the matter of life through a vampiric relation. This is an explicit theme of the film of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). Strong parallels are drawn throughout the film between the slaveholders of New Orleans and the vampire Lestat feeding off the blood of the living. Morrison identifies a similar phenomenon in the literature of (white) America: that of minstrelsy:

In minstrelsy, a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law. Just as entertainers through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and

imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture. (p. 66)

In other words, literary whiteness is accompanied and paid for by the shadow of blackness, an abiding Africanist presence that is the locus both of white fear and loathing and longing and desire.

A similar textual economy to Stimpson, (i.e. the race-different text as fact) can be seen to be enacted in the first feminist issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry*. Edited by Elisabeth Abel this feminist edition, entitled 'Writing and Sexual Difference',<sup>32</sup> included a short story by Bengali writer Mahasveta Devi, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. As Gallop, in her critical response contained within the collection, points out, 'Draupadi' is said to represent the transition in the collection 'from West to East, ...from implicit to explicit political perspective' as well as 'from metaphor to fact. 'Draupadi' lays bare the physical violence sublimated in metaphors of textual production.' (p. 6). The story is, then, seen as representing a moment of materiality in the metaphoric atmosphere of the critical essays that precede it: 'Draupadi' offers the immediacy of explicit political fact. This construction is readable in terms of white feminist critical longing. Elisabeth Abel suggests a number of possibilities:

. . . white feminist restlessness with an already well-mined white female literary tradition; . . . the internal logic of white feminism's trajectory through theoretical discourses that, by evacuating the referent from the signifier's play, fostered a turn to texts that reassert the authority of experience, that reinstate political agency, and that rearticulate the body and its passions. (p. 478)

In short, Abel argues that '...white women turn to black women to articulate a politics and to embody a discursive authority that are either lost or not yet found.' (ibid).

By the mid 1980's the feminist critical agenda was dominated by questions generated by poststructuralist interventions into the literary field.<sup>33</sup> The concern over positive images that shaped critical activity in the late 1970's and early 80's had



largely been superseded by debates around the issue of textuality and women's relation to language. In light of the crisis over representation, the incursion of postmodern discourses into feminist literary debates and the clear anxieties that have ensued in their wake, Abel's suggestions intimate that black/raced women's writings offer the fantasy of a space untroubled by any such issues. In a universe where all that seemed solid increasingly melts into air, where signifier and signified part company, work by black women writers is seen as the point where everything joins up, stabilises, levels out. The disruption brought to the feminist 'order of things' - loss of ground, stability, and authority - is healed by appeal to the steadying influence of black women's writing.

This construction of black women's texts is rendered deeply problematic when it is considered that the kinds of representational difficulties that, today, are attributed to postmodern philosophy, were around long before questions of language, representation, and subjectivity preoccupied feminist thinking. The point where appeals to universal sisterhood was undermined was not, as it would appear, with the incursion of poststructuralism, but rather with challenges from black and other feminists not 'included' in the original feminist remit. In 1980 Audre Lorde wrote:

By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus on their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.<sup>34</sup>

The extent to which these issues were placed on the feminist map by black feminist critique is largely disavowed, and hence are made difficult to address. Jane Flax takes this thinking a stage further in that she suspects the degree of hostility directed at postmodern theories to be displaced '...anger at the "others" for disturbing the initial pleasure and comfort of "sisterhood"'. She continues:

Since directly attacking women of color or voicing our resentment of them (in public) would be politically unthinkable, is it easier and more acceptable for

white women to express our discomfort with different discourses and the politics of knowledge claims by categorically rejecting postmodernism and branding it politically incorrect?<sup>36</sup>

Pushed further, the preoccupation with thinking difference through the postmodern allows for a more comfortable engagement with race for white women. First, because it is rendered simply one in a universe of differences competing for our attention, and second, through certain deployments of deconstruction (where race is declared a 'fiction'), it furnishes a space for thinking about race which avoids a confrontation with the social fact of one's whiteness.

Unlike Stimpson, as opposed to pursuing a direct connection to the realm of fact, Gwin acknowledges the idea of a reading /theoretical process: 'I am not sure what the next step will be in this process of reading ourselves through one another. I only feel that this may be our beginning.' (p. 23). For Gwin, then, reading from the position of the black women's texts 'other' is a strategic move with the aim of 'working through' the legacies of being socially positioned as a white woman. Having thus 'confronted' the full extent of white women's otherness to black women, Gwin is then in a position to *listen* to black women's articulations of biracial female experience. However, though the critical journey proposed by Gwin differs significantly from Stimpson's, the destination is the same, and no less problematic.

The aspiration of *truly hearing* black women runs into similar difficulties to those accrued by Stimpson's pursuit of factual description, in that the achievement of discursive transparency, were it possible, would not necessarily dispense with questions of appropriation. The inherent non-innocence at the heart of appeals to innocent, objective meaning undermines any appeal to an anti-imperialist relation to the text based on pure seeing. In addition, issues of textuality are placed firmly to one side, if not ignored altogether, in the effort to attain an unmediated hearing of black women. This is not simply to castigate Gwin for failing to think through these issues but rather to register the effect of asserting an unproblematic vision of black women

as a theoretical goal, in the light of the *availability* of critiques around representation (in contradistinction to Stimpson, who writing in 1970, was competing in a wholly different critical/discursive universe)<sup>37</sup> In a conversation with Sneja Gunew, Gayatri Spivak refers to the way in which the words of the 'Native Informant' are granted a literalness that elsewhere is subject to question:

. . . his stuff was unquestioningly treated as the objective evidence for the founding of so-called sciences like ethnography, ethnolinguistics, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems relate only to the one who knows. The person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self. These days, it is the same kind of agenda that is at work. Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications. This is very frightening.<sup>38</sup>

The 'Native' text is granted authenticity while the (white) self that reads is in representational crisis. The radical movement that Gwin attributes to her own reading position, one of considerable pain and upheaval, can be contrasted with the supreme stillness that is conferred upon her chosen texts. What is more, in Gwin's case, the goal of hearing leads to a total collapse of author into text, so that literary considerations are entirely missing from her discussion. By aiming to really hear black *women*, through reading herself as other in their *texts*, Gwin is in danger of undermining any engagement by black women writers with literary politics. Rita Felski comments:

. . . it is clear that fictional works are shaped by relatively autonomous aesthetic structures which mediate the text's relationship to ideology. A reflectionist understanding of literature as authentic reproduction of authorial experience pays inadequate attention to the way texts signify as literature.<sup>38a</sup>

As such debates that are burgeoning elsewhere in the feminist literary field fail to be

'applied' to the race-different text in Gwin's formulation. While it can be said that the relative unavailability of discourses concerned with expressly literary political issues of representation and language explains Stimpson's neglect of textual matters, the same cannot be said for Gwin. An effect of this omission is to suggest a model of black women's writing based on the documentary, or the sociological.

### ***Marvellous recordings: black writing as sociology***

This idea of black writing as an immediate presentation of 'black reality', is far from new, as this now infamous review of Toni Morrison's *Sula* indicates:

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification 'black woman writer' and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, in the context of her Nobel award, Morrison was referred to as a 'feisty chronicler of black America.'<sup>40</sup> Both comments are interesting in that they seek to establish a distinction between what is properly *literary* and what is not. For Blackburn, an opposition is set up between (white) American literature and black recording, a binary which operates as a code for other divisions such as universal/particular; white/black; metropolitan/regional; important/irrelevant; serious/provincial; talented/untalented. The disruptive term in the review's attempt at classification is talent. The admission of Morrison's talent breaks open the neat division of black writing as untalented, as mere writing down<sup>41</sup>, or passive recording on the one hand and serious, creative, white, literature on the other. By way of restoring equilibrium, Blackburn is obliged to urge Morrison to become 'universal',

to transcend her 'blackness', to become American, to relinquish her role as black recorder and enter the serious realm of the literary. For Johnson, however, the intention behind the remark is a good deal more sinister. In his consideration of the prize committee's decision to name Morrison as Nobel Laureate, his assessment of her as feisty chronicler forms the basis of an argument designed to question her award. Turning on a distinction between literature and politics Johnson asks:

. . . has the Swedish Academy, which awards the prize, allowed the silver currency of literary judgment to be adulterated (not for the first time) by the baser metal of politics?

Morrison's designated status as chronicler, together with what Johnson sees as her eschewing of the European literary tradition in favour of 'American Africanism' puts her, quite literally, beyond the pale of literary consideration. The alignment of European (with its repressed significance of white), silver (meaning pure), and literary judgment as opposed to 'American African' or BAF (a term borrowed from the discourses of political correctness signifying Black American Female), politics, base metal (contaminant), chronicling, is an arrangement of meaning intended to expel Morrison from the literary enclosure. Confined to 'minorities', or to interested whites who perhaps want a 'taste' of a minority culture, Morrison's work (and by extension that of all black writers, which according to this logic is simply representative of one another) is deprived of its potential for disrupting the orthodox literary order of things: the disguised particularity and political interests of the European tradition for one, the wholly gendered and racialised nature of what passes for the pure currency of literary judgment, for another<sup>42</sup>. If it is considered that 'systems of domination find expression in virtually all areas of cultural practice and symbolic exchange'<sup>43</sup> the political debate about whether black or other raced writing counts as literature cannot be ignored. Designed to protect disguised interests, the frontier of the literary field itself is a crucial location for the exercise of domination. One of the major issues at stake in the literary or artistic field is that of its limits or

legitimate participation: 'Saying of this or that tendency in writing that 'it just isn't poetry' or literature means refusing it a legitimate existence, excluding it from the game, excommunicating it.'<sup>44</sup> Such expulsions serve the interests of those who dominate the field: 'it is the rule of the game which will favour the trumps that they hold which tends to be imposed on everybody'; the dominant definition imposes itself on everyone 'as a more or less absolute right of entry'(p. 144). Literally beyond the pale of the literary, 'black' 'chronicles', 'sociology', 'recordings' , however *marvellous* or *feisty*, find themselves cast outside the bounds of literary consecration, and hence outside an important sphere of symbolic production and influence. '<sup>45</sup>

### **Black women's writing and literary politics**

The effects of representing the stable term in another's discourse, or in Sara Suleri's words, material for another's epistemology, are multiple. One of the more worrying is the way in which white feminist constructions of black women's texts (as *embodiments* of vitality; human spirit, endurance, authenticity, French feminisms, the postmodern) function to screen out texts that do not conform to the critical 'house style'. In other words, this idealisation of writings by what gets constructed as 'black' women becomes a fixing of those texts, an essentialising which masks the sheer range of texts, not to say meanings, that circulate as writings by racially different women authors. Sneja Gunew comments, with reference to the Australian context:

. . . they choose the parts they want to hear, and they choose what they then do with this material; and what seems to happen in very crude ways, within the context of multiculturalism, is that certain people are elevated very quickly to those who speak for all immigrants: in terms of funding, and in terms of the dissemination of their work, and so on. As a result, you don't get to hear about the rest, because 'we have covered that,' and those few token figures function as a very secure alibi.<sup>47</sup>

In the feminist critical field, the question of reading and race for white critics has been posed in relation to a notably limited range of texts. The overdetermination of writings by African-American women writers and the corresponding lack of attention paid to British black and Asian women's writings in criticism by white feminists is a case in point. Indeed, works by African-American women writers have tended to operate synecdochally, as standing for black women's writing. Following Gunew's point there is a real danger of tokenism here; of believing that by 'including' Toni Morrison or Maya Angelou black women's writing has been addressed. Or even that 'race' has been addressed. The dynamic complexity of racial categories is screened off, denied in favour of a construction or taxonomical arrangement based upon representative examples. The beginnings of a literary race gallery can be discerned.

### **Reading not seeing?**

The problem of seeing the text is far from solved by simply appealing to reading, however. Faced with the critical problem of 'seeing' Judith Butler stresses the need to acknowledge the process of reading as relentless and continued. Adopting a permanent position as self-conscious reader of an event, as opposed to viewer or observer, Butler attempts to avoid the traps of appeals to pure visibility. If seeings are merely disavowed or disguised readings, 'contestable construal[s]' (p. 16) their contestability is assured through the assertion that there is only reading. If there is no possibility of avoiding reading then the question of interpretation is transferred from one whose goal is accuracy and truth, to one based upon strategy and politics.

Butler authorises her own reading of the Rodney King events, then, not in terms of better or more accurate view but in those of strategy. In a footnote she states:

I do not mean to suggest by 'white racist episteme' a static and closed system of seeing, but rather an historically self-renewing practice of reading, which when left uninterrupted, tends to extend its hegemonic force. Clearly, terms like 'white paranoia' do not describe in any totalizing way 'how white people

see,' but are offered here as theoretical hyperboles which are meant to advance a strategically aggressive counter-reading. (p. 22)

In a characteristic move, Butler dispenses with the problems of referentiality even as she attempts to intervene critically in an event marked by referential violence. At once suggested as part-explanation of the King events and a discursive counter Butler's argument refuses to deal with the question of 'real' whiteness. Furthermore, the use of the term *hyperbole*, with its denoted significance of exaggerated, extravagant meaning, '...not intended to be taken literally' (OED) to describe her theoretical work, acts to introduce a fundamental difficulty in Butler's reading. One of the more intractable problems with her reading of the trial is her refusal to account for the ways in which her diagnosis of the existence of a white racist episteme *connects* with how actual white people see or read. By contrast, Gwin admits both the problematic nature of the distinction between black and white women, and the discursive nature of the signifier 'white women' but attempts to hold onto the concrete privileges that are consequently made available to *actual* white women in the world (p.22) through reference to racist cultural scripts, Butler can only emphasise their separation.

In asserting the *figurativeness* of white racism, Butler empties of referential content the very episteme she identifies as bearing the responsibility for leaving King bloody and beaten. Butler thus evades any discursive responsibility for what she writes. By stressing the gap between world and discourse in this way Butler leaves entirely unexamined the most important of the questions that the King event raises. To use her own words how is such a feat of interpretation possible? How does her identification of the paranoid structure of whiteness *relate* specifically to the brutality of the LAPD? And how was it made possible for those twelve members of the jury to conclude what they did. Was it simply that the Simi Valley court selected twelve paranoiacs that day? What bearing does Butler's reading have on the verdict if it is intended merely as a strategic counter to that verdict? While whiteness as



pigmentation is by no means automatically consonant with discursive productions , and skin and meaning do not readily line up, it follows equally that they cannot be said to *never* coincide. There is no easy separation between race as a lived, material condition or designation and racial discourse.

Butler's assertion of extreme strategy or even fictionality, of her formulation 'white racist episteme' serves equally to evacuate any consideration of power from her argument. By detaching her discourse so emphatically from the situation she uses it to describe Butler avoids the issue of power that her suggestion of aggressive reading opens up. If the answer is to provide aggressive counter-readings the question of decidability is also effectively glossed over. It is hard to imagine a more aggressive reading of the evidence in the King case than that offered by the defence. What is it about Butler's reading, given this, that is preferable as a version of events? What is there to stop a simple reversal of Butler's view in favour of the racist reading? Whose reading wins the day? Who has the most power to make a reading stick? These and other questions like them, questions which are essentially ethical issues, are evaded by Butler's assertion of theoretical hyperbole and aggressive reading.

The white paranoia is asserted by Butler not as 'a static and closed system, but rather an historically self-renewing practice of reading'. Nevertheless, it is the case that the history of this self-renewal is neglected. Butler's 'white racist episteme' relies on a profoundly ahistorical psychoanalytic (Lacanian?) narrative, of disavowal, projection and repetition compulsion and as such presents a closed loop. The 'circuit' of white paranoia is constituted, hence, as 'the projection of their own aggression, and the subsequent regarding of that projection as an external threat' (p. 19) which projecting 'the intent to injure that itself enacts then repeats that projection on increasingly larger scales, a specific social modality of repetition compulsion' (p. 22). Having diagnosed 'social' paranoia Butler cuts her argument loose from its signifying ground by denying its social application. Thus producing her own closed

circuit of reasoning, the beauty of her reading is protected from the question of critical and social responsibility. After all, it's only a reading, it's not about 'real' white people, the question of how to break the circuit of white paranoia is thus suspended. The repetition compulsion, albeit in its social modality, is set and left to run like clockwork, and is thereby uninterrupted. The power of Butler's model, as an alternative way of thinking about the King events, in disdaining history, is significantly underdeveloped and hence, weakened. It consequently has little purchase as a means of intervening in the defence's aggressive construal of Rodney King's role in the events of March 3rd 1991 and its aftermath.

Despite her profound distrust of appeals to the visual, to how things are, Butler cannot resist grounding her own authority in that which she seeks to jettison as a legitimate basis for argument. So Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, offers 'a *description* of how the black male body is constituted through fear....' (p. 18, my emphasis). The evidence (Fanon) for the prosecution (Butler) is deemed to speak for itself. Here Butler appeals to the *ability* to see:

To claim that King's victimization is *manifestly* true is to assume that one is presenting the case to a set of subjects who *know how to see*; to think that the video 'speaks for itself' is, of course, for many of us, obviously true. (p. 17)

Such a claim is surprising in the context of Butler's sustained attack on the visual field as a basis for knowledge. This persistence of 'seeings' is less a matter of Butler's theoretical inadequacy, a gap in the fabric of her argument, but more one of the *inevitability* or perhaps, irresistibility, of appeals to immediate vision, or innocent meaning. Both Butler and Phelan act as though seeing can be avoided, as if seeing were a theoretical/philosophical error that can be corrected, through the assertion of reading, or in Phelan's case, blindness<sup>48</sup>. This is a point which is related to the question of essentialism in feminist theory. Like essentialism, the issue of seeing cannot simply be dispensed with, marked as contaminated, by dint of its colonialist/racist/Enlightenment structuration, and subsequently, abandoned. Indeed,

it has been argued that there is no possibility of a pure anti-essentialist position:

If one sets out to do a critique of metaphysics, there is no escape from the metaphysical enclosure. You cannot simply assert, 'I will be an anti-essentialist' and make that stick, for you cannot not be an essentialist to some degree. The critique of essentialism is based on essentialism<sup>49</sup>.

Rather, the question of essences should be thought around, according to Spivak, 'a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.' (p. 9) Similarly, with the reading/seeing division, marking the impossibility of visibility for feminist criticism, the impossibility of innocent, or essential readings (appeals to how things are, descriptions etc.); is needfully more than the simple assertion of non-innocence, anti-essentialism or reading.

Self-consciousness with regard to reading cannot be endlessly sustained. The slippage between what is decoded, *read*, and what is merely *seen*, is in many ways a difference between what is unfamiliar and familiar. Which is to say that the act of decoding may be disguised through the fact of familiarity.<sup>50</sup> Butler does not pause to consider the extent to which her own familiarity with psychoanalytic ideas structures her reading of the King events and subsequently blinds her to alternatives. The point at which readings slip into seeings cannot always be detected, even as a permanent disposition of reading is asserted. Rather than constituting a philosophical limit, however, Butler's aggressive counter-reading reads as theoretical defensiveness. It's-only-a-reading-its-not-about-real-white-people seems less about answering difficult questions such as those of power and authority than of offering self-protection from critical responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

In giving 'raced' women the task of carrying the burden of the real, the responsibility for stability in an otherwise chaotic, unpredictable universe, white feminist critics are ensuring that any debate around the question of race is foreclosed

upon. Silently articulate, artless bearers of authentic significance the black woman's novel/poem or play has no need of being *read*. All that is left is to collect its various examples to furnish the glass cabinets of women's writing courses and feminist journals. In the place of any engagement with race-different writings white feminists simply curate a postmodern race gallery. White feminist criticism becomes an exercise in information collecting. But it will neither do to simply assert continuous reading . Dispensing with the materiality of race in favour of an emphasis upon figuration raises its own problems. This is precisely the neglect of referential violence that the King events can be seen to represent. It is far from adequate to simply to install a transcendental equation where seeing is oppressive and reading is radical. In pushing against the idea of seeing, there is a danger of reifying the idea of reading and evading critical responsibility for the meanings that are produced

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2 vols., ed. by Paul Lauter and others (Lexington, Mass: DC Heath, 1990), I, pp. 1640-1704 (p. 1653). Cited in Houston A. Baker, 'Scene . . . Not Heard', in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. by Robert Gooding-Williams (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 38-48 (p. 42).
2. Catherine Stimpson, *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 1
3. Houston A. Baker, 'Scene . . . Not Heard', p. 42.
4. Patricia J. Williams, 'The Rules of the Game', in Gooding-Williams, pp. 51-55 (p. 53)
5. Judith Butler, 'Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia', in Gooding-Williams, pp. 15-22 (p. 15).
6. Patricia J. Williams, p. 51
7. Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 92.
8. Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*, (London: Routledge 1992) p.viii.
9. Nancy K. Miller in 'Criticising Feminist Criticism' by Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (London: Routledge, 1990) pp.349-369 (p. 364).
10. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller, 'ReelTime/Real Justice', in Gooding-Williams, pp. 56-70 (p. 59)
11. Patricia J. Williams, p. 53
12. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markham (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 111-12, in Butler, p.18.
13. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987) pp. 198-9
14. Houston A. Baker, p. 47.
15. Patricia J. Williams, p. 52
16. See Marek Kohn, *The Race Gallery: the Return of Racial Science* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 30.
17. Cited in Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 97-8.
18. Pauline Melville, 'Beyond the Pale' in *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present*, ed. by Margaret Busby (London: Vintage, 1993), pp.739-43, (p. 740)
19. The certificate to which Melville refers is that of her great-great grandmother, 'occupation- slave of D. Melville.'(p. 740)
20. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 42.

21. See Sander Gilman *The Jew's Body* (London: Routledge, 1991) and Nancy L. Stepan, 'Race and Gender: The Role of Analogy in Science', in *The 'Racial' Economy of Science: Towards a Democratic Future*, ed. by Sandra Harding, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) for discussions of Jewish and Irish prognathism or facial projection.
22. 'In 1890, census enumerators were charged with the task of classifying people of mixed African and European descent as Mulattos (half and half), Quadroons (a quarter black), or Octoroons (one eighth black). This proved completely unworkable, and the mixed categories were discarded in 1900; however, the Mulatto class reappeared in 1910 and 1920. From 1930, the one-drop rule was subsequently adopted: 'one drop of black blood' consigned an individual to the Black category.'  
Marek Kohn, p. 21
- 23 Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), pp. 64-81 (p. 78)
25. Spillers comments: 'Even though we tend to parody and simplify matters to behave as if the various civil codes of the slave-holding United States were monolithically informed, unified, and executed in their application, or that the 'code' itself is spontaneously generated in an undivided historic moment, we read it nevertheless as this- the *peak points*, the salient and characteristic features of a human and social procedure that evolves over a natural historical sequence and represents, consequently, the narrative *shorthand* of a transaction that is riddled, *in practice*, with contradictions, accident, and surprise. (p. 78).
26. Daniel P. Moynihan, 'The Moynihan Report', *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).
27. Catherine Stimpson, 'Black Culture/White Teacher' (1970) in Catherine Stimpson, *Where the Meanings Are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces* (London: Routledge, ) p.1
28. Catherine Stimpson p. 7; Minrose Gwin, 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or ... The Necessity of Being Other' *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 1. 1988, pp.21-31
29. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by G. Raymond and M. Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 131
30. Elizabeth Abel 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation', *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1993), 470-498 (p. 492)
31. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 37
32. This issue has since been published by Abel under the same title. (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982).
33. See Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992) for an account of this shift in critical priorities.
34. 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' in *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) pp. 114-123 (p. 116).
36. Jane Flax 'The End of Innocence' in *Feminists Theorise the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 445-463 (p. 459)
37. There is, of course, an entirely different way of reading both of these texts, which I would argue constitutes a second order discussion, that of reconstituting the critical field in which both essays were

competing at the time of writing. That I do not reconstruct them contextually here is attributable to my own interest in registering their potential effects as theories of the black/race-different text. To begin to reconstruct their own intertexts and interests at this stage would distract and interrupt this process.

38., Sneja Gunew, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 412-420 (p. 420)

39. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989) p.28.

39. Sara Blackburn, 'You Still Can't Go Home Again', *New York Times Book Review*, Dec 30, 1973, p. 3 cited in Barbara Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 168-185 (p. 171)

40. Daniel Johnson, 'Of Prizes and Prejudice', *Times*, 8 Oct 1993, p.16.

41. This distinction has been mobilised in relation to British working-class texts. John Healy's autobiographical work *The Grass Arena* (London: Faber, 1988) was considered, in the following Guardian review to be beyond literature: 'Healy may consider himself a writer. After all, he's had books published. But he isn't in a literary sense. . . Healy doesn't write, he writes down. There is a yawning difference. Healy has an addictive personality. His latest addiction is expunging his experiences by *writing them down*.'

Deborah Orr, 'When life is a real bummer', *Guardian*, 30 Jan 1992, p. 31

42. See Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).

43. Editors Introduction, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 2.

44. Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. by Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 143

45. Other labellings cause no less problems however. Morrison, in interview has objected to her categorisation as a magic realist, 'as though I don't have a culture to write out of. As though that culture has no intellect.' Paul Gilroy, 'Living Memory', *City Limits*, Mar 31-Apr 7 1988, pp. 26-7 (p. 27)

47. Gunew and Spivak, p. 413.

48. 'By declaring our eyes blind and impotent we may be able to resist the smooth reproduction of the self-same. We may be able to inhabit the blank without forcing the other to fill it.' p. 33.

49. *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 7. See also Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989) for this point.

50. cf. Bourdieu discusses the ways in which the arbitrary, culture, naturalises itself through familiarity, so that the cultural conditions and conditionings necessary to the development of particular tastes, are by necessity *forgotten*. See *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984)

## Chapter 2. Better to Say Nothing: White Feminist Authority, Reading and Race.

When I finished (and gave!) the piece 'on race' - let's just say it created more problems than it solved - I began to wonder whether there was any position from which a white middle-class feminist could say anything on the subject without sounding exactly like that . . . . The rhetorical predictability of it all. The political correctness. Just like 'men in feminism.' In which case it might be better not to say anything.<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Miller is not the first feminist critic to suggest that white feminists may be ill-equipped to write, to use her phrase, 'on race.' As I note in the previous chapter, Catherine Stimpson, writing in 1970, called for the resignation of the white teacher of black culture, on the grounds of what she saw then as the inevitability of white misreading and appropriation. In 1976 Patricia Meyer Spacks wrote how she felt unqualified to comment upon black women's texts on the grounds of her racial difference. Utilising a quote from white psychologist Phyllis Chesler: 'I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America... As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had.' Spacks defended her decision to exclude black women's writings from her feminist literary survey *The Female Imagination*.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Catherine Belsey has written of her decision to refrain from analysing Toni Morrison's work and 'Third-World or African American' texts in terms of her project *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*:

And if all this seems ethnocentric, as it is, I want to draw attention to the dangers of imperialism inscribed in anthropology. Just as feminists want men to take us seriously, but not to speak on our behalf, so it is not for me to speak for other existing cultures, whether Third-World or African-American. My job here, I believe, is to listen.<sup>3</sup>

As has previously been noted, Spacks' reasoning occasioned strong protest



from black feminist critics such as Alice Walker and Deborah McDowell. 'Spacks never lived in nineteenth century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?' remarked Walker, a comment which puts into question the presumed base from which any reader reads with acuity, not to say wit. McDowell criticised the normative judgement at the heart of the text, arguing that white feminist critics were guilty of perpetrating 'against the Black woman writer the same practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars'<sup>4</sup>

Given the force of both critiques it was at first surprising to find arguments for *not* reading black or Third World texts still being made. However, on closer reading there is a distinction to be drawn between Spacks' and the other's arguments. Whereas Spacks makes her case in terms of an *essential* racial difference, albeit founded upon experience ( her *whiteness* prevents comment on the text's perceived *blackness*) Stimpson and Belsey assert the idea of critical abstention as an anti-imperial stance; as a deliberate, *political* option on the part of the white critic, signalling their *respect* toward the autonomy of black feminist criticism. Belsey, in particular rejects the idea of experience as a foundation for reading, insisting that 'The problem of writing on Morrison is political.' (p. 92) It is to this - saying nothing as a political move - that I wish to turn my attention.

In this chapter I argue that, despite the best of intentions, the act of saying nothing on the part of white feminist critics succeeds mostly in reinscribing a relation of dominance to black women's texts. Briefly, the handing over of responsibility for 'dealing with' race to black women/feminist critics and writers not only reaffirms a notion of the authority of experience that elsewhere in the feminist critical field is subject to considerable scepticism; it also adds weight to the idea that race refers solely to what is perceived as blackness; that whiteness is not a racial designation. Contrary to the insistence on the *politics* of not commenting on black women's writings there is an unwitting essentialism operating in the critical decision to not write. Gayatri Spivak refers to the idea of refraining from comment on the grounds of

one's gender or skin colour as, respectively, genitalism and chromatism.<sup>5</sup> In what follows I investigate the implications of adopting , in this case, a chromatic relation to texts. With this I make two main points: first, that deciding not to read, write or comment on texts that are perceived as 'raced' forecloses a debate that has been key to feminist literary criticism, namely that of reading positions, i.e. the relation of the reader's subjectivity to the text and the implications of this relationship to the meanings produced; and second, more crucially, that the ideas of dominance and authority are not dispensable with in the manner that these critics suggest. Consequently I dispute the inherent equation of speaking/visibility/voice with authority and silence/invisibility with its lack. Given that whiteness operates by virtue of its *unmarked* relation to blackness, to say nothing about race is hardly to relinquish authority; it is instead to leave the relation of white supremacy wholly unchecked.

### **'Just like men in feminism'**

It is interesting that both Belsey and Miller appeal to the idea of men in feminism as a reason not to participate in the reading and race debate. The political argument put forward by Belsey is founded upon an analogy between the situation of the white feminist reader faced with *The Bluest Eye* and men 'advanc[ing] their careers by writing about feminism and feminist criticism' (p. 92). Miller, likewise, implies if white feminists are to 'race' what men are to feminism, to say nothing at all might be preferable. Through this analogy each critic constructs the critical scene in terms of its predictability. Just as men cannot help but appropriate feminism, the white feminist reader/critic cannot but colonise the race-different text. It is this inevitability of appropriation in Belsey's case, or of causing more problems than one solves in Miller's, that constitutes grounds for abstaining from comment altogether. The racial equivalent of Elaine Showalter's 'Critical Cross-Dressers'<sup>6</sup>, white feminist critics of black women's writings are seen as in danger of transgressing the

boundaries of what is perceived as black feminist territory.

Such arguments present a depressing scene: an unwelcome, critically intrusive, profiteering, presence in the field of black women's writings, the position of the white feminist seems irredeemable. For the hopelessly appropriative critic the logical move would seem to be *not* to read, to leave it to those who are thought to know best, black writers and critics themselves. However, it is precisely this inevitability, the 'rhetorical predictability of it all' to quote Miller, that I wish to question.

First, the extent to which the parallel of men in feminism is helpful is itself debatable.

With this Belsey and Miller misrepresent what is a complex, above all *unresolved* debate around gender and reading. Both critics present the formulation 'men in feminism' as a transparent illustration of appropriation, and as such foreclose an area of ongoing discussion. While many feminist critics have expressed anxieties over the potential for male critics to *master* feminist criticism, recuperating its challenges to patriarchal, canonical constructions of value, it is equally the case that establishing secure grounds for feminist work, for instance through reference to female biology or experience, is fraught with problems<sup>7</sup>. Identifying what is distinctive about feminist criticism along with establishing criteria for membership is then by no means clear. So far there has been little to *guarantee* that which is seen to bind a class of men, or indeed of women, reading. There is effectively less to suggest that the relation of men to feminism is *automatically* governed by appropriative motivations. While it may be true to say that we always read from somewhere, the locus of that somewhere is very much open to question. As Diana Fuss has indicated the debate over gender and interpretation, and hence, men in feminism, is in many ways a struggle between essentialism and deconstruction; briefly, establishing a secure basis from which to read on the grounds of gender runs the risk of essentialism, while deconstructing that basis is seen to open feminism unilaterally to men, and is consequently a burgeoning

political issue.

Even placing this problem to one side, however, the effect of setting up a correspondence between 'men in feminism' on the one hand, and 'white feminists and black writing' on the other, is no less intractable. Analogies, on the grounds of their assumptions of *sameness*, can function to obscure the complex cultural history of relations between the respective groups, or entities under comparison. So, this case, the particular histories of relations between black and white women, in the feminist critical field and beyond, becomes obfuscated by those of something termed 'men and women'. The parallelism effectively reduces consideration of the respective specificities (between various racialised categories of women in the feminist critical field not to mention gender relations in the said field) to that of a universalised structure: an abstract equation pitching dominant against dominated replaces consideration of material differences between the particular racialised configurations of identity. The specific issue of the varying histories of white women/feminists encounters with 'black writing' not to mention 'black people' is translated into a more universalised narrative of oppression. Debate, thereby, is construed in terms of a struggle between oppressor and oppressed. The question to be asked, and by extension answered, is, consequently, one of how, or indeed whether, members of the dominant category are able to read the work of the dominated. The implications of abstracting or universalising in this way are that the matter of appropriation is deemed inevitable; the over-identification of white women with dominance, through analogy to the obduracy of patriarchal dominance, renders change difficult to imagine. The dominant cannot help but dominate; men cannot but take over or master; white women cannot but assume authority. The day that Belsey looks forward to, the day she gets to publish her reading of Morrison's 'subtle, lyrical account of postmodern love' (p. 93) is hard to foresee.

## Speaking For Oneself

Both Belsey and Stimpson, however, can be seen to be supporting black critical autonomy, conforming to paradigmatic feminist ideals regarding speaking for *oneself*, as opposed to being spoken *for*, in recommending white critical abstention. Asserting the *moral* unacceptability (p. 7) of a white authored criticism, Stimpson advocates that whites quit the critical scene to allow space for an autonomous black theoretical project:

Only blacks can create such a theory. . . . Since a common principle of black revolutionary politics is the need for black self-determination, it would be obviously inconsistent for a white person to make critical, authoritative comments. (Ibid)

Stimpson also calls for the resignation of the white teacher of black culture: 'White people at the moment have neither the intellectual skill nor the emotional clarity nor the moral authority to lead the pursuit of black studies' (p. 2). With white critics wholly lacking in ability and authority, critical reading of black writing is best left to the experts: black critics. White critical abstention enables black self-empowerment. Belsey, similarly, justifies her decision to refrain from commenting on Morrison's work in terms of respect for black feminist critical endeavour, in addition to a concern about appropriation:

. . . I have a fear of appearing to colonize her work, or at least of seeming to pre-empt the work of African-American critics. . . . what she writes about includes the white expropriation of black experience and I am afraid to repeat that process. To make her fiction work for me, to get it to define desire on my behalf, might well be one form of such expropriation; to analyse Toni Morrison, who writes about black experience, *is to advance into an area constructed in the first instance by those pioneering African-American feminists who have done so much to put black women's writing on the critical agenda.* (p. 92, my emphasis)

Although the struggle for self-definition is central to feminist politics across 'race', there is a sense in which speaking for oneself has a particular currency in black feminist theory. Patricia Hill Collins explains:

Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African-American women is not surprising. Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for 'them and one for ourselves' creates a peculiar tension to extract the definition of one's true self from the treatment afforded the denigrated categories in which all Black women are placed.<sup>8</sup>

This dual consciousness, the living of two lives, one public, one private, gives an urgency to black women's self-definition. If the securing of autonomous space has been of great importance to black feminism, white feminist respect for that space is politically crucial. Stimpson's and Belsey's decision can be seen to take on political significance when read in the light of this search for black critical autonomy. Indeed, both critics recommend a secondary supportive role rather than total silence. In advocating critical abstention by whites, Stimpson, nevertheless, restates her commitment to reading black writings: 'I want to keep reading black literature, though. What matters is reading it accurately. And doing that demands a new, practical, literary theory for white people' (p. 2). This new 'theory' begins with accepting 'black authority of interpretation' (p. 7). Critical comments, if they are made at all, are to be confined to the realms of the informal and the personal. Belsey likewise states that her perceived task is that of listening, of withholding her analyses until a more appropriate time: 'I conclude that at this stage of history I ought to feel a certain inhibition about setting out to substantiate in a detailed analysis the case I should like to make about Toni Morrison . . . . Perhaps one day.' (p. 93).

**'Is anyone, is anyone white, preparing to listen?'**<sup>9</sup>

Posited as an alternative to what is seen as the imperialist, anthropological stance of *speaking for* Third-World or African-American cultures, listening is politically significant in Belsey's argument. As a strategy for undermining the white dominance of feminist theory the act of listening appears compelling, and is not without support in the wider feminist field. Suggesting, for instance, ways of 'doing' theory 'That Is Not Imperialistic, Ethnocentric, Disrespectful', Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman remark:

It may be that at this particular point we ought not even try to do that [i.e. 'create feminist theory jointly'] - that feminist theory by and for Hispanas needs to be done separately from feminist theory by and for Black women, white women, etc. But it must be recognised that white/Anglo women have more power and privilege than Hispanas, Black women, etc., and at the very least they can use such advantage to provide space and time for other women to speak.<sup>10</sup>

As with Stimpson's suggestion of a supportive, back seat role, a prescription of white feminist silence is seen to offer a means of correcting the hitherto asymmetrical relations between white and, here, black and Third World feminists. White feminists, by adopting a more quiet position than they may be used to, are urged to use their racial privilege to secure spaces for racially non-hegemonic women to speak. That said, listening is not without problems as an anti-imperialist strategy.

Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin, for instance, are critical of the 'assignment of fixed positions' where the woman of color is 'educator/critic' and the white woman is 'the guilty and silent listener', arguing that: 'The dynamics set up would seem to exempt both parties from the responsibilities of working through the complex historical relations between and among structures of domination and oppression.'<sup>11</sup> Audre Lorde makes a related point in *Sister/Outsider*:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male

ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the masters concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.<sup>12</sup>

The act of listening on the part of white women then can function not only to drain the energy away from black feminist critical endeavour but also to obscure the complexity of race relations between black and white feminists and women. In obscuring this complexity in this way, by assuming too permanent a stance of listener, white feminists absolve themselves from taking an active role in transforming racial politics in the feminist field. Rather than thinking about whiteness, the critical goal becomes implied as one of *understanding* blackness. Vron Ware remarks:

. . . white feminists have managed to avoid dissecting these cultural and racial components of white femininity, although they have become eager to hear what black women have to say about their racialised and gendered identities.<sup>13</sup>

Listening can operate, then, to trap white feminists in what Trinh T. Minh-ha refers to as 'the mold of permanent schooling . . . wait[ing] for the delivery of knowledge as a consumer waits for his/her suppliers goods'<sup>14</sup>. This relation of white consumer/black text is precisely what concerns Hazel Carby in her essay 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood':

In arguing that feminism must take account of the lives, herstories and experiences of black women we are not advocating that teams of white feminists should descend upon Brixton, Southall, Bristol or Liverpool to take black women as objects of study in modes of resistance. We don't need that kind of intrusion on top of all the other information-gathering forces that the



State has mobilized in the interest of 'race relations'. . . . Instead of taking black women as the objects of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanisms of racism amongst white women<sup>15</sup>.

Objects of study, something to be *comprehended*, understood, mastered, the lives and texts of black women in terms of this construction offer white feminists protection from having to reflect upon their own *denied* yet implicitly racialised position. This state of affairs has led Helen (Charles) to ask:

. . . white women have listened and in some cases have become experts at listening to the voices of Black and/or Asian women, but how has this listening affected their own voice and understanding? Can 'white women' in politics and/or in academia only see the colour of their skins in relation to women of colour?<sup>16</sup>

Which is another way of saying that listening, for the white feminist critic, has limits unless it is accompanied by reflection upon one's own relation to the racial order of things. Thinking about whiteness is, then, a crucial part of listening to the Other.

**'What would I do white?'**

I would do nothing.

That would be enough.<sup>17</sup>

Electing to stay silent as a contribution to any debate around race fails on the grounds that it is a strategy that is only available to white feminist critics. Obligated to carry the burden of race as a marked identity, silence on the subject of race is a luxury not available to black women/feminists. In the context of the British colonial project Vron Ware comments:

While white feminists with colonial backgrounds may not feel it necessary or desirable to talk about this aspect of their personal histories, the majority of black women living in Britain are in an entirely different position. Depending

on the specific history of their country of origin, they are visibly and personally connected to the British Empire whether they wish to recognise this fact or not. (p. 228)

Given the means by which racial identities are culturally structured in Western thinking, with the dominant designation enjoying *unmarked* status, whiteness maintains its dominance precisely because it gets to say nothing about its racialised nature, or as Diana Fuss puts it: 'As a self-identical, self-reproducing term white draws its ideological power from its proclaimed transparency, from its self-elevation over the very category of 'race'.'<sup>18</sup> Choosing silence becomes, itself, a marker of that privilege: 'The claim to a lack of identity or positionality is itself based on privilege, on a refusal to accept responsibility for one's implication in actual, historical or social relations, on a denial of one's own personal history and the claim to a total separation from it.'<sup>19</sup> Such thinking perpetuates the myth that race refers solely to 'blackness'; that only black, i.e. non-white people 'have' something called 'race.' As a consequence, whiteness is denied and remains *unseen* as a racial category, and hence the structure which shores up white domination stays intact. This sense of whiteness as nothing permeates Ruth Frankenberg's findings in her study of its social construction. Interviewee after interviewee makes the point that whiteness is hard to grasp as a specific racial category. Cathy Thomas, for example, describes:

. . . the formlessness of being white. . . . If I had an ethnic base to identify from, if I were even an Irish American, that would have been something formed. But to be a Heinz 57 American, a white, a class-confused American, land of the Kleenex type American, is so formless in and of itself. It only takes shape in relation to other people.<sup>20</sup>

Here the structure of whiteness as an empty signifier, as absent centre, as othering, as forming rather than formed, is made explicit. Its perceived relational quality belies the extent to which it demands form of the Other. That the ethnicity so desired, 'even' Irish Americanness, is itself a function of a white supremacist order of things.

The absent centre insists upon the definition of the margin; whiteness demands of the 'ethnic' identity, form, definition. Or in Helen (Charles) words, 'white' assumes a place of control out of which all 'others' are categorised' (p. 32). Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston's essay 'How It Feels to Be Colored Me' exposes the racialising nature of the white gaze<sup>21</sup>. Remembering the day she 'became colored', Hurston narrates the change from when racial difference, in her early childhood, functioned geographically: 'white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there' (p. 152) to when it became essential. Leaving 'the little Negro town of Eatonville', Hurston was no longer 'Zora of Orange County' but instead 'a little colored girl'.(p. 153)

I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown - warranted not to rub or run. . . . I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. (pp. 153-4)

The other side of the racial coin so to speak, here it is the racialised category, 'colored', and not whiteness, that is revealed as unstable, relational. Hurston's racialised identity takes shape in relation to white people. It is following her separation from Eatonville that Hurston's ethnicity becomes fixed, essential even, 'fast brown - warranted not to rub or run'.

This demand for ethnic definition can be seen to operate in instances where white people register shock when they are confronted with formations of whiteness in the black or 'raced' imagination. While similar constructions of whiteness as nothing inhere in what bell hooks refers to as 'the black imagination' it is by far a less benign nothingness than in white-authored accounts. Ghostly, associated with death as in *Beloved's* 'men without skin' who command the slave ships, whiteness assumes a terrifying form in black representation. bell hooks comments upon the confrontation of white students with these images in her classroom:

Many [white students] are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful. Even though the majority of these students politically consider themselves liberals, who are anti-racist, they too unwittingly invest in the sense of whiteness as mystery.<sup>22</sup>

In light of all this it is interesting that Nancy Miller's concern over the 'race question' was expressed not in terms of being perceived as an imperialist or as racist but of sounding like a 'white-middle class feminist'. Richard Dyer refers to the shock registered by Jean Paul Sartre, who, writing an introduction to an anthology of negritude poetry, finds himself being seen as a white man.<sup>22a</sup> In terms of hooks' argument these responses can be attributed to racist thinking, the failure of the white imagination to grant critical intelligence to black people.

However, I would argue that least some of this shock comes from belief in the the myth of whiteness as *nothing*, rather than malign thoughts about the capacity of the Other for critical thought. Talking or thinking about whiteness is a conversation the majority of white people are not used to having. Active thinking about whiteness is a recent development in anti-racist work. The topic of whiteness will appear strange, unfathomable, at least for those outside fascist, white supremacist organisations who until now have the monopoly on thinking self-consciously about being white. The implications of not reflecting upon whiteness as a white person in a wholly racialised universe are multiple but this is not the same as intentionally promulgating racist thinking or ideology.

A further dimension of the shock of discovering one's own whiteness may be due to the denied connection of the designation 'white' to other ethnic categories. The realisation that whiteness as a racial designation is not, as it pretends to be, innocent and elevated above something called 'race', and is instead intensely connected to the racialisation or marking of the Other is profoundly shocking, not

least for whites involved in anti-racist politics. Helen (Charles), again, asks:

Could it be that it is far easier for some 'white women' to speak of racism from an assumed Black woman's point of view? What happens to the 'white woman' who feels more confident about anti-racist strategies than her own place in the dominant whiteness that we live in? (p. 30)

To speak of 'race' as anti-racists is a far more comfortable position than to inhabit the privileges it accords to those of us with white skin. Taking up a position as the victim of racism overlooks the everyday, mundane workings of a racially-stratified universe which confers privilege upon white people, whether it is wished for or not, whether it is noticed or not.

The paper that Miller refers to as the source of all the trouble, 'Dreaming, Dancing, and the Changing Locations of Feminist Criticism', takes as its subject the problematics of locating 'political agency for feminist subjects.'<sup>23</sup> A meditation on racial and cultural difference, Miller's paper sought to relinquish critical authority through presenting a montage of quotes. Through juxtaposing 'voices that don't normally address each other' (p. 75) Miller intended to surrender the authorial control that usually inheres with the critic, in addition to foregrounding feminist intertextualities, a process of reading *through*, rather than *toward*. Stepping out of the critical spotlight, Miller uses italics to 'mark the shift of attention to the quotations themselves' (p. 75). She continues:

*My own dream does not appear here*, but it was of course the invitation to dream, to think about dreams that lured me into the writing in the first place. Dream passages from seminar readings pressed themselves forward; the shape of the paper rapidly took form from the quotations which seemed to lead each other, against each other, *without me*. (p. 76)

Although expressly concerned with agency, Miller's agency in the production of her paper is effectively denied. Far from giving up its authority the essay simply hides or rather displaces it. Peggy Kamuf comments upon the concealed authority that inheres

in arranging conversations between theories, positions and authors:

. . . one might wonder about the posture that . . . stands outside 'the conflict of interpretations and overviews' without proposing to adjudicate among them, but merely so as to give them a stage upon which to disagree. There is no assurance, of course, that such exteriority to the conflict has been or indeed can be reached.<sup>24</sup>

Miller's involvement in her essay's conversation is merely disguised and not dispensed with, or reversed. 'Dreaming, Dancing . . .' succeeds mostly in erasing Miller's social and textual positioning as a white woman. The foregrounding of blocks of quotation mainly by black women writers does not succeed in the reversal of authority Miller intends. Rather it provides a convenient hiding place for the white critic, who, by not including her own dream, by denying her role in the production of her paper (which took form 'without me') disappears from view.

Miller's anxieties over finding a position from which to speak about race without sounding like a white middle-class feminist are, then, misguided in that it would be far better to try to speak precisely as white, as middle-class, whatever that may entail, however problematic an enterprise that may be, to attempt to let these aspects of her identity *speak*, to bring them into signification, instead of disappearing into the white spaces between quotations. Given the entrenched nature of racist structures of thinking, being and feeling, sounding like a white middle-class feminist may not be a bad place to start.

### **Always black**

It is in this regard that the stance of listening/saying nothing serves to position the other-text as always black or 'raced'. By including the voices of black women through largely unincorporated quotes, as in Miller's case, or simply listening in Belsey's, it is implied that black and raced writings are fixed in significance. Miller, in the context of her Jewishness, questions this determination of the raced text/voice:

Did being Jewish really mean I *always* wanted to speak 'as a Jew' *and be spoken as one*? The short answer is no, I have not found a way to assume that rhetoric of identity (although I am both, I cannot lay claim to 'Jewish feminist'); it is not a ground of action for me in the world, nor the guarantee of my politics - or writing.(p. 95)

For Miller, then, the assumption on the part of the reader that her race is of permanent priority in her writing and political work is oppressive. This fixing denies the potential for their texts to signify in ways other than that of race, its agenda becomes determined as paramount by the white reader as being always about race. To take the point further, do Toni Morrison or Joan Riley or Buchi Emecheta or Maya Angelou wish always to be spoken of as black women writers? Morrison in particular has expressed a degree of ambivalence about the racial classification of her writing. Put differently, the formulation white reader/black text has the effect of simplifying a considerably more complex configuration of social categories that intersect at the meeting place between reader and text. As Miller puts it, 'What gets left out of Black and White, Black or White? What is the relation of difference to plural? Sexism to Racism? Feminism to Racism? Race to Theory?'(p. 77) The stance of listening to black women's writing can therefore serve to fix those texts in a permanent relation of otherness to white critical endeavour, whilst simultaneously functioning to repress or mask the points of connection that are textually available. The relation between reader and text is less determinable than this equation (white reader-listener/black text-speaker) supposes, in that texts provide varying potential for identification and/or distance. In the juncture between text and reader there are possibilities for identification/othering as limitless as there are configurations of identity in the text or indeed in the reader. In Spivak's words:

. . . when the card-carrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone 'speaking as' something or the other, I think there one encounters a problem. When they want to hear an Indian

speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenisation.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to fixing the Other as Other, in what threatens to solidify into a permanent relation, the intended redistribution of power brought by listening is undermined. The reversal of authority is rendered problematic by the complex relation of knowledge to power. While the assumption of the role of listener seemingly operates to acknowledge both the hitherto delegitimated/subjugated knowledges of black women and the *lack* of knowledge on the part of white women, such a scenario relies upon an overdetermined equation of knowing with power and lack of knowing with lack of power. In the context of the emergence of the discourse of true sex, Michel Foucault comments how:

the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.<sup>26</sup>

The silent listener is, then, by no means in a necessarily powerless position. This can be demanding and insistent. The Other disappears into the shape of the demand. Allowing the Other to speak, to inhabit the silence of the dominant self, giving voice, can achieve the reverse of redistributing power. Rather it can strengthen the dominance of the listener.

### **The Problem of Authority**

Following this, the strategy of white reader/critics relinquishing their own authority by giving voice to black writers and texts cannot succeed in the manner intended. If, as I have argued in chapter 1, authority and transparency are mutually reinforcing, white 'descriptions' of black texts can never achieve the innocence they aspire to. The discursive authority bound up with the notion of description allows that authority to reassert itself unhindered. Furthermore, to conceive of authority as



something which simply can be refused is to misapprehend the nature of authority as a social force. It is also to allow its influence to proceed uninhibited in the very act of attempting its restraint.

As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Language and Symbolic Power*, authority is less a matter internal to a particular person, group or indeed language, than a force external to it, a pressure exerted from without : 'authority comes to language from outside'<sup>27</sup>. Authority is, then, conferred and institutional rather than inherent or personal.

The power of words is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokesperson, and his speech - that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking - is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the *guarantee of delegation* which is vested in him. (p. 107)

Following this, authority can never be constituted as a personal possession to be relinquished at will. Indeed the very act of construing authority as a *decision* to be made, that is whether or not to have it, or as *personal property* to be donated to a more deserving case, is itself an authoritative act and can be read as what Bourdieu refers to as a 'strategy of condescension': '. . . which allow[s] one to push the denial of social definition to the limit while still being perceived through it. (p. 124) In other words, in order to refuse authority one has to be availed of the authority to do so. To refuse privilege is itself a privilege.' . . . the condescending and consecrated person chooses deliberately to transgress the boundary; he enjoys the privilege of privileges, that which consists of taking liberties with his privilege. (Ibid)

Put differently, the idea of authority as something to be refused denies the extent to which it conferred and is hence, in part, the property of a *reader*. In her discussion of Jennie Livingstone's documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Judith Butler has commented upon the ways in which the dominant culture reserves the right to refuse self-authored determinations of identity. Referring to the death of Venus Extravaganza, a black male to female transsexual who transgresses gender and racial

boundaries to live as a white woman who has relationships with men, Butler remarks:

As much as she crosses gender, sexuality, and race performatively, the hegemony that reinscribes the privileges of normative femininity and whiteness wields the final power to *renaturalise* Venus's body and cross out that prior crossing, an erasure that is her death.<sup>28</sup>

Venus' transgressive self-identification as a white woman nonetheless contains within it the potential to be *read* in ways that she did not intend: in normative terms she is black, male and gay. In the words of Gayatri Spivak: 'A subject position is a hard place, and we cannot read it ourselves; we are given over to others even as we make inevitable public attempts to read our subject position.'<sup>29</sup> The self-determined refusal of white authority can, at any time, itself be refused. My decision, then, to forgo the authority that inheres with whiteness can never totally negate the fact that I will be perceived through the delegated power of a racist culture that confers authority upon me whether I wish for it or not. Skin privilege is not dependent upon wanting it: to believe it as such is to overestimate the one's own performative power (that is, the power to bring about a situation by saying it, to refuse authority by saying so), to mistake the power of the delegation for personal merit or authority. Indeed, as Bourdieu points out, it is precisely this *mistake* that secures the authority of the discourse of authority:

[the] specific efficacy [of which] stems from the fact that they seem to possess in themselves the source of a power which in reality resides in the institutional conditions of their production and reception. (p. 111)

The refusal of authority, consequently, on the part of one who is institutionally endowed with authority is an illusion, an epistemological sleight of hand which serves to disguise an essentially authoritative act.

Turning on ideas of accuracy, fact, truth, morality, Stimpson's 'Black Culture/White Teacher' is unable to complete the exchange of authority that is deemed necessary for an end to white critical dominance. As such the political

division installed between black and white critical projects threatens to solidify into a chromatic or essential division. Even overlooking the intractability of the issue of white authority, the appeal to an automatic, unproblematic black authority of interpretation to be unconditionally accepted by white critics renders change difficult to imagine. Although it is implied that the white/black critical relations she prescribes are historically determined (for example, speaking of her class composed of nineteen white and six black students she remarks 'History has made geniality improbable', 'white readers, *at the moment*, have...the moral authority to lead the pursuit of black studies', p. 2), the reliance upon transcendental notions such as authoritative truth and accuracy makes it difficult to imagine the possibility of change. What began as a strategic division of the critical project along racial lines hardens into one more rigid: political segregation soon becomes chromatic. Despite the sense that her essay looks forward to a time of more favourable relations between white readers and black writers Stimpson's theoretical assumptions render this obscure. If the critical goal for the white reader is to be one of reading black writing *accurately* ('I want to keep reading black literature, though. What matters is reading it accurately,' p. 2) Stimpson is unable to make theoretical provision for its realisation.

### **'I am not a Rock': Reading and Transference**

I am not a Black Goddess

I am not a Rock

I am not a Photograph

I am not a picture in your mind

I am myself struggling toward myself<sup>39</sup>

A further consequence of assuming too permanent a stance as listener, on the part of the white feminist critic, can be seen with reference to psychoanalytic ideas.

Allowing texts to speak for themselves through the use of unincorporated quotation or adopting a stance whereby the black woman/text is the unequivocal knower to white woman's lack, white feminist critics can be said to be enacting a transference relationship to those texts/voices. Jane Gallop explains the concept with regard to her relationship to the dictionary:

According to Lacan, transference occurs in a relation to a 'subject presumed to know'. In transference one considers the other as the Other (capital O). The Other means what s/he says and does what s/he means. The Other's language is not alienated and the Other knows what the subject's own discourse means. At one point, Lacan calls the Other, 'the locus of the signifier's treasure' (Ecrits, p. 806). The gesture by which we go to the dictionary, the gesture of trying to find out what a mysterious word 'means', is the attempt to go to the place of the signifier's treasure. . . The dictionary can function as the Other, and in that way, it is not surprising that it produces certain effects of transference.<sup>40</sup>

In construing the black text as a site of authentic truth and meaningfulness, white critics

produce the kind of extreme idealisations of Black women and their texts that form the content of Donna Kate Rushin's poem 'Black Goddess'. Elaine Jordan, for example, comments with respect to her experience of teaching black women's texts:

One of the reasons why white women have responded so enthusiastically to writing by Black women is because it so often offers such uncompromising identifications with women who are tough and enduring, often humorous.<sup>41</sup>

Refusing such a construction, the poem's images of stillness highlight the freezing, ossifying nature of the transference relation - 'I am not a *Rock*', 'I am not a *Photograph*' - whilst at the same time refusing the essential, the authentic as grounds for self-definition: 'I am myself struggling toward myself'. Likewise, the protagonist of Grace Nichols' poem, 'Of course When They Ask for Poems About

the 'Realities' of Black Women', objects to being 'the location of the signifiers treasure' thus refusing the transference:

they want a little black blood  
undressed  
and validation  
for the abused stereotype  
already in their heads

Or else they want  
a perfect song

Here Nichols exposes two related constructions of black women's subjectivity, as victims of racism, and as culturally authentic and strong. The poem sounds a warning to those who invest in these images:

Touch a black woman  
you mistake for a rock  
and you feel her melting  
down to fudge

cradle a soft black woman  
and burn fingers as you trace  
revolution  
beneath her woolly hair<sup>42</sup>

Some critics have argued the effects of transference to be an inevitable part of reading and, therefore, the solution to lie in its exposure, and consequent working through or interpretation, rather than its eradication<sup>43</sup>. In this line of thinking, to foreground desire in critical practice is to work against repressive systems of meaning, in that letting desire speak draws attention to 'the fact ... that no reading has access to the meaning of the story and that all readings are stories of readerly

desire.’<sup>44</sup> Such a positive claim, nevertheless, needs to be set against the problems that are created when white feminist desire constructs a black woman’s literary work as its object.

### **Readerly Desire**

Catherine Belsey’s text stresses the importance of foregrounding desire in writing:

It is important to do that: to write in a way that keeps desire in view for the reader, not just as an object of knowledge (though it is that) but as a lived condition, so that it is possible to see not only what but *how much* is at stake in the stories Western culture tells about desire. (p. )

Making desire visible then is the suggested means of exposing the stakes of the West’s self-narrations. Given the critical importance attributed to the connections between nations and narrations, to refer to Homi Bhabha’s edited collection of essays, these stakes cannot be underestimated: ‘To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself.’<sup>45</sup> In other words, exposing the West’s investment in its own narratives on desire is a deeply political enterprise whose goal is to shift those investments as it analyses them.

Building on a *politics* of desire, Belsey’s text simultaneously recommends a political silence with regard to reading Toni Morrison’s and other Third World writers work. However, the manner in which Belsey inscribes her political silence into her text can be read to undermine the ‘welcomeness’ of this intended anti-colonial gesture. Far from being quiet, Belsey’s silence, with respect to Toni Morrison’s work, is a peculiarly noisy affair. The texts critical/political silence takes the form of a page and a half description of what would have been said but for the matter of ‘appearing to colonize [Morrison’s] work.’ (p. 92) The following extract is exemplary:

I should dearly have liked to consider how *The Bluest Eye* (1979) records the

cultural construction of the object of an unattainable but obsessional desire, and to discuss the brilliant account in *Beloved* (1987) of the imbrication of the deadly past of slavery in a present which cannot in consequence realize the possibilities of life. (p. 92)

An effect of this abundant supply of detail regarding what is, after all, *not* to be included, is to push against the claim to silence. In this sense, Belsey gets to have her critical cake and eat it: her argument is made, albeit sketchily, and at the same time *not* made so preserving the theoretical protocol she sets up in the first instance.

This is not the only means by which Belsey has it both ways. Perhaps the most serious problem with the argument for critical abstention, as it is presented in *Desire*, is that in deferring analysis of Morrison's work there is a sense in which it is reconstituted as the site of desire in the text. Full analysis deferred, Belsey's explanation is marked by an escalating and urgent desire: 'I should have liked to . . . I should have liked to . . . I should dearly have liked to . . . (p. 92-3). What is more, the definitions of desire subscribed to in the text further confirm Morrison's novels as its prime location. Privileging Lacanian/Derridean modes of analysis, desire is made to signify as:

elud[ing] final definition, with the result that its character, its nature, its meaning, becomes itself an object of desire for the writer. (p. 6)

Desire is what is *not* said, what is "hollowed within the demand" as Lacan puts it (pp. 17-18)

With 'absence' signifying 'as desire's recurring figure'(p. 15) the self-conscious withholding of what appears to be fully worked out analyses of Morrison's works serves to mark those works as the very embodiment of desire in Belsey's text. With this there is also a sense in which Belsey's own (withheld) analysis is simultaneously constructed as an object of desire, which is then held before the reader who is left presumably wanting more. This appears to be a self-conscious strategy of the text:

. . . one feature all these texts have in common, including Lacan's, including

Barbara Cartland's is that by citing, by evading, by teasing, they elicit the desire of the reader, thus demonstrating the degree to which desire is an effect of the signifier. (p. 19)

A strategy that is undercut by the fact that within the terms of her own frame Belsey reinscribes the very relation that she sets out to avoid: 'To make her fiction work for me, to get it to define desire on my behalf, might well be one form of such expropriation...' (p. 92). In refraining from such an analysis Belsey only succeeds in expropriating (to use her term) Morrison's texts as the site of *Desire's* desire. If the other texts in her study are explicated theoretically *in terms of* desire, Morrison's texts *embody* desire in their *partial* and absent explication.

With this there is a further point to be made with regard to the textual location of Belsey's comments on Morrison. Appearing at the end of the chapter 'Postmodern Love,' this non-reading of *The Bluest Eye* etc. takes place at the end of the first section 'Desire now'. In addition to constituting the site of desire for the critic, Morrison's texts also mark the limit of the thinkable/sayable, the point at which the text itself hollows out, where discussion fades into *Desire's* absent centre. The section on Morrison marks the transition from the first to the second half of the book 'Desire at other times', a point which occurs, coincidentally, almost at the centre of the text. The race politics of this are questionable. As numerous postcolonial critics have indicated, the alignment of the colonial subject/territory with unspeakability, not to say unreadability, has a long and pernicious history. Elleke Boehmer discusses the manner by which colonial anxieties, regarding the inadequacy of scientific paradigms of knowledge to the Enlightenment project of mapping the colonised lands, become displaced onto the native.

Especially where they were resistant to his requirements, the European represented colonized people as unruly, inscrutable, or malign. Crowd imagery came in handy to suggest a lack of character and individual will...A little differently, displacement in its more pronounced forms is characterized



by its appeal to the Romantic Sublime. *Here the unreadable subject is transformed into the sign of its own unreadability.* What happens, typically, is that description admits defeat, submitting to the horror of the inarticulate. The native or colonized land is evoked as the quintessence of mystery, as inarticulateness itself.<sup>46</sup>

Within the textual territory of Belsey's discussion, Morrison's work constitutes the limit of what is articulable; the effect of which is to undermine Belsey's anti-colonialist claims further still.

To pick up the point about the radical potential of making the transference visible, Elizabeth Abel discusses Jane Gallop's self-confessed transference relationship to African-American feminists. Gallop has stated:

I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women. Those are the people I feel inadequate in relation to and try to please in my writing. It strikes me that this is not just idiosyncratic.<sup>47</sup>

As Abel indicates, Gallop prefers to make the transference visible, '... rather than positing alternatives to it' (p. 473) Questioning the limits of mere displays of readerly desire she states: '... by simply transferring the transference, [Gallop] reenacts the process of idealisation that obscures more complex social relations.' (p. 472) In exposing the fact of the transference Gallop stops short of doing anything about it. This is odd, given her commitment to working through and interpreting the transference in other contexts, for instance, in her readings of the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, for instance.<sup>48</sup> Again a critical debate that has currency in feminist criticism is bracketed off from consideration in the context of race. Similarly, the flirtatious relationship that *Desire* sets up with the reader, with its veilings and evasions, its teasing aesthetic, may have radical potential in certain contexts, its radicalness with respect to offering a way of rethinking race politics is far less certain.

## Conclusion

All three critics under discussion in this chapter place emphasis upon the inevitability of reading equating with imperialism. This sense of inevitability permeates Miller's, albeit tentative, reasoning. Saying nothing becomes an option in light of the damage that is seen to be caused by her attempt to say something about race: the piece 'on race' does more harm than good, better to say nothing than add fuel to the fire. However, saying nothing is by no means the critical innocence that each critic intends. To say nothing is both to perpetuate the idea that whiteness is *nothing* in racial terms, and to belie the fact that there is plenty to say on the part of white feminist women who, whether she wishes to recognise it or not, and indeed whether she desires it or not, is the beneficiary of a white supremacist set of racial designations. It is interesting, then, in this light, that both Stimpson and Belsey seek to restrain the significance of their respective critical silences. Neither critic opts for a literal silence in the reading and race debate, instead both offer a figurative notion of 'not speaking' that turns on ideas of authority and its distribution in the critical field. In attempting to make their silences readable, however, both critics run into troubled territory.

This is not to say that the ambition of listening is any less problematic. Belsey fails to realise her self-assigned task of listening to Third World and African-American women; listening remains a wholly rhetorical gesture in her text. The redistribution of authority through opting for silent listening ultimately fails. While it is tempting to buy into what could be termed a logic of regret - choosing silence as means of renouncing authority or as an exercise in damage limitation - saying nothing not only causes no less damage, it leaves the issue of white dominance unchallenged. As Spivak has remarked 'Unless one is aware that one cannot avoid taking a stand, unwitting stands get taken'<sup>49</sup>

1. Nancy K. Miller in 'Criticising Feminist Criticism' by Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.349-369 (p. 364)
2. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), p. 5
3. Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.10-11
4. Alice Walker, 'One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Works' in *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, Alice Walker, (London: The Women Press, 1984) pp. 361-383 (p. 372); Deborah E. McDowell, 'New Directions For Black Feminist Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed.by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago 1986), pp. 186-199 (p. 186). The Walker comment is cited by McDowell, p. 187.
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in 'Questions of Multiculturalism', by Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 412-420 (p. 416).
6. Elaine Showalter, 'Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year', in *Men in Feminism*, ed. by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (London: Methuen, 1987), pp.
7. See *Men in Feminism*, ed.by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (London: Methuen, 1987), also Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989) for useful discussions on the issue of gender and reading. Fuss in particular provides an insightful account of these debates.
8. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 94.
9. June Jordan, 'On Listening: A Good Way to Hear' in *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays*, by June Jordan (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 15-19 (p. 19)
10. Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, 'Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6 (1983), 573-581 (p. )
11. Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?' in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* ed.by Teresa de Lauretis (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 191-212 (p. 199).
12. Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 113
13. Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London & New York: Verso, 1992), p. xv
14. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 85
15. Hazel Carby, 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70's Britain*, ed.by Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 212-235 (p. 232)
16. Helen (Charles), 'Whiteness - The Relevance of Politically Colouring the 'Non' in *Working Out*, ed.by Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix and Jackie Stacey (London: Falmer Press, 1992), pp. 29-35 (p. 29).
17. June Jordan, 'What Would I Do White?' in *Lyrical Campaigns: Selected Poems*, by June Jordan,

(London: Virago, 1989), p. 35.

18. Diana Fuss, 'Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification', *Diacritics*, 24 (1994), 20-42, (p. 22)

19. Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty 'Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?' p. 208, in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.) *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1988) pp. 191-212

See also Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990):

Unlike women of color, white women have the 'privilege' of 'forgetting' or not noticing the operations of race and many socially sanctioned opportunities for doing so. (p. 175)

20. Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 196

21. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing. . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. by Alice Walker (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979).

22. bell hooks, 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 338-346 (p. 339-40)

22<sup>a</sup>. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 45

23. Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 75

24. Peggy Kamuf, 'The Division of Literature', *Diacritics*, 25 (1995), 53-72 (p. 56).

25. In Gunew and Spivak, p. 413.

26. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990) p. 62

27. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by G. Raymond and M. Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 109.

28. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 133

29. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'a response to' *The difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, ed. by Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamin, 1989) pp. 207-220 (p. 210).

39. Donna Kate Rushin, 'The Black Goddess' in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. by Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), pp. 328-330 (p. 329).

40. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) p. 109

41. Elaine Jordan, 'Not My People': Toni Morrison and Identity' in *Black Womens Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 199 ), pp. 111-126 (p. 118)

42. Grace Nichols, in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 52-54 (pp. 52-3).

43. See Gallop, op. cit. for example.

44. Carla Kaplan, 'Reading Feminist Readings; Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine of Feminist Criticism' p. 187 in *Listening to Silences; New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994) pp. 168-194 (p. 187)
45. *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 3
46. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 95 (my emphasis).
47. Elizabeth Abel, 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation.' *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993) 470-498 (p. 470)
48. See *The Daughter's Seduction* pp. 72-4, for a discussion of reading and transference.
49. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 147

### Chapter 3. 'One of Us': Feminists Reading and the Politics of Identification

And do we not, after all, easily recognise one another?<sup>1</sup>

If some white feminists have stressed the difficulties of reading black women's texts to the point of doubt over whether they can read at all, others have remarked upon the relative ease that accompanies reading. Far from being 'other', the race-different text are greeted with nods of recognition, as in Eva Lennox Birch's classroom.

Despite the differences between our own and the autobiographers' social and cultural backgrounds, we found ourselves nodding in agreement and recognition at the articulation of experience we shared as women, irrespective of colour.<sup>2</sup>

Alison Light notes how, whilst studying *The Color Purple*, students identified very strongly with aspects of Alice Walker's novel:

Our readings began instead from a position of identification rather than of difference... we all talked about the power and appeal of such writing in terms of recognising, identifying with, and desiring such affirmation as women, as white, working-class, middle-class, feminist or not.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than being overwhelmed by difference, such readers proceed from a sense of connection based upon recognition. In both cases texts are perceived as speaking to their readers 'as women'. Shared, as opposed to disparate, experiences form grounds from which to read. While Light goes on to problematise such identifications, Birch affirms identification as a basis for reading writings by black women. So, the work of British writer Buchi Emecheta is described, for example, as 'recreat[ing] a female experience that was recognisable by women irrespective of their colour.'<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Birch asserts how black women's writings inscribe a notion of oppression that reaches *beyond* that of race: 'In examining racial prejudice black women writers expose the cultural constraints of class, gender and religion with which white women

can also identify.’<sup>5</sup> Race oppression then, speaks to other oppressions which are in turn ‘recognisable’ to white women readers.

The notion of a reading position based upon recognition or identification has an important history in feminist theory/literary criticism. Christina Crosby describes the process of readerly identification as constituting a ‘founding moment of a certain feminist self-consciousness’ which heralds ‘the discovery of an identity common to all women, woman’s identity as ‘the other.’<sup>6</sup> Indeed feminism in its second wave can be said to be founded upon on a notion of global gender oppression; the idea that gender relations were organised fundamentally in terms of male domination was axiomatic to early feminist theorists. However, this history of identifying on the grounds of a shared gender oppression, ‘as women’, is simultaneously problematic. As has been shown in chapter 2 a number of black feminist critics have questioned the basis for white women’s assumption of universal sisterhood. From Barbara Smith’s observations as to the unwitting Eurocentrism of early investigations of ‘women’s’ writing to Audre Lorde’s concern that, ‘There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood which does not in fact exist’<sup>7</sup>, many critics have challenged the use of ‘universal woman’ on the grounds that its foundation, far from being all inclusive, is one of exclusion. Trin T. Minh-ha explains further:

Just as ‘man’ provides an example of how the part played by women has been ignored, undervalued, distorted, or omitted through the use of terminology presumed to be generic, ‘woman’ more often than not reflects the subtle power of linguistic exclusion, for its set of referents rarely includes those relevant to Third World ‘female persons’.<sup>8</sup>

The incursion of feminist postmodern critique has further undermined the basis for universal sisterhood with its relentless questioning of the category ‘woman’, not to mention the nature of subjectivity itself. Privileging difference over sameness, postmodern feminists raise doubts as to the usefulness of identification as a basis for reading and political organising<sup>9</sup>. Carla Kaplan suggests, for example, that

proceeding from a position of identity reduces texts to little more than self-indulgent mirrors<sup>10</sup>. Unable to take account of the text's differences, identificatory reading reproduces what is already known. So, in the case of the white feminist identifying with *The Color Purple*<sup>11</sup>, for instance, she is said to find what she is looking for: herself. The 'raced' text is reconstituted in her own (white) image. Called universal, the text is reduced to the reproduction of the self-same. Alison Light points up this effect in the marketing of Spielberg's film of Walker's novel. 'It's about life. It's about love. It's about us' proclaimed the promotional trailer, a statement which, Light argues, denies the film's sexual and racial specificity<sup>12</sup> in order to increase its marketability (p. 89) This erasure of racial difference is also borne out in Birch's identificatory reading practice.

Stressing the recognisability of black women's writing for white feminist and women readers, Birch's universal reading is, nevertheless, undermined by its inattention to race. In both texts Birch relies upon notions of transcendence and translation as means of rendering the racial content of her chosen texts legible to white readers. It is argued that through 'examining racial prejudice' black women writers simultaneously raise issues with which white women 'can also identify' (class, gender and religion). Furthermore:

The examination of racial and sexual oppression in their writing inevitably starts with, but crosses the bounds of race, and emphasises the universality of women's sense of the constraints with which a socially constructed gender position burdens them. (1994, p. 7)

Put differently, if race is the (particular) starting point for the majority of black women writers it is soon transcended in favour of the universal story of gender. The specific (that is, *not*-universal) script of 'race' in the text is then rendered legible through the translation of its particular codes into the general, universal script of women's oppression. Racial difference is seen, then, to interrupt the process of identification as a woman<sup>13</sup>



Because I am not black I cannot have complete identification with the body of black feminist critics such as Barbara Christian or Barbara Smith who have successfully encouraged the development of black feminist theory. (p. 4)

Here Birch is more explicit: stressing the ‘truth of [Barbara] Smith’s observation that ‘When white women look at black women’s works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics’” she comments: ‘This is a self-evident truth but will only become an impassable barrier to understanding if the *only* way of looking at that work is from the viewpoint of race.’ (p. 2). The argument is that ; white women, despite being self-evidently ill-equipped, can read black women’s writing, not only because it offers other reading positions to that of ‘race’, it speaks also to all forms of women’s oppression.

While these remarks seem intended as a means both of relinquishing any claim to a totalising representation/authoritative statement regarding black women’s texts and of acknowledging ongoing tensions between the projects of white and black feminist criticism, they nevertheless present problems. First, in attributing self-evidence to Barbara Smith’s comments about white women’s (in)capacity for dealing with race politics, Birch involves herself in the kinds of difficulties outlined in chapter 1: by freezing Smith’s significance in the field of feminist interpretation there is an unwitting rehearsal of the discourses of ethnicity which rely upon the fixing of the ethnic as a category. Second, the translation of race into gender, of illegible into legible, is a colonising gesture. In a discussion of Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ Diana Fuss writes of the colonial potential of the act of translation:

The theoretical move to banish history from the realm of translation operates to conceal, and ultimately to preserve, a colonising impulse at work in translation; Benjamin’s ‘great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language’ [77] represents an imperialist dream, a fantasy of linguistic incorporation and cultural assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

Birch's invocation of the universal operates in such a way; the many tongues of black women's writings are translated into the one true language of sisterhood/gender oppression. The 'particular' discourse of race is translated into the 'general' of gender. With this Birch perpetuates the fantasy that white women are un-raced, that they are simply women; if black women read and write, irrevocably, as black women, white women do so as *women*. The feminist dream of a common language is revealed here as an imperialist fantasy. Rather than constituting unknown territory, in this view, black women's writing offers confirmation of something that is already known. Reading becomes less a matter of decoding something strange and unfamiliar than of affirming a set of knowledges that are already, in advance, in the possession of the white reader. Reading becomes then an acknowledgment or recognition of these facts as opposed to a confrontation with difference. The perceived gender script wins out, that of race being relegated to the realm of the particular. This is a familiar scene. Again to recall chapter 1, black writing generally has often found itself interpolated, like Jade in *Tar Baby*, at the centre of an exasperating opposition: 'She was uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalling out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics.'<sup>14a</sup> In marking race as a particular script, dividing it from the universal story of gender, Birch's analysis flips erratically between these two poles: 'Universalled out', 'blackened up', 'ours' and 'theirs'. For all the attempts to respect the traditions of the literature she and her students read by maintaining a position as universal woman Birch only succeeds in othering her texts. As Gayatri Spivak puts it in the context of First World readers and Third World writers: '. . . in order to learn about the Third World women and develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged *as a woman*.'<sup>15</sup> Patricia J. Williams, in a recent lecture, speaks of the 'false luxury of a prematurely imagined community', a place where racism, disharmony is spirited away with a supreme act of the imagination.

To put it another way, it is a dangerous if comprehensible temptation to imagine inclusiveness by imagining away obstacles. . . . We must be careful not to allow our intentions to verge into outright projection by substituting a fantasy of global seamlessness that is blinding rather than just colour-blind.<sup>15a</sup>

For Williams, the assumption of community is to be replaced by the 'difficult work of negotiating real divisions' among women, 'of considering boundaries before we go crashing through, and of pondering our differences before we can ever agree on the terms of our sameness' (p. 4)

Given these problems, it is not surprising that feminist criticism has moved from saying that we have everything in common as women, to a position of suspicion regarding any form of identification. Proceeding from a Lacanian model of the subject where, to recall, the subject discovers itself, as it were, through self-identification with the image reflected in the mirror, an identification which is nevertheless based upon *misrecognition*, many critics have placed emphasis upon the fictionality of identity and therefore identificatory acts, such as 'seeing oneself' in a text or social category. While the exclusions produced by readerly identification need, somehow, to be accounted for, it is also questionable whether it is possible to dispense entirely with identification as a basis for reading. The emphasis on the denial of difference or the manifest inability to account for differences in identificatory reading practice has tended to produce an overinvestment in difference itself. There is also an attendant danger in writing off identificatory reading as little more than a necessary error or a naive aspect of the feminist past.

In the light of this, in addition to rehearsing some of the arguments against identification as a basis for reading, I suggest a re-examination of their assumptions. Most importantly, I challenge the thinking that conflates identificatory reading with the establishment of universal ground from which to read. In short, to identify with a text is not necessarily to universalise it. To recognise themes and issues from one's own life in a given text is not automatically to explain that text in terms of a universal story. With this I also suggest a re-examination of the universal itself: a

questioning of the ways in which it operates as a code word for authoritarianism/conservatism etc. in feminist postmodern discourse.

I explore these ideas in relation to two modes of identificatory reading: between self and text and in the following chapter between theory and text. The first section of this chapter focuses on two feminist readings of the 'Third World' event of female genital mutilation: Mary Daly's *Gyn/ecology* and Alice Walker's *Warrior Marks*<sup>16</sup>. I have chosen to discuss this issue precisely because of its reputation as site of profound difficulty for Western feminists. This difficulty can be seen to manifest itself in the extreme polarisation of responses in white/Western feminist discourse: on the one hand, there is a view that cultural difference renders the event unreadable, producing a 'we cannot say anything' approach, and on the other, genital mutilation is seen as but one manifestation of a universal plot or story which centres on the abuse of women. A common feature of the depiction of this global war against women is the tendency to reduce the various oppressions endured by women the world over to a single structure. This structure then enables white Western women to identify with their Third World sisters on the grounds of a shared experience.

The implications of abstaining from comment have been raised in the previous chapter. I will confine myself in this chapter to an examination of what happens when white feminist readers choose to identify with events from different cultures. The main reason for choosing Daly's text is that it is, in many ways, paradigmatic of a 'First World' approach at its most problematic and provides a good rehearsal of the debates around 'First World' reading and the 'Third World' text. In addition, although the position Daly presents in her text has been, in many ways, theoretically superseded, its historical status in the feminist canon justifies its examination. This is particularly the case when it is considered that little advance has been made in terms of the issues of reading and appropriation that the text is instrumental in raising. However, while I agree that the majority of responses by white feminists have been at best unsatisfactory and that the fear of being charged with racism is all too pervading, I question the automatic assumption that the issue of

appropriation is irrelevant to Alice Walker on the sole basis of her blackness. In looking at the work of both Walker and Mary Daly I am interested first in disrupting the arrangement of meanings where white and First World and black and Third World are assumed to stand neatly next to one another. That it is, necessarily, the province of a black woman to deal 'properly' with an issue such as genital mutilation. Second, I am concerned with how identificatory reading practice renders intelligible a culturally different act/text/event, and I wish to assess the gains and losses of this intelligibility for the both the Third World and the white/Western feminist critic. Finally, I discuss my own identifications with Jackie Kay's collection of poems *The Adoption Papers*, in order to highlight the shortcomings of arguments that seek to dispense with identification as a basis for reading.

### **The Hag's Liberation: Mary Daly's Cosmic Voyage.**

Published in 1978 *Gyn/ecology* is an important landmark in feminist critical history. Uncompromising in tone, Daly's text proclaimed itself as a wake-up call to women across the globe. *Gyn/ecology* assembles a formidable collection of acts of woman-hatred, of 'gynocidal' activity. Everything from the wearing of stiletto heels to witch burning to foot-binding to rape to twentieth-century gynaecology is held up for scrutiny in a work that is massive in its scope. In gathering together these hitherto disparate acts of oppression Daly's self-stated ambition is the '...discovery and creation of a world other than patriarchy.' (p. 1) Given that, first, 'Patriarchy appears to be 'everywhere' ' and second, '. . . this colonization ... is also internalised, festering inside women's heads, even feminist heads.' (p. 1) the feminist endeavour is one of confronting in full the distortions and perversities that bear the Name of the Father. This confrontation is described by Daly as nothing less than an exorcism:

The Journey, then, involves exorcism of the internalised Godfather in his various manifestations (his name is legion). It involves dangerous encounters with these demons...Our journey involves confrontations with the demonic manifestation of evil. (pp. 1-2)

Having become their 'own exorcists' feminists are then able to cut through the 'maze/haze of deception' so 'springing into free space which is an a-mazing process'(p. 2), thus entering '... the wild realm of hags and crones' (p. 3).

In addition to charting the course of the hag/crone/feminist's liberation, Daly asserts the universality of patriarchal oppression. While the specific acts of 'Goddess-murder' are admitted to be various Daly not only views 'the phenomenon [as] planetary' (p. 111) but also identifies an underlying structure common to all such acts. The 'Sado-Ritual Syndrome' is said to have seven distinguishing features. Briefly: i) 'an obsession with purity'; ii) 'a total erasure of responsibility for the atrocities performed through such rituals'; iii) 'a tendency to 'catch on' and spread'; iv) 'women are used as scapegoats and token torturers'; v) 'a fixation upon minute details, which diverts attention from the horror'; vi) 'behaviour which is at other times unacceptable becomes acceptable even normative as a consequence of conditioning'; vii) 'legitimation of the ritual by the rituals of "objective" scholarship' (pp. 131-3). Each particular oppressive event is then translated into the frame of the Sado-Ritual.

Stressing the essential sameness of patriarchal abuse throughout the world, through recourse to the Sado-Ritual, permits Daly to criticise different cultures, on the grounds that the West's record is no better regarding its treatment of women. Arguing that 'accusations of racism... serve only the interests of males' Daly continues in a footnote:

... it is in the interest of women of all races to see African genital mutilation in the context of planetary patriarchy, of which it is but one manifestation. As I am demonstrating it is of the same pattern as the other atrocities I discuss.

Lest Westerners feel smugly distant from these rituals it would be best to recall some fact of 'our' culture. (pp. 154-5)

These facts include clitoridectomy as a so-called cure for 'hysteria', gang rape, and the use of the chastity belt in medieval Europe. Daly then appeals to a universal sisterhood-in-suffering, so to speak, precisely as a *counter* to any potential

accusations of critical imperialism or, to use her term, racism. Daly's universal, her pursuit of a common identity or structure to patriarchy's oppression of women, is then intended to be inclusive, as opposed to exclusive, to unite the world's women under the banner of the Sado-Ritual Syndrome. Universal sisterhood is predicated upon recognition of the essential sameness of our condition as women worldwide. If the underlying structure of patriarchal oppression is the same problems of imperialism seem to disappear in that we can all recognise one another's experiences; we can all identify with each other on the basis of shared victimhood. 'We' in the 'West' experience, in essence, the same things as 'you' in the 'Third world'; we are in this together, united against a common enemy. 'We' wear high heels; 'you' are/were foot bound; 'we' Europeans were burnt as witches; 'you' Asians as widows. However, despite these intentions there remain serious problems with Daly's vision of a feminist universe which undermine her anti-imperialist aims.

In claiming to identify a single common form to women's oppression *Gyn/ecology* runs up against the kinds of problems that inhere with structuralist approaches. In presuming to identify a deep structure to women's experience in 'patriarchy' Daly's analysis can only fail to account for the particular 'workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists. Where those contexts have been consulted within such theories, it has been 'to find 'examples' or 'illustrations' of a universal principle that is assumed from the start'<sup>17</sup> The imposition of a predetermined frame ensures that Daly finds no more than what she set out to look for. One of the more serious consequences of this neglect of the specific context of gender oppression is the manifest inability of the text to provide any specific engagement with issues of race.

In her essay 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly' Audre Lorde states: 'The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences.'<sup>18</sup> Put differently, in reducing women's oppression to a single structure and in creating a fundamental opposition along the lines of gender, Daly's analysis is unable to address the most crucial aspects of black

feminist critique. Namely, that for non-white women gender is not automatically the privileged site of oppression; that black women are by no means always able to choose their gender over their race in the fight against oppression. In Daly's textual universe there is no accounting for the differential power relations between black and white women, or between white and non-white women, or even within women themselves. Laura Donaldson elaborates the problems in thinking internal differences:

For example, describing the position of a white, middle-class woman either as oppressed or oppressive might vary in terms of her racial or economic status; indeed, she can sometimes be both simultaneously - in a patriarchal society, her femaleness dictates her subjection as a sexual object, and in a racist society, her whiteness dictates an often unwitting participation in sustaining a system of white supremacy. Another way of saying this is that sometimes women can be in the men's room and not even know it.<sup>19</sup>

In using a fixed hierarchical model of universally opposed men and women, class and race distinctions get lost along the way or else added onto the foundational model of gender difference. A further manifestation of this problematic division can be seen in the very different meanings that accrue for black and non-white women around certain universal 'women's issues'. Audre Lorde suggests the following as a place to start:

...for nonwhite women in this country there is an 80 percent fatality rate from breast cancer; three times the number of unnecessary eventrations, hysterectomies and sterilisations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. (op cit., p.70)

As Angela Davis wrote in *Women, Race and Class* (white)feminist campaigning around the 'universal' issue of reproductive rights neglected to notice that for black women/women of colour there was a very different agenda at work. For black women the facts of sterilisation abuse, along with the administering of Depo Provera, an injectable contraceptive with proven side effects, did not sit well alongside white



women's campaigning for abortion on demand<sup>20</sup>. The racism of the Family Planning services had ensured that black women '...had always been given abortions more readily than white women and are indeed encouraged to have terminations [they] didn't ask for.'<sup>21</sup> A woman's right to choose takes on a very different set of meanings when these issues are taken into account.

In reducing gender oppression to a monocausal, culture-neutral model *Gyn/ecology* implies that 'escaping' that model, liberating oneself from the 'world religion' that is patriarchy is the same for all women. Daly's analysis is unable, to borrow a phrase from Teresa de Lauretis, to distinguish between: 'women who wear the veil, women who 'wear the mask'(a metaphor by Paul Lawrence Dunbar often quoted by black women writers) and women who masquerade (Joan Riviere).'<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in *Gyn/ecology* there is no distinction to be made between such practices in that they are all aspects of the state of false consciousness engendered by the patriarchal thought police. In this extract Daly uses the veil as a metaphor for the condition of women in the State of Possession that is male supremacy:

It isn't enough for women who can see the State of Possession merely to 'escape.' The problem is not merely one of escape from the religious, technological, and medical Mafia. So long as we are only escaping, we are re-acting. The etymology of the term *escape* is enlightening. According to Merriam-Webster, it is derived from the Latin *ex*, meaning out, and *cappa*, meaning head-covering, cloak. Thus, as the word literally says, we are slipping out from our head-coverings or cloaks (ex-caping). In other words, as long as we are just escaping, we are simply un-veiling ourselves. Indeed, this is necessary for the Journey. It names the important process of women throwing off such alienating ideological '-hoods' as 'womanhood.' Yet so long as the Voyager is only or primarily escaping, re-acting, she is still haunted by the messages of the agents who spook in the Passive Voice. (p. 339)

Here, the veil is granted a fixed significance: it is a part of the apparatus of the oppressor, something to be cast off; an obstacle to clear feminist vision. What is more the very act of un-veiling is said to be *necessary* for the feminist Voyager; without un-veiling there can be no entry into the Third Passage, no final liberation. While Daly is admittedly deploying the veil as a metaphor, there is evidence to support a more literal reading. Throughout the text Daly conflates material, psychic and social practices. For instance, the wearing of cosmetics is seen as the acting out of a set of oppressive practices designed to obscure or distort woman's true nature, erasing their true Selves. This act is then metaphorised, taken to imply something essential about the women's condition. Such women are termed 'Painted Birds' (p. 334), a condition which enacts in microcosm the position of women in the Phallocracy. Thus the token torturers (the mothers who bind their daughters feet, the female circumcisers etc.) or token women (agents of male supremacy: male-identified women, Daddy's girls, pseudo-feminists), become 'doubly or triply Painted Birds' (p. 335):

. . . the multiply Painted Bird, functions in the anti-process of double-crossing her sisters, polluting them with poisonous paint, making them less and less real in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. For unknowingly, she is herself a carrier of the paint disease, an intensifier of the common condition of women under patriarchy. (p. 336)

In short, a material practice is taken to signify as a transparent symptom or manifestation of the ideological oppression of women by men. Women who wear veils or make-up (the one amounts to the other in Daly's world) are then simply performing a set of rituals that guarantee their own subordination.

This fixing of significance rehearses the same problems encountered earlier in the division of oppressor from oppressed strictly according to gender. Again, there seems to be no accounting for cultural differentials in the meanings of what are termed, unequivocally, patriarchal acts and institutions. For instance, in her study of

male-female relations in Muslim society Fatima Mernissi explains how the meanings around the issue of cosmetics differ fundamentally for Western and Muslim women:

It is interesting that while Western women's liberation movements had to repudiate the body in pornographic mass media, Muslim women are likely to claim the right to their bodies as part of their liberation movement. Previously a Muslim woman's body belonged to the man who possessed her, her father or husband. The mushrooming of beauty salons and ready to wear boutiques in Moroccan towns can be interpreted as a forerunner of women's urge to claim their own bodies, which will culminate in more radical claims, such as the claim to birth control and abortion.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the meanings that accrue around the matter of personal appearance for Muslim women cannot be incorporated into Daly's interpretive frame. In the textual universe of *Gyn/ecology* Muslim women are simply victims of false consciousness, Painted Birds, 'token women...acting in complicity with the Possessors' (p. 318), exchanging one veil for another. Daly's feminism unwittingly enacts its own complicity with the discourses of colonialism. With regard to Muslim women's relationship to the veil, there is more to consider than simply its role in the control of female sexuality. Mernissi details the complications arising from the fact that 'the first gesture of 'liberated' Arab women was to discard the veil for Western dress, which in the thirties, forties and fifties was that of the wife of the colonizer.' (p. 167) The adoption of Western clothes in the context of colonialism can never mean an unequivocal victory for feminism. Put differently, there is more than a degree of privilege at work if the only identifiable source of oppression is that of gender. For non-white/working-class/lesbian and other non-hegemonic groups issues of dominance are always about more than gender alone.

From identifying a fundamental structure of oppression Daly identifies a structure of liberation or escape from the clutches of patriarchy. The journey to freedom is divided into three separate stages or passages. These passages are inter-

related in that it is through the work of the first two passages that access to the third is achieved:

Gyn/ecology is the proper name for The Third Passage, for it names the patterns/designs of the moving female-identified environment which can only be heard/seen after the Journeyer has been initiated through the First and Second Passages. (p. 316)

The First and Second Passages are described, respectively, as a breaking through the barriers of patriarchal myth in order to perceive woman's true nature and a confrontation with the atrocities perpetrated by the Unnatural Enemies of Female Be-ing. This spiral dynamic of discovery and confrontation is what allows entry into the Third Passage: 'the Otherworld - which is her own time/space.' (p. 32) This movement between passages is simultaneously a movement through exorcism to ecstasy, from myth to naming, from falsehood to truth. By confronting the distortions of the Foreground (Patriarchy) Daly and her fellow Amazon Voyagers are able to sail deeper into the Background: the location of women's truth, the 'Treasure Trove of symbols and myths that have been stolen and reversed by the patriarchal thieves' (p. xxviii).

Spinning deeper into the background is courageous sinning against the Sins of the Fathers. As our senses have been tricked by their texts. We begin by unweaving our winding sheets. The process of exorcism, of peeling off the layers of mindbendings and cosmetics, is movement past the patriarchally imposed sense of reality and identity. This demystification process, a-mazing The Lies, is ecstasy. (p. 6)

Despite the text's insistence upon the accessibility of The Voyage to all women, transglobally, transculturally, the extent to which this is the case is questionable. In other words, some women are in a better position to buy a ticket to the Otherworld than others.

Daly's text partakes of a romantic fantasy in that it invests far too heavily in the notion of individual self-determination. The text recommends that liberation is a

matter of will, of individual strength. The contradictions that this throws up for its thesis notwithstanding, *Gyn/ecology* renders culture/ideology (the two are entirely coincident in the text) to be little more than a set of restrictive or ill-fitting garments that can be cast off at will. Daly's Journey is then envisaged as mainly a psychic and linguistic adventure: confronting lies and rescuing truth nowhere does Daly consider the complexity, or to be more precise the supreme embeddedness of the cultural practices she examines. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* Nawaal El Sadawi specifies the nationalist and economic context of the practice of female genital mutilation and is critical of Western feminists who presume to know without reference to the relationship between First and Third worlds.<sup>23a</sup> In presuming identity through reference to the Sado-Ritual *Gyn/ecology* can be said to enact a form of 'imperialist cross-referencing'<sup>24</sup> or 'white solipsism'<sup>25</sup> ie the tendency to unwittingly organise meanings around the (white) self, according to specifically white interests as if they were the interests of all.

Furthermore, the Voyage itself is highly problematic in terms of its race politics in that the structure of *Gyn/ecology*'s feminist Journey serves to reinforce the unwitting privilege of its First world participants. Arriving at her ecstatic destination is wholly dependent upon the Voyager's ability to face up to or confront the atrocities of the Sado-Ritual Syndrome.

Despite - and because of - the terrors and tragedies that must be faced in this part of the Journey, the Voyager senses a growing integrity of vision and purpose. As a consequence of her courage to see, she finds the focus of her anger, so that it fuels and no longer blocks her passion and her creativity. Thus this exorcising Passage gives her the right of passage into the Otherworld, the world of her own Enspiriting, Sparking, Spinning Ecstasy.  
(p. 112)

Having confronted the spectacle of the foot bound, the genitally mutilated, the incarcerated woman, the Voyager gains entry into Ecstasy. Rather than help her mutilated sister, the Voyager makes use of her to purify herself spiritually, to unblock

her creativity. In her work on the ethical obligations of 'First World' to 'Third World' women/texts Spivak asks that the First world reader ask herself persistently 'who is the Other woman' as a way of ensuring critical accountability. In other words, how am I consolidating myself/my reading/my text? What assumptions am I making about the Other woman? These are questions that are conspicuous in their absence from the text, whose 'Other' woman remains silent and stuck on the outside of the gates of Ecstasy. In *Gyn/ecology* Daly has effectively constructed a feminist theme park, complete with its chamber of horrors. Entrance into the Otherworld of Ecstasy is reserved for those strong enough (or rather privileged enough) to stomach its spectacle.

### **Alice Walker's Blindness**

I remember when the issue of female circumcision was raised and all these western women were saying, 'We don't like it. But we don't want to judge it through white imperialist eyes.' It took a black woman, it took Alice Walker, to say this is not an issue of culture, this is an issue of humanity.<sup>26</sup>

With white, First World feminist critics floundering it has seem<sup>e</sup><sub>Λ</sub>d to many that the issue of female genital mutilation is rightfully the province of black women. As Meera Syal's words (above) suggest, the problems that dominate white First world approaches to the subject are able to be swept aside by black feminists. Alice Walker's high profile campaign against the continued practice of female genital mutilation has taken a number of forms. The novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* brought the subject to an unprecedented audience<sup>27</sup>, as did the film *Warrior Marks* made in collaboration with feminist filmmaker Pratibha Parmar. Walker also promoted the film with an accompanying lecture tour, an event which stimulated still more media attention for the campaign. This work has an origin in the author's sense of debt to a character who appears briefly in *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*. 'Tashi . . . stayed with me, uncommonly tenacious, through the writing of

both books, and led me finally to conclude she needed, and deserved, a book of her own.<sup>28</sup> This debt is marked in the text of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by the inclusion of an extract from *The Color Purple* as a preface. The book can then be read as a problematisation of what in *The Color Purple* is presented as an act of cultural preservation in the context of imperialism; 'It is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways . . . even though the white man has taken everything else' (n.p.).

My discussion will concern itself, however, mainly with Walker and Parmar's journal published as a companion piece to the film, also entitled *Warrior Marks*. An assemblage of diary entries, letters, interviews and additional material (including diagrams of female genitalia; descriptions of the various types of genital mutilation; addresses of contact organisations and advocacy groups; and further reading), the text offers a kind of witness to the motivations that inform Walker and Parmar's involvement with the campaign. It is here that Walker establishes the grounds for her work most explicitly, hence my interest in this particular text above the others. In particular, I question the grounds on which Walker establishes her authority in presenting herself as a commentator/campaigner against the practice. While it is indisputable that the writer's presence has had a significant impact on the campaign in this country, there are, I believe a number of hidden problems in the way in which Walker relates herself to the project, particularly in the ease with which Walker assumes sisterhood and identity with both the genitally mutilated and their African campaigners. The main contention is that the categories black and Third World, and the corollary, white and First World should not be assumed to always line up together. The precise status of these problems is also subject to discussion.

The first clue as to the potential problems of Walker's epistemological assumptions can be gleaned from the text's cover. Subtitled 'Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women' *Warrior Marks* as text and film establishes close identity between Walker and its subjects from the outset. Following the written text's dedication to 'the female child in Africa', a statement from Walker

appears explaining the 'special significance' of the girl in the photograph that accompanies the dedication. The child, standing alone with her back against a tree, captivates Walker. Having arranged for her to be photographed Walker is approached by Parmar:

'Look at that little girl,' I said. 'I am very drawn to her and haven't managed to take my eyes off her since we arrived.' Pratibha took one look and laughed. 'But, Alice,' she said, '*she's a little you.*' At that moment I could see it too. It was exactly as if I were looking in a mirror but seeing my three year old self. Only one photograph of me used to exist - I don't know where it is now - and suddenly I was able to remember it. (n.p.)

The identification set up here between Walker and 'the female child of Africa' continues throughout her journal entries. It is at its most sustained, however, in Walker's introduction to the film which is reprinted in the journal text. Entitled 'Like the pupil of an eye', it begins with a narration of the events that culminated in the author's loss of sight in one eye (she was shot by her brother with an air rifle). The shooting was effectively ignored by her family and Walker grew up feeling 'completely devalued. Unseen. Worthless.' (p. 16) As a 'consciously feminist adult' though, Walker comes to the realisation that 'What [she] had . . . was a patriarchal wound', a 'warrior mark'(p. 17). She continues:

It is true that I am marked forever, like the woman who is robbed of her clitoris, but it is not, as it once was, the mark of a victim. What the woman warrior learns if she is injured as a child, before she can even comprehend that there is a war going on against her, is that you can fight back, even after you are injured. Your wound itself can be your guide. (p. 18)

Initially this reads not unlike Daly's attempt to establish global sisterhood. Elsewhere in the text both Walker and Parmar attempt to link the practice of genital mutilation to other Western practices. Parmar writes of ' . . . the psychic and physical mutilations that women in the West undergo are equally devastating: unwanted hysterectomies, endless facelifts, liposuction, bulimia, anorexia, silicone breast



implants . . . ' (p. 109); Walker describes the 'mutilation of hair' and skin bleaching (pp. 13 -14). In appealing to the woman warrior, Walker seems to be establishing sisterhood as grounds for challenging genital mutilation as a practice. However, what ensues is a narrowing, and not a broadening of the text's focus, in that Walker refracts the issue entirely through herself. Her childhood injury is construed as lending a privileged perspective upon her subject: 'It was my visual mutilation that helped me 'see' the subject of genital mutilation'(p. 18). The identification continues:

I was eight when I was injured. This is the age at which many 'circumcisions' are done. When I see how the little girls - how small they are! - drag their feet after being wounded, I am reminded of myself. How had I learned to walk again, without constantly walking into something? To see again, using half my vision? Instead of being helped to make this transition, I was banished, set aside from the family, as is true of genitally mutilated little girls. For they must sit for a period alone, their legs bound, as their wound heals. It is taboo to speak of what has been done to them. (pp. 18-19)

Here the parallels are explicit: from the age of both victims of patriarchal violence, to their being cast outside the family circle, to the taboo upon speaking of their experiences. These connections are intensified further:

No one would think it normal to deliberately destroy the pupil of the eye. Without its pupil, the eye can never see itself, or the person possessing it, reflected in the eye of another. It is the same with the vulva. Without the clitoris and other sexual organs, a woman can never see herself reflected in the healthy intact body of another. Her sexual vision is impaired, and only the most devoted lover will be sexually 'seen'. And then, never completely. (pp. 18-19)

Identity is thus presumed between organs of the body; the eye and the clitoris are precisely equivalent. At the introduction's close the conflation of Walker with her subject is complete:

Those of us who are maimed can tell you it is possible to go on. To flourish. To grow. To love and be loved, which is the most important thing. To feel pleasure and to know joy. *We* can also tell you that mutilation of any part of the body is unnecessary and causes suffering almost beyond imagining. *We* can tell you that the body you are born into is sacred and whole, like the earth that produced it, and there is nothing that needs to be subtracted from it. (p. 19, my emphasis)

Any division, even that between equivalences, gives way to total identification; 'I' collapses into 'we'. Walker's interest in installing herself in the category of 'we the mutilated' is far from clear. Aside from attempting to disrupt the smug division that often inheres with that of First World/Third World, that is, civilised/barbaric, and establishing international sisterhood, Walker's intentions are hard to read, particularly given the intensely personal way in which she inflects the issues.

What is clear is that the extreme focus on identity denies or at least suppresses a number of crucial differences between Walker and the subjects of her film. First, in seeking to disturb the First World/Third world division Walker does not account for her own, albeit complicated, First World position. While her location is far from straightforward, it is nevertheless the case that there are important differences to be acknowledged. Lata Mani notes how in an academic context:

There is . . . a problematic logic of substitution in many academic conferences whereby people of color from the U.S. and of the third world diaspora are assumed to occupy identical locations and to be interchangeable. This posits an equivalence which must be resisted, eliding as it does differences in the relationships, both historically and in the present, between third world groups and the U.S. power structure.<sup>29</sup>

From her stated attraction to Ghanaians ('. . . perhaps my African self is Ghanaian', p. 29) to these remarks in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: 'I do not know from what part of Africa my African ancestors came, and so I claim the continent' (p. 268), Walker assumes an unproblematic, almost essential, African identity throughout her

project. This in itself is not cause for concern, as Margaret Busby has pointed out, since re-establishing connection throughout the African diaspora has been and continues to be politically crucial:

Tradition and history are nurturing spirits for women of African descent. For without an understanding of where we have come from, we are less likely to be able to make sense of where we are going. . . . The legacy of the slave trade confronts us daily in the very existence of the diaspora. . . . To rehearse again the traumatic facts is not to wallow in victimhood but to ensure an understanding of what our foremothers had to survive.<sup>30</sup>

What is problematic is Walker's denial of her difference in establishing such a connection. Not to mention the extreme visceral differences between genital mutilation, on the one hand, and being shot in the eye, on the other. In choosing *Daughters of Africa* as the title for her anthology of black women's writings, Busby warns of the dangers of overlooking 'our differences' (p.xxx). Likewise, June Jordan questions her identity in relation to the hotel maid where she is staying in the Bahamas:

My 'rights' and my 'freedom' and my 'desire' and a slew of other new World values; what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as 'Olive the Maid'? 'Olive' is older than I am and I may smoke a cigarette while she changes the sheets on my bed. Whose rights? Whose freedom? Whose desire?<sup>31</sup>

In this different context Jordan confronts her cultural and class differences, a confrontation which Angela Davis also faced in Egypt whilst attending a conference to celebrate the end of the UN decade of women.<sup>32</sup> Explaining her presence to her audience Davis details her research topic, 'Women and Sex', at which 'pandemonium erupted':

'Angela Davis in the Third World,' said Dr. Latifa Zayat . . . 'Your name, your personality, is known because of your struggle. You can be used by your society, a wealthy society, which is trying to exploit our country. (p. 124)

Clearly positioned by her audience as a First World researcher, a potentially imperialist scholar hailing from a capitalist country looking to observe and assemble data according to hers and their own interests, Davis is forced to realise her own relational privilege. Reflecting upon the incident she conjectures: 'Perhaps I had begun to feel a bit too relaxed. After all, I had slipped into a cultural continuum whose acquaintance I had previously made through mental excursions alone'(p. 123). So, Davis' imported agenda of sexual equality is deemed as failing to address the indigenous issues of economic dependency not only between men and women, but also between Egypt and the West. Despite Parmar's assertions that 'as women of color we have not absorbed acritically the Western feminist paradigm, which assumes a universal sisterhood where none exists' (p. 108), *Warrior Marks*' global ambition ('Together we will produce a film that serves the world', p. 9) and identificatory focus threaten to compromise its politics.

Having said all of this, however, there is a great extent to which I remain uncomfortable with this analysis, or rather with its status. Alice Walker's work on the subject of female genital mutilation has a political significance that is difficult to quantify. As is the case with the emotional power of her texts. What, then, is the status of my analysis, if, as Walker herself hopes, her work shields just one girl from the circumciser's rusty blade? What use is an argument about what amounts to little more than literary politics in this urgent context? How do we, as feminist critics, account for the power of ideas that 'misbehave', epistemologically speaking? I cannot pretend to have the answers to such questions except to say that to dismiss Walker's work purely upon grounds of its shaky assumptions is itself a mistake. Jane Gaines puts it thus:

I would suggest that we have overemphasised the ideological function of 'signifying practice' at the expense of considering other ideological implications of the conflicting meanings in the text. Or, as Terry Lovell puts it:

. . . while interpretation depends on analysis of the work's signifying practice, assessment of its meanings from the point of view of its validity, or its ideology, depends upon comparison between those structures of meaning and their object of reference, through mediation of another type of discourse.<sup>33</sup>

Walker's signifying practices may well be suspect in the light of prevailing feminist discourses but this cannot account for their efficacy in the campaign against female genital mutilation, nor can it totalise the force of an emotionally demanding text.

### **Rethinking identification.**

Some critics have questioned the value of identificatory readings *per se*. Carla Kaplan, for instance, proclaims a 'postidentitarian, postidentificatory' epoch for feminism in the 1990's, and wonders 'what place is there, finally, . . . for an enterprise [i.e. the recuperative paradigm] tacitly founded on both identity and identification?'<sup>34</sup> Jane Gallop equates identification as a basis for reading with the search for the 'good mother' of object relations theory, and is suspicious of it for precisely that reason. For both critics to pursue a relation of identity with the text is to privilege sameness over difference and hence to screen out or deny textual difference. Rather than prohibit identification I would argue that to do so is a mistake in that identification, the assertion of sameness or like with like, as impossible to avoid. With this I advocate a rethinking of identification that is both more process-oriented and provisional than fixed and permanent.

Kaplan's essay provides a relentless account of the costs of identificatory readings of feminist canonical texts. Through the mechanism of identification feminist critics are seen to be guilty of fixing the meanings they create and so prohibiting further arrangements of meaning. This is particularly the case in which texts are claimed to allegorise issues of feminist reading itself. Kaplan argues that, for example, in insisting that *A Jury of Her Peers*, *The Blank Page* or *The Yellow Wallpaper* be read as standing for feminist criticism<sup>35</sup>, as paradigms for the feminist

critical act, the potential for rereading is foreclosed upon. In establishing these texts as founding moments in feminist critical history there is a danger of ceasing to *read*, instead transmuting them into feminism's theoretical edifice. Arguing that such texts are 'over-read' whilst at the same time not read thoroughly enough (p. 172), Kaplan seeks to disrupt their status as paradigms for feminist recuperative action. Briefly, it is contended that feminist recuperative work, 'revisionary rereading', the retrieval of women's lost voices/texts/experience, with 'its grounding in sameness and identification' (p. 169) is exclusionary, 'theoretically single-minded', and politically suspect. In reading texts as mirrors for female experience or feminist critical activity, as in the case of Gilman, Dinesen and Galspell's short stories, the text's differences are repressed, and the need for further interpretation forestalled. As a counter to this freezing of the stories significances in the field of feminist criticism Kaplan attempts to activate their differences. In a series of close readings the critic shows how each text, far from asserting a straightforward allegory of feminist interpretation, simultaneously problematises the critical act.

They both practice and parody feminist recuperation. Each warns against the very politics it seems to endorse, suggesting dangers, impasses and problems inherent in any "fantastic collaboration" grounded in a politics of identification.(p. 178).

For all its emphasis upon difference and its attending disdain of identification Kaplan's argument cannot dispense with identification for its formulation. In her reading of the readings, she too relies upon sameness as a basis from which to proceed. The disruption of feminist canonical readings, insofar as it depends upon *rereadings* of the said texts (the texts provide their own evidence, and hence justify internally Kaplan's reading), is incomplete; Kaplan succeeds merely in recuperating her texts *for* difference. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Blank Page*, *A Jury of her Peers*, instead of appearing as allegories for feminist identity are now co-opted for difference. The text's disruptions are identified with a theory of difference; matched with patterns of dissonance to borrow Rosi Braidotti's phrase.<sup>35a</sup>

Likewise Jane Gallop, whilst being suspicious of identificatory readings cannot resist their ground. Troubled by 'the assumption, here readerly, that good mothering is mirroring and that what we demand from a text is an image of ourselves', she nevertheless incorporates her own identifications through a series of bracketed off, self-reflexive gestures. As I deal specifically with the issue of self-reflexive criticism in chapter 6 I will confine myself here to merely pointing up the seeming unavoidability of identification as a way of reading texts, in addition to asserting that the fact of Gallop's undermining strategy, of confessing her own potential transferences, does little to disrupt her authority in diagnosing the 'unseemly narcissism' (p. 54) of the first feminist edition of *Yale French Studies*.

In her essay 'Playfulness, 'World' Travelling and Loving Perception'<sup>36</sup> Maria Lugones, offers a different way of thinking about identification and its effects. Whilst remaining critical of, in her terms, 'white/Anglo' interpretations of 'outsider' culture, Lugones suggests that white/Anglo's *need* to pursue identification with non-white women as a counter to arrogant perception or cultural imperialism. Taking up Marilyn Frye's formulation 'loving perception/arrogant perception' Lugones argues that there are a series of connections to be made between perceiving arrogantly, failing to identify with, and failing to love women of colour on the part of white/Anglo women. So, whereas Kaplan views identificatory readings as self-reproduction, and hence as imperialistic, Lugones regards the ability 'to see oneself in other women who are quite different from oneself' (p. 393) as crucial to white/non-white relations. In other words, Lugones foresees the potential for a positive basis for identifications between race-different women. A tentative definition of 'loving perception' is formed through Lugones thinking around her relationship to her mother:

Seeing myself in her through travelling in her 'world' has meant seeing how different from her I am in her 'world'. This is the form of identification that I consider incompatible with arrogant perception and constitutive of a new understanding of love. (p. 402)

For Lugones, perceiving her mother lovingly entails leaving 'home,' the secure world of the self, and entering the world of the (m)other, thus seeing herself through the eyes/terms of her mother's world/discourse. It follows from this that the task of the white/Anglo feminist is one of leaving home, of leaving the familiar secure ground of the norm or universal in order to perceive herself as other. Relinquishing the normative space from which the other woman/text can only be read as either concurrence or deviation is then the precondition for loving perception.

Read in relation to Kaplan's argument, Lugones' notion of arrogant perception seems coincident with Kaplan's concerns about identificatory reading *per se*. The self that reproduces in Kaplan's thinking is a self that seldom leaves home in the pursuit of textual meaning. It is a self that is solid and reliable as grounds from which to proceed. It is a self that remains unaware of the means by which it achieves consolidation. It posits a centre from which all meanings radiate. The text literally impresses the self that reads at those points where it matches up with what is seen as its own, in fact self-authored, experience. It is in this sense that arrogant perception is self-confirming as a textual relation, in that what is taken from the text is those aspects or themes which serve to confirm or consolidate what has already been decided as belonging to the authentic self.

A further helpful intervention can be gained from Sarah Ahmed's notion of 'identificatory practices'<sup>37</sup> In contrast to both Kaplan and Gallop who seem to presuppose a fully-formed subject in search of her own likeness in their accounts of identificatory reading, Ahmed conceptualises identification more in terms of ambition or aspiration.<sup>38</sup> Recommending a shift away from theories which 'assume the singularity of "the subject"' (p.159) Ahmed, through examining a racist incident from her own life, traces the various identifications and disidentifications involved therein. Concluding that identifications are never fixed and complete, but rather ongoing structured processes, the active creation of identities and positions, the equation of identity with sameness/fixity/conservatism is thus avoided.



### Reading Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*<sup>39</sup>

In discussing *The Adoption Papers*, an autobiographical poem sequence which tells the story of a black girl's adoption by a white Scottish couple, I face, first, a fundamental difficulty in that my identifications with the text are such that I still struggle with making the initial break necessary to begin to speak of it as literature. Neither can I objectify the poems as text, nor offer any insight into their constructions of identity or sexuality. I remain as inarticulate as when I attended a reading of the poems by the author, and instead of taking the opportunity to join in the informal discussion that spontaneously arose at the session's end I sat apart speechless.

In terms of Kaplan's and Gallop's positions I am stuck in the mirror stage, an example of arrested development, wanting the text to reflect me back, wanting it for my mother, self-indulgent. What is more, and both critics point up the politically suspect construction of the 'black' text as 'good' mother, the text's author is black and this reader is white. The fact of my response to Kay's text then would seem to place me in difficult territory. And yet for all my merging with her poems I am fully cognisant of my racial difference, I know that I am white and the poet is black. I know that I am not Jackie Kay, I know she is not her text despite its autobiographical nature. The extent of my mirroring does not occlude textual differences. Furthermore, I identify with the poems not because I want to be black or Scottish but rather because I, too, am adopted, and it is in this context that my lack of differentiation becomes readable.

The issue of mirroring is particularly acute for adopted people, who grow up without seeing their likeness reflected anywhere in their family. I have the features of nobody in particular. I 'take after' no-one.

I don't know what diseases  
come down my line;  
when dentists and doctors ask  
the old blood questions about family runnings

I tell them: *I have no nose or mouth or eyes  
to match, no spitting image or dead cert,  
my face watches itself in the glass.* (p. 29, my emphasis)

In finding myself mirrored in the poem, however, I am less confirming something that is already there than actively constructing a place of identity, shifting and temporal, that, hitherto lived mostly wordlessly, is coming into being as I read. I am engaged, then, in a form of *identificatory practice* and not narcissistic self-affirmation. Becoming not confirming. The state of merging should be recognisable in terms of that moment when we read or hear articulated what has been until then an unnamed experience or condition. 'Words wreak havoc' Jean-Paul Sartre has stated 'when they find a name for what had up to then been lived namelessly'<sup>40</sup>. In many ways this raises the question of identity politics, of what has been seen as the need to assemble along the lines of a perceived sameness. As opposed to the Lacanian model that often underpins the identity politics debates<sup>41</sup> Elspeth Probyn prefers to think of identity in terms of belonging:

Surface belongings and desiring identities refuse to stand still; in between being and longing, they compel connections, producing themselves as other. Such belonging is formulated in neither exclusionary nor inclusionary terms but in its sheer perplexity and yearning bypasses the meanness of individualised identities.<sup>42</sup>

An 'identity' as an adopted person is one marked by perplexity and yearning, and as such escapes categorisation as an identity enclosure. The issue of belonging too has a specificity for the adopted person, whose relation to their family, in a world obsessed with blood and genes, is seen as somehow not real.

I could hear the upset in her voice  
I says I'm not your real mother,  
though Christ knows why I said that,  
If I'm not who is, but all my planned speech  
went out the window (p. 21)

While I have spent most of my academic life problematising subjectivity, blood and genes still exact their hold,

All this bother, certificates, papers.

It is all so long ago. Does it matter? (p. 20)

I have my parents who are not of the same tree  
and you keep trying to make it matter,  
the blood, the tie, the passing down  
generations.

We all have our contradictions,  
the one's with the mother's nose and father's eyes  
have them;  
the blood does not bind confusion,  
yet I confess to my contradiction

I want to know my blood. (p. 29)

Investments in identification do not necessarily originate with a failure to recognise difference. The question of blood takes on racial significance elsewhere in the poem. The section entitled 'Black Bottom' details the daughter's childhood experiences of racism. During a dance class at school her teacher,

shouts from the bottom  
of the class Come on, show

us what you can do I thought  
you people had it in your blood.

My traversing of the surface of Kay's poem, establishing connections with it does not eclipse these and other meanings. To read the poem thus is not simply to remake it in my own image. It is more, as Deleuze puts it, to go

from one specific place to another, from one singular point to another . . .  
producing thus effects of transversality and no longer universality,  
functioning as a privileged point of exchange or crossing.<sup>42a</sup>

It is also to unfix the text, as it were, from a chromatic relation (white reader/black text) to one based on its other meanings. And also to suggest that mirroring has a specificity that is often overlooked.

(...)

## **Conclusion**

In examining the problem of identification for white feminist readings of race-different writings I stress the following points: the importance of separating the mechanism of identification from the universal; the question of who is the other woman; and the rethinking of identification itself. In addition I argue that the notion of sameness cannot be dispensed with in favour of a focus on difference; a text of pure difference would be illegible, unreadable in that any reading is always a process of recognition. Rather the point is to find ethical ways of identifying that do not leave the Other woman frozen, petrified in the self-consolidating gaze of the white subject. I suggest some of those ways here: the notion of identificatory practice, the historicisation of the universal offer potentially exciting projects in realising the ambition contained in Zora Neale Hurston's phrase, 'In my eyesight you lose nothing by not looking just like me'<sup>43</sup>

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1. *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, ed. by Robin Morgan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 36.
  2. Eva Lennox Birch, 'Autobiography: The Art of Self-Definition' in *Black Women's Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke: MacMillan 1993) pp. 127-145 (p. 133)
  3. Alison Light, 'Fear of the Happy Ending: *The Color Purple*, Reading and Racism' in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. by Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) pp. 85-96 (pp. 87-8)
  4. Eva Lennox Birch, 1993 (p. 133)
  5. Eva Lennox Birch, *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 7.
  6. Christina Crosby, 'Dealing with Differences', *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 130-143 (p. 131).
  7. *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Feminist Press, 1984) p.116
  8. Trin T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 97.
  9. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989); for a discussion of the limitations of identity politics.
  10. Carla Kaplan, 'Reading Feminist Readings: Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine of Feminist Criticism', in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 168-194.
  11. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: Women's Press, 1983)
  12. It has been argued that the film itself achieved this erasure of racial and sexual difference. See Michele Wallace's 'Blues for Mr Spielberg' in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 67-76. Also see Alice Walker, *The Same River Twice: Honouring the Difficult* (London: Women's Press, 1996).
  13. Birch's position is by no means idiosyncratic. Gabrielle Griffin's attributes the following comments to her students is reported as saying:
 

Sometimes the colour of the writer, and therefore the experiences they wrote about, acted as a barrier. The experiences they wrote about which were primarily concerned with being a woman I felt more at ease with - in the sense of being able to identify with them.. Gabrielle Griffin, in Wisker, op.cit., p. 39
  14. Diana Fuss, 'Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification', *Diacritics*, 24 (1994), pp. 20-42 (p.38).
  - 14<sup>a</sup>. Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Triad/Panther, 1983), p. 62
  15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame' in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 134-153 (p. 136)
  - 15<sup>q</sup> Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race, The 1997 Reith Lectures* (London: Virago, 1997), pp. 3-4.

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16. Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 2nd.edn: rev. intro. by Daly (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1990); Alice Walker and Pratibha Palmer, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993)
17. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 3
18. Audre Lorde, 'An Open Letter to Mary Daly' in *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984) p. 70
19. Laura Donaldson, *Decolonising Feminisms: Race, Gender and Empire Building* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 34.
20. See Angela Davis 'Racism, Birth Control and Reproductive Rights', in *Women, Race and Class* (London: Women's Press, 1982), pp. 202-221.
21. Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 105
22. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.2, cited by Donaldson, p. 34.
23. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985), p. 168.
- 23<sup>a</sup>. Nawaal El Sadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*
24. Homi Bhabha, 'Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense', in *Literary Theory Today*, ed.by Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Ithaca, NewYork: Cornell University Press. 1990), pp. 203-18 (p. )
25. Adrienne Rich, 'Disloyal to Civilisation: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia', in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, (London: Virago)
26. Meera Syal in interview with Suzie MacKenzie, 'Passage from India', *Guardian*, 6 April 1996, pp. 13-16 (p. 16).
27. This was intended by Walker. 'This was a subject most people didn't want to know anything about, and they are more likely to read it as fiction because at least they can put a distance between themselves and the suffering' Kate Muir, 'The Exorcist', *Times*, 10 Oct 1992, pp. 4-6, (p. 4)
28. Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992) p. 267.
29. Lata Mani, 'Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning' in *Cultural Studies*, ed.by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 392-408 (p. 394)
30. *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present*, ed.by Margaret Busby (London: Vintage, 1993), p. xxxv.
31. June Jordan, 'Report from the Bahamas' in *Moving Towards Home: Political Essays* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 135-146 (p. 139)
32. Angela Davis, 'Women in Egypt: A Personal View' in *Women, Culture and Politics* (London: Women's Press, 1990), pp. 116-154

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33. Jane Gaines, 'White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory' in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 197-214 (p.209); Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 90.
34. Carla Kaplan, p. 170
35. As in Annette Kolodny's 'A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 46-62; Susan Gubar's 'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity' also in Showalter, pp. 292-313.
- 35<sup>2</sup>. Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*
36. Maria Lugones, 'Playfulness, "World" Travelling and Loving Perception', *Hypatia*, 2 (19\*\*), pp. 390-402.
37. Sarah Ahmed, 'It's a sun-tan, isn't it? Autobiography as an identificatory practice', in *Black British Feminism*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 153-167.
38. See also Richard Dyer's *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) for an account of whiteness as an 'aspirational' structure
39. Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991).
40. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'idiote de la Famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol.1. p. 783, cited by Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 170.
41. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989) for an example of a Lacanian take on identity
42. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 35.
- 42<sup>a</sup>. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1986), p. 97, cited by Probyn, p. 15.
43. Hurston, *Dust Tracks On A Road*, (London: Virago, 1986), p. 286.

## Chapter 4. Theory and Identification

In this chapter I suggest that certain uses of theory operate as displaced modes of identification, in the sense that, in place of the reading self, a particular theory is said to match up or identify with the text. In addition to replaying the structuralist error whereby the patterns that are identified in the text are supposed as belonging to it, as deeply embedded and hence *observable* from the *outside*, the gesture of applying theory renders the unfamiliar, familiar through the reproduction of the already known, or the self-same. This raises the question of the precise nature of what is familiar or recognisable in making the 'Other' text legible as well as what happens to the excess of meaning produced with theoretical identifications; what are the costs of French feminist framings of Toni Morrison's work, for example. However, as I argue in the previous chapter, this is not to suggest that identificatory modes can simply be dispensed with in favour of a pure focus on difference. Even as I argue for reading Morrison's work in terms of witnessing and testimony I run the risk of repeating the error diagnosed, of reproducing a mirroring relationship between the novels and the theoretical texts I rely upon to make my case. Rather the question of interpretation can be seen to be, at once, one of distinction and identification, a dynamic shuttle movement of alignment and disagreement. So, my resistance to certain framings of Toni Morrison's novels nevertheless involves me in aligning the texts with alternatives. In addition to highlighting some of the dangers and traps of *applying* theory in terms of straightforward identification, I offer possibilities which resist the objectifying discourses of tools, lenses and frames, the uncomplicated view from outside or above.

By way of drawing out these issues I concentrate upon two radically opposing, even mutually exclusive, readings of the author's work. <sup>1</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison*<sup>2</sup> deploys French feminist thought as a means of determining the politics of Morrison's work. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia's *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*<sup>3</sup>, striking in its difference to Rigney's



text, with its strict materialist analysis, locates its politics in what is identified as a progressing preoccupation with class struggle in the novels. More than offering merely 'different' readings, each critic reaches utterly opposing conclusions in assessing the significances of the same literary features. While the fact of the difference is interesting in itself and raises questions, among others, about the precise nature of literary politics, I wish to stress the costs of the particular framings each critic proposes. Following this I argue that the tensions between the two essays - the literary and the social, history and the imagination, the semiotic and the material, for example - constitute an important theme in Morrison's work. In this context I offer the figure of the witness as an alternative means of reading. Briefly, I argue that Morrison's texts, in particular *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*<sup>4</sup>, in foregrounding issues of interpretation and reading, constitute a massive act of witnessing; an act which participates in the events it describes and thus implicates the reader in the debates it sets up. The figure of the witness, through the very fact of her/his narrative involvement, or to use Morrison's term, 'participatory'<sup>5</sup> nature, breaks the objectivity implied with pure framing. Through this, alongside a development of the notion of testimony as outlined by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their book of the same name<sup>6</sup>, I hope to find ways of honouring aspects of Morrison's texts that escape interpretive framing, the blindnesses that accompany insights, what is obscured as well as revealed in any reading of her work.

### **The Politics of Holes and Gaps.**

*The Voices of Toni Morrison* privileges a French feminist perspective and examines the author's work in terms of its perceived linguistic subversion. With their stylistic complexity and non-linear structure, Morrison's novels are said to present a radical challenge to 'phallographic law'. The site *par excellence* of this subversion is the narrative hole or gap: Morrison's celebrated spaces specifically designed for the participation of the reader. The significance of these spaces for Rigney is 'profoundly political' and therefore crucial to an understanding of the author's work. These

'stunning absences' are seen as acquiring their political significance in a number of ways. To begin with, leading on from Morrison's own comments, Rigney sees the author as rejecting 'theories that privilege the author over the reader' (p. 25). In accord with postmodern views of authorship<sup>7</sup> Morrison is held to be surrendering control over the text's meaning, adopting an anti-authoritarian stance, as it were, in relation to her work. Following on from this, Rigney offers a compelling account of how silence operates as a specific trope in African-American writing. Drawing upon the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr., it is argued that the novels manipulate, destabilise and effectively deconstruct the Western metaphysical constructions of white/black, and presence/absence. Focussing on *Beloved*, Rigney details how the trope of silence is informed by the referential silencing of African-Americans from slavery to the present, and how in turn the 'unspeakable thoughts unspoken' of recorded history are taken up by Morrison to exert a pressure upon that record. Referring to Morrison's comment that:

... invisible things are not necessarily 'not there'; that a void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Rigney illuminates the extent to which silence is always 'ideologically and politically revelatory' (p. 25) in the novels.

From this a broader feminist argument is constructed regarding the texts political meanings. Through specific reference to French feminist thought Rigney outlines the contours of Morrison's perceived textual politics

Significant to Morrison's great strength as a writer is the fact that her style is imbued with contradiction and saturated with breaches of narrative continuity. And according to Irigaray, a feminine style of writing is 'always fluid', always 'resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea, or concept to the point that linear reading is no longer possible.' (p. 31)

In short it is argued that Morrison's texts 'break the back of words' (p. 10), they subvert Symbolic codes and systems of signification. With their fluid, jouissant 'celebrations of the Laugh of the Medusa' (p. 34), the novels constitute collectively an 'unpoliced . . . black and feminine discourse - semiotic, maternal, informed as much by silence as dialogue, as much by absence as presence' (p. 7), and thus refuse the conventions of patriarchal discourse.

Mbalia's reading of Morrison's narrative silences could not be more opposed. For instance, in her discussion of *The Bluest Eye*, the novel's temporal shifts are attributed to the author's ' . . . clumsy handling of time' which is in turn read as evidence that 'She is not yet skilled in structuring plots' (p. 34) Such clumsiness, however, is deemed to have been remedied by the time Morrison writes *Song of Solomon*, in which time is 'manipulated much more skillfully':

Transition sentences such as 'That was the beginning. Now it was all going to end' transport the reader from the past to the present without the nauseating jolt of an air pocket. Such sophisticated use of transitions appears between as well as within chapters. (p. 64)

Far from constituting the site of radical subversion the text's gaps and holes are read by Mbalia as indication of Morrison's artistic weakness, 'a mark of her undeveloped writing skills.' What are read as stylistic inconsistencies are seen to impede the advancement of plot, to create 'confusion, not clarity' (p. 37). Linguistic disruption detracts from rather than constitutes the text's politics in that form is deemed, necessarily, to reflect structure. Texts are privileged, then, in terms of their ability to convey information as to the 'African's oppression' (p. 49). What is more, they are valued for their perceived capacity as offering political blueprints or solutions:

Tactically, she employs her novels as vehicles to incite action. They are, in fact, social and political treatises; not simply aesthetically pleasing, but, in making a social statement, they are didactic because she understands the urgency of arriving at a solution for the African's crisis. (p. 22)

The novels are seen to be expressly didactic; they are political manifestos, test sites for the author's emancipatory project: 'Like a scientist, she uses each work as a laboratory in which to research a hypothesis as to the nature of the oppression experienced by African people and to posit a solution to it.' (p. 87). Written from what she terms 'a people class perspective', Mbalia's analysis is clear in its identification of the specific 'oppression experienced by African people; that is, class exploitation' (p. 16) Drawing upon the work of Kwame Nkrumah, Mbalia maintains that class exploitation underpins all other oppressions such as those of race and gender:

. . . it is the economic system of capitalism, characterised by the exploitation of one group by another that gives birth to and continues to fuel racism and sexism. It is neither racism nor sexism but capitalism that is the primary enemy of African people. (p. 17)

The analysis is also clear as to the relationship between literature and politics. Just as form reflects content, literature reflects society: 'Literature is a product of the society in which it is produced, arising from and dependent on the material conditions of the society . . . literature can in turn help shape the particular society in which one lives' (p. 15).

One critic stares into Morrison's celebrated 'holes and spaces' and sees evidence of authorial inadequacy; 'Morrison's inability to make her text cohere' (Mbalia, p.37). Another intent on the same place finds proof of the author's radical politics; 'Clearly, the significant silences and the stunning absences throughout Morrison's texts become profoundly political as well as stylistically crucial' (Rigney, p.25). The fact of this disagreement is interesting in itself. Highlighting the amenability of texts to a range of interpretations, it becomes more interesting if each text is allowed to speak to the other's inadequacies.

In focussing its political project in terms of textual revolution *The Voices of Toni Morrison* is able to take account of an important critical dimension that is entirely missing from Mbalia's text. Her view of literature as a scientific testbed or

political manifesto which is in turn assessed as to its pragmatic use-value neglects the textual politics that form the basis of Rigney's study. Mbalia, therefore, overlooks the specifically literary function of Morrison's work. Rita Felski explains:

. . . it is clear that fictional works are shaped by relatively autonomous aesthetic structures which mediate the text's relationship to ideology. A reflectionist understanding of literature as authentic reproduction of authorial experience pays inadequate attention to the way texts signify as literature.<sup>9</sup>

By neglecting the text's multiple and various mediations Mbalia's reflectionist argument is hobbled by intentional fallacy. Comments such as these abound:

Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), serves as proof of her low level of class consciousness at the beginning of her writing career. . . . By the time she writes *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison has become increasingly aware of capitalism as the African's primary enemy. . . . Thus Morrison's works reflect a thematic and structural evolution that coincide with her own growing class consciousness. (pp. 20-1)

As organising principle of the texts meanings Morrison is held personally responsible for their perceived shortfall as political solutions. In rendering Morrison accountable in this way, Mbalia is able to attribute that which exceeds and consequently threatens the certainty of her theoretical frame to authorial inadequacy. Postmodern objections to the author as guarantee of a text's meaning notwithstanding, Mbalia seriously misconstrues the nature of the relation of literary and the social.

In *The Field of Cultural Production* Bourdieu outlines the complex relationship between the fields of power and cultural production. Although in some ways independent, ('Reflection theories, no matter how elaborate or euphemised, neglect the relative autonomy of the literary field, p. 13) the cultural/literary field exists, nevertheless, in a relation of subordination to the field of economic and political power (whose legitimacy is based on possession of economic and symbolic capital). Situated in and dominated by the field of power, intellectuals therefore exist in a 'dominated fraction of the dominant class.'<sup>10</sup> The relationship between cultural

practices and other broader social processes can be summarised as an ‘economic world reversed’ or ‘winner loses logic’ (p. 9) in that success in economic terms in literary field translates into low prestige, which in turn constitutes a barrier to the field’s symbolic power. The prizes of the literary field are thereby denied those who succeed in economic terms; Jilly Cooper although exceeding James Joyce in terms of book sales, for example, accrues in the literary field a negligible level of symbolic capital, particularly when compared with the high prestige accorded to Joyce. The complex relation between cultural and economic power is such that one does not translate directly into the other. Mbalia’s analysis thus neglects the objective conditions which govern the ‘production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods’ (p.13). However, even if Morrison’s novels were intended and consumed as transparent political treatises, as calls to arms, their success in the social field would be compromised by the domination of the literary field by that of power and economics. The profound disregard of literary and social mediations of texts leads Mbalia to seriously misread, not to say underestimate, the political force of Morrison’s work.

As it has been noted Rigney’s analysis foregrounds the very issues that Mbalia’s overlooks or condemns in that it favours a textual approach to the novels and sites the author’s politics in her manipulation of language. Citing Temma Berg, the political significance of Morrison’s disruptive poetics is outlined thus:

. . . the use of such language ‘will lead to the subversion of the closure of traditional Western metaphysics’. In all her novels Morrison implies the primacy of the maternal and the semiotic in the economy of language in order to achieve signification and a higher form of poetic (and also political) truth (p. 12)<sup>11</sup>

While considerably less reductive than Mbalia’s conception of the text’s politics, Rigney’s argument is not without its problems.

First, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* relies upon an almost wholly uncritical use of French feminist theory. Given the space that is given over to the issue of

theorising itself in the text's introduction this is entirely unexpected. Using an extract from *The Bluest Eye* a warning is issued regarding the interpretive process, for instance.

Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at the moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics, but not Christ's serious anarchy. . . . For all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. . . . A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay. (p. 133-4)<sup>12</sup>

In addition to rehearsing the dangers of selective reading some of the problems specific to French feminist thought are raised. Through reference to Ann Jones' critique of *écriture féminine*<sup>13</sup> Rigney questions the precise nature of its political project. However, as quickly as the problem is raised it is resolved by appealing to what Jones terms an "energizing myth" rather than an agenda for change' and 'an island of hope in the void left by the deconstruction of humanism'(p. 4). This recuperation is problematic in two ways. Initially, there is a sense in which the notion of French feminisms as energising *myths* is denied in the collapse between textual and social revolution that occurs within Rigney's argument. Subversive language is deemed to contain the power to confound Western metaphysics, to enact political change; disruption of linguistic and material processes are identical, political and artistic revolution are one. Here Rigney's reasoning coincides in unforeseen ways with Mbalia's. The lack of attention paid to the mediations of world and text, albeit from the opposite end of the equation, renders Morrison's texts as paradigmatically, indeed programatically French feminist. With this is a comparable investment in the kind of reflectionist conception of the text practiced by Mbalia; formal features of Morrison's work mirror their worldly effects: narrative disruption, polyvocality, the

eruption of the semiotic, catalyses political transformation as does madness and hysteria ('Hysteria itself can function as an agent of such transformation', p. 20).

Rigney accepts too readily the French feminist equivalence of fluidity and radicalism. To locate revolution in the subversion of Symbolic codes is to drastically overinvest in the power of theory as well as to underestimate what Edward Said has referred to as the text's 'capacity for the production of misery or liberation'<sup>14</sup>. Felski again explains:

Such a position . . . fails to offer any adequate explanatory account of the relationship between the subversion of internal formal structures and processes of social change. Any such abstract conception of a feminine text cannot cope with the heterogeneity and specificity of women's cultural needs, including, for example, the development of a sustained analysis of black women's or lesbian writing, which is necessarily linked to issues of representation and cannot be adequately addressed by simply arguing the 'subversive' nature of formal self-reflexivity. (p. 9)

Despite the potential reification of black women's and lesbian writing as preoccupied with realism, Felski's point is crucial to a consideration of literary politics. To recall Bourdieu, the political nature of a piece of writing cannot be determined in terms of form alone. Rather it is to be located relationally, within the field of discourses in which it finds itself competing.

The full explanation of artistic works is to be found neither in the text itself, nor in some sort of determinant social structure. Rather it is found in the history and structure of the field itself, with its multiple components, and in the relationship between that field and the field of power. (p. 9)

To borrow a phrase from Nancy Miller, feminist critics must beware of being too confident that non-discursive practices will respond correctly to the correct theory or discursive practice'<sup>15</sup>

A more serious problem, however, inheres with Rigney's conception of the relation between French feminist and race theory and politics. Black feminist



objections to the 'subsuming of racial difference into the category of the feminine' (p. 4) are raised and quickly dispensed with. First, the question of racial difference is deemed answerable through a metaphorised idea of a double-voiced discourse, articulable via French feminist thought. The necessary focus on race *and* gender is achieved through what Rigney terms a 'philosophical two-step' (p. 4), the plural assertion of 'both/and rather than either/or . . . perform[ing], as *Beloved* does, 'A little two-step, make-a-new-step, slide, slide and strut on down' ([*Beloved*, p. 74], p. 5). Rigney then stresses the suitability of her approach to Morrison's texts by appealing to her chosen theorists adoption of blackness as a metaphor of difference.

The important metaphor that pervades the works of such theorists as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Marguerite Duras, and Monique Wittig, is in fact that of marginality, of blackness as symbolic of radical dissidence and linguistic revolution. Duras, for example, defines feminine writing as 'an organic translated writing . . . translated from blackness, from darkness . . . from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language.' (pp. 3-4)

Making reference to Cixous' statement 'we are black and we are beautiful'<sup>16</sup> it is argued:

'Blackness' as a metaphor, for Morrison as well as for these French theorists, embraces racial identity and a state of female consciousness, or even unconsciousness, that zone beyond the laws of white patriarchy in which female art is conceived and produced. (p. 4)

In assuming 'blackness' as a metaphor for race-and-gender difference Rigney's theoretical framing of Morrison's novels runs into a number of difficulties. As a conduit for thinking about the exclusion zone of the feminine, blackness as metaphor is one available only to white women scholars. Kadiatu Kanneh draws attention to the colonial imperative at the heart of metaphorising racial difference in this way. Referring specifically to Cixous' appropriation of the slogan 'black is beautiful' she comments:

This reference to African peoples in order to underline the position of women outside history and culture, beyond the self-conscious, adult world of reason and politics, is in indirect collusion with the deliberate policies of the Western colonial countries which aim to wipe out the achievements and intricate pasts of the colonized.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, Cixous' assumption 'In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history'<sup>18</sup> is read both as an active dissociation of white woman from colonial history and as a further mark of white privilege. This 'flagrant fluidity of metaphor' where the critic occupies a steadfast position in gender terms 'and yet can slide racially and class-wise' (p. ) is dependent upon an ability to disengage such metaphors from their respective signifying histories. This ability to erase the past is uniquely a property of the white critic. What is more, it is a project which denies what Toni Morrison has termed the continued 'ideological utility' (*Playing in the Dark*, p. 64) of historically constituted racialised discourses. Kanneh explains:

The idea that women should ignore the divisions between themselves and sweep together across class, race and national boundaries to create a post-historical Utopian home, bypasses the knowledge that racial oppression has always created the body from obsessive fantasies of biology and environment. The power of Cixous's metaphors comes precisely from their continuing life in present ideologies of race. Black women are not in a position to bypass the histories and divisions, both of class and race, which block the development of a unified feminist movement. (p. 335)

So, despite its celebratory, not to say political, intent Rigney's linking of racial and gender oppression through the discourse of French feminist thought has the effect of suppressing any consideration of race as a distinct and above all historical oppressive force. Blackness is subsumed into the feminine, pressed into service as a metaphor of the wild zone of *écriture féminine*. The warnings of subsuming race to gender, although initially noted by Rigney, go entirely unheeded.

The methodological device of dancing is no less free of difficulty however. Rigney's analytical soft shoe shuffle, although intended as a means of combining consideration of race and gender, succeeds mostly in effacing race from the critical agenda. Nancy Miller discusses Annette Kolodny's deployment of the dance as a signifier of plurality and multiplicity, alongside that of Derrida in 'Choreographies', in *Getting Personal*.<sup>19</sup> Summarising the thirty-five pages of replies elicited by Kolodny's controversial essay published in the Autumn 1982 edition of *Feminist Studies* Miller states:

. . . both the critical plural of a mainstream, white woman's feminism, and a 'degendered' poststructuralist 'multiplicity of sexually marked voices' can be seen to erase the bodies of differentiated social subjects. The one imposes a false feminist universal that seems to be complicitous with a central institutional authority; the other reveals itself to be the cover of a phallogocentric subject who measures difference by himself. (pp. 83-4)

Rigney's choreographic method enables the critic to 'slide, slide' out of any obligation to the concrete differences that structure all relations between women. In supposing a metaphorised notion of race-and-gender difference in the form of a dance Rigney overlooks the ' . . . real and consequential differences of race, class, and sexual identification [which] often entail the destructive impact among women of unequal and oppressive power relations, their history, and their continuation into the present.'<sup>20</sup> The 'philosophical two-step', therefore, is a dance that neutralises, even as it proposes itself as a means of holding onto, racial difference. The both/and of Rigney's intentions slips into the false universal identified by Miller. Despite the demonstrated awareness of the potential problems of her critical enterprise Rigney's insights remain split off from the main analysis.

Both critics, in *advancing* a theory of the text, determining a frame in advance of reading, find what they set out to discover: evidence of the theory in the text. Mbalia's and Rigney's investment in an all-encompassing critical position has the

effect of blinding them to key features of Morrison's texts. In Rigney's case the emphasis upon deferral, fluidity, disruption, and other features of *écriture féminine*, produces a closed circuit and sacrifices issues of witnessing through the privileging of a critical frame that disdains Symbolic signification. The referential, denotative function of Morrison's poetics, her professed concern with bearing witness, is dispensed with in the generalised focus upon linguistic subversion and the defiance of closure. Whereas Mbalia retains a concern with the material she does so at the expense of any viable consideration of the text's function as literature. The doctrinaire, rigid nature of her thesis produces an excess of meaning which is then projected out of her discussion in the name of inadequacy, 'clumsy handling of time', or weak class consciousness. Hill Rigney's approach for all its professed interest in multiplicity and fluidity is no less confining, however; in her analysis contradiction is entirely recuperable in a classic postmodern gesture which marks narrative contradiction or discontinuity as the very essence of a radical poetics. In foregrounding wildness, anarchy, disorder, the unpoliced black and feminine discourse, the critical text exempts itself from charges of repressing disorder and decay. And yet paradoxically the text's meanings are subjected to an ordering process albeit one based upon disorder. The uncontrolled aspects of Morrison's texts are recuperated within the fold of French feminisms, shepherded into a theoretical enclosure whose boundaries are wildness and disruption itself.

The tensions that I have identified here between these two radically opposed readings of Morrison's novels are identifiable in turn in issues that accrue in Morrison criticism. The suggestiveness of Morrison's work makes it particularly susceptible to multiple and wide-ranging meanings; the complexity of her poetics render her texts amenable to radically different readings. Indeed, it is this amenability that is one of the sources of Morrison's celebration as an exemplar of the postmodern. With their multiple meanings, quarrel with documentary history, undermining of oppositional thinking, the novels have been read as profoundly

postmodern. However, just as Rigney and Mbalia produce an excess of meaning that is either repressed or cannot be accounted for in their rigid framings of the texts, so many postmodern readings cannot deal with Morrison's express purpose of finding 'the words to say it.'<sup>21</sup> What follows is an attempt to address these tensions in the criticism. In thinking through Morrison's work as testimony, as preoccupied with witnessing, I hope to offer ways not only of negotiating the split between history and the imagination; but also a means of rethinking critical responsibility regarding interpretation and third, a mode of identification that can take account of difference.

### **Inventing the Past: Toni Morrison's Crisis of Witnessing**

In interview Morrison makes frequent mention of her need, as a writer, to *invent*, and yet, equally, sometimes in the same sentence, references are made to her perceived role as *witness*. So, for example, in 'Memory, Creation, and Writing' Morrison speaks of her purpose thus:

If my work is to be functional to the group (to the village, as it were) then it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them; it should not even attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, in her many comments about *Beloved*, Morrison refers to having (in the words of Linda Anderson), 'researched very thoroughly the historical background of the novel' at the same time as refusing 'to find out any more about Margaret Garner'<sup>23</sup> as she 'really wanted to invent her life'<sup>24</sup>. In the context of an historical project founded upon positivist logic, the idea of rigorous research accompanied by an act of imagination is a contradiction in terms. Indeed the very suggestion of an imaginative act is enough to cast doubt upon the verity of the historical record or document: the possibility of a history is supposed to involve the suspension of the imagination in favour of the 'bald' facts.

Such was the discursive context of the slave's narrative. Presented as 'the plain, unvarnished truth'<sup>25</sup>, accounts of slave experience were nevertheless profoundly *euphemised*<sup>26</sup> in their denial of the role of memory and subjectivity in writing. In an essay examining the narrative conventions of slave accounts, James Olney explains the political importance of the slave narrative's professed immediacy:

The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of 'slavery as *it is*.' Thus it is the writer's claim, it *must* be his claim, that he is not emplotting, he is not fictionalizing, and he is not performing any act of *poesis* (= shaping, making). To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty - indeed, if it were creative it would be *eo ipso* faulty for 'creative' would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for 'lying.'<sup>27</sup>

The presence of memory, then, would threaten both the validity of the account and by extension the abolitionist cause. The necessity of the 'clear-glass', memoryless account also served to shape the conventions of slave narrative as a genre. The resulting account tended to depict the perceived evils of slavery as an institution rather than as an individual experience. So, in Olney's words:

The lives in the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like. (p. 154)

In short, the slave's narrative was concerned more with slavery than with slaves.

In interviews and lectures, Morrison has referred to the deliberate omissions, the codified narrations, in addition to the wholesale absence of any mention of 'the interior life' of the slave, in published accounts of slave experience.<sup>28</sup> Precisely intent upon those omissions and spaces Morrison wrote *Beloved*. This is not to say, simply, that a handful of facts about slavery were gathered and then the rest made up or that

the author added a few feelings, the subjective, to the historical document. Rather, in pressing hard upon the narrative refusals and omissions of orthodox history its very existence is called into question. Linda Anderson puts it thus:

Morrison's complex re-imagining of history in *Beloved* is also an exploration of how what is unwritten and unremembered can come back to haunt us, troubling the boundaries of what is known.<sup>29</sup>

In Morrison's own words, in drawing attention to 'the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment' the 'dark', 'abiding' Africanist presence/absence inhabiting the centre of (white) America's self-representations, the 'unspeakable things unspoken' of American history, a re-ordering, not to say a reinvigoration of history and the literary canon is intended.<sup>30</sup> Put another way, if, as Lyotard has it, history 'forgets through discursive ordering'<sup>31</sup>, Morrison is addressing the structural forgetting of slave narrative as a form and in a broader sense the forgettings of documentary history itself. If the forgetting is structural, a re-ordering of memorial history is implied in Morrison's ambition of making its silences speak, of filling in the blank on *Beloved*'s headstone. Furthermore, in granting hitherto denied interiority to the case of Margaret Garner, Morrison is engaging in a profoundly political act. Morrison's preoccupation both with memory in her work generally and with imagining the interior life of a particular slave in *Beloved*, one for whom only 'objective' and hence exteriorised, accounts exist, becomes a politically charged restorative act given Olney's point about 'the ex-slave being 'debarred' from the use of memory and the imagination' (p. 151). The narrative and social purpose to which slave accounts were put, therefore, militated against what might be termed personal expression/imagination; if slaves lacked ownership of themselves they also lacked ownership of what were professed to be their own words. Although ostensibly 'written by themselves' slave accounts were by no means the sole property of their authors.<sup>32</sup> Houston Baker puts it thus:

the voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is

perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. it is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery.<sup>33</sup>

In *Beloved* Morrison's literary project can therefore be seen as the articulation of the inscribed silences, refusals of the documented history of slavery. A crucial part of this articulation is achieved through granting the characters not merely the right to tell their own story, but also the '... the time afterward to shape it' (*Beloved* p.78). The act of shaping, ordering, making, hitherto denied, is politically resonant in Morrison's text. In Sethe's words: 'Her story was bearable because it was his as well - to tell, to refine and tell again.' (p.99, my emphasis)

### **History and Memory Work**

This focus upon the interior history further shakes up the historical order of things. The privileging of memory over document/monument implies first a temporal re-ordering; a radical reworking of the metaphysical renderings of past and present. Notions of teleology, chronology, are here complicated by the deferrals and belatedness that mark the temporality of the psyche. Designated by the term *Nachtraglichkeit* (translated variously as deferred action, belatedness or in Laplanche's translation afterwardsness<sup>34</sup>) the concept of psychic time finds its most early development in Freud's case history, the Wolf Man. In this study Freud describe the process by which the Wolf Man's shock at witnessing a sexual act between his parents produces an accompanying psychic act of deferral in that the significance of the primal scene is only realised later in adulthood. Peter Nicholls explains further:

As Lacan observes, 'the event remains latent in the subject', thereby giving rise to the complex temporality in which the subject is always in more than one place at any time. . . . *Nachtraglichkeit* calls into question traditional notions of causality - the second event is presented now as the cause of the first - and its retroactive logic refuses to accord ontological primacy to any



originary moment. Since the shock of the first scene is not felt directly by the subject but only through its later representation in memory we are dealing with, in Derrida's words, 'a past that has never been present'<sup>35</sup>.

An event's eventness, so to speak, or its significance is less a delimited set of occurrences consciously registered both individually and socially in their full presence than a kind of self-divided shuttling between two temporal moments, or what has been termed historicity.<sup>36</sup>

These ideas of the differing temporality of the psyche have received further consideration in the work that has developed in relation to the notion of trauma. Following on from psychoanalytic conceptions of forgetting, a traumatic event, too, constitutes 'a record yet to be made'<sup>37</sup>

Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative - the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma - does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. (p. 57)

In addition to psychic amnesia, a forgetting that retroactive in that, to recall Nicholls phrase, 'the second event is presented now as the cause of the first', forgetting can also be determined in more active terms: the dissociative, psychic work which Freud describes as 'dissolving thought connections, failing to draw the right conclusions and isolating memories' (Benjamin, p.171) Given this it would be more useful to speak of forgettings, in the plural, as opposed to mere forgetting.<sup>38</sup>

Forgetting as the dissolving of 'thought connections' is practiced most by Sethe in *Beloved*. The used-to-be-slave woman '...worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe.' (p.6); her '... future was a matter of keeping the past at bay' (p.42). The work, the conscious activity that forgetting demands of Sethe is made explicit here:

Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. . . . Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it. (pp. 38-9)

Sethe's realisation of not experiencing colour is also acknowledged as belated, as retroactive or, to use Peter Nicholls' phrase, 'the second event is presented now as the 'cause' of the first'. That is, it is only through becoming conscious of the existence of colour in the present moment that Sethe has awareness of its lack in her past. What is more, the return of her awareness of colour is directly linked to Sethe's confrontation with the scene of its loss: the murder of her daughter at her own hands.

The re-ordering of temporality required by memoried history also extends to the consideration of place. In the process of remembering, geographical and spatial location are fundamentally disrupted. Given the unintegrated nature of traumatic memory, its profound disconnection from everyday life, the spatial distinctions between places in the 'real' world are entirely absent in the traumatised memory. In Dori Laub's words:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. . . . Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (p. 69)

Despite Sethe's relentless work of 'beating back the past' (p. 73), 'Unfortunately her brain was devious' and with the slightest of triggers 'suddenly there was Sweet

Home rolling. rolling, out before her very eyes' (p. 6) Memories of the plantation in the form of Sethe's 'rememory' are concrete and physical:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. it's never going away. Even if the whole farm - every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there - you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you. (p. 38)

The process of remembering, by contrast, is a process of re-integration of the split-off, frozen 'memory'. The fact of its unspeakable and unspoken nature places the soon-to-be remembered event in a relationship of crisis with the everyday. It is in this sense that testimony is said to necessarily enact a breakage of the available discursive frames for its expression. Shoshana Felman notes:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (p. 5)

Bringing such memories into cognition then requires an act of creation, of composition, and therefore entails the piecing together of fragments never before placed together. In this respect, testimony is not the retrieving of a lost, forgotten, already-constituted object/event, a referring back, but a textual event in itself taking place in the present. It is not, therefore, a faithful copy, or a simple mirroring, of a past incident but the *present* enactment/construction/realisation of an event's significance(s). Testimony is therefore less an appeal to the already known than a movement toward knowing.

Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right. (p. 62)

Testimony, therefore impacts upon the world of the listener in addition to that of the teller. Without this impact, Felman argues, the telling has not been truly heard: 'Testimony cannot be authentic without that crisis' (p. 52).<sup>39</sup> As a textual event in its own right, testimony necessitates the act of reading; it is dynamic and involving rather than static and immediate. Testimony therefore also implies the presence of an empathic listener, a witness. Conversely, without a witness testimony is unthinkable.

Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time. (p.70-1)

The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, *annihilates the story*. (my emphasis, p.68)

The listener, the witness, then, is said to activate the testimony; her/his presence enables the story to be told, provides what has been termed a 'testimonial bridge' (p.101), a holding, supporting role in the testimonial relationship. To testify is, consequently, to participate in a testimonial relationship with an other; a witness to the testimony. A testimonial narrative is therefore relational and not monolithic, in the sense of its constituting a discrete object, it is instead determined and therefore exists between two people; teller and witness.

In short, to remember is to create, to literally *re-collect*, to piece together that which has been held apart, or to reconstruct a traumatic scene retroactively. The idea of remembering as creation resonates with Morrison's conception of memory as outlined in her essay 'Memory, Creation, and Writing'<sup>40</sup>: 'Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation' (p.385) A form of creation that, as Annette Kuhn notes, is without end:

Memory work, on the other hand, is potentially interminable: at every turn, as further questions are raised, there is always something else to look into.<sup>41</sup>

Or in Felman's words

The way in which the translator can bear witness to what actually happens in the original is, however, paradoxically, not by imitation but only by a new creation, a creation that, although it insures the literal survival of the original, is itself only the testimony of an afterlife. . . (p. 160)

Testimony or bearing witness, rather than presenting an event in its perceived transparency, as an exact copy of an original event (as Andrew Benjamin enquires what is 'the first time of this first time?', p. 170) instead implies the necessity of *reading*, of interpretation, which brings with it the question of responsibility, of *how* to read.

### **Guardian of the Testimony: Witnessing and Responsibility.**

If the reader participates in the creation of the testimony it is a role not without responsibility. As 'guardian' of the narrative (p. 58) the witness is under obligation in a number of ways. Laub outlines this obligation, first, in terms of the listener's 'both unobtrusive, nondirect, and yet imminently present, active' role. The listener bears some responsibility both in controlling the flow of the remembrance and in helping to piece the fragments together: letting the 'trauma fragments make their impact both on him and on the witness'.

Thus, when the flow of fragments falters, the listener has to enhance them and induce their free expression. When the trauma fragments, on the contrary, accelerate, threaten to get too intense, too tumultuous and out of hand, he has to reign them in, to modulate their flow. (p.71)

The witness then bears responsibility for the survivor surviving the telling; 'holding' the teller at the moment event and significance(s) are felt/realised. Having passed a 'mutual test of safety', having established that 'they are stable and strong enough to affirm the reality of [the event] in actual *nonmetaphorical statements*'(pp.69-70), both teller and listener enter a testimonial contract:

Implicitly, the listener says to the testifier: 'For this limited time, throughout the duration of the testimony, I'll be with you all the way, as much as I can. I

want to go wherever you go, and I'll hold and protect you along this journey. Then, at the end of the journey, I shall leave you'. (p.70)

Sethe can be read as enacting the role of witness to Paul D's untold stories in the following extract. While <sup>in</sup> the very presence of Sethe 'the closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock' (p. 41), she also plays a more active part in Paul D's testimony.

'You want to tell me about it?' she asked him.

'I don't know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul.'

'Go ahead. I can hear it.'

'Maybe. Maybe you can hear it. I just ain't sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean, because it wasn't the bit - that wasn't it.'

Paul D then tells of the moment when he realised that Mister, Sweet Home's rooster, 'was allowed to be and stay what he was' whereas he, tongue 'held down by iron' was 'something less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.' At which point Sethe intervenes to slow the telling down.

Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knee, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. (p.72)

Sethe holds Paul D's emergent story, acting as 'the guardian of its process and momentum' thereby ensuring he survives its articulation. The testimonial process is consequently a strenuous one for both participants. The testimony is not a literal recording of experience but a creation that bears the hallmark of textual activity. The reader/witness then has to be alert to its potential encodings, deferrals, and repetitions in order to read meaningfully.

Laub details an incident where the pursuit of historical accuracy served to discredit the testimony of one of the rare survivors of the Auschwitz uprising. In a videotaped interview with Laub, a woman in her early sixties gave an eyewitness

account of the moment when, in her own words, 'we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding.' At a conference organised a few months later, a debate ensued as to the validity of the woman's account. According to a number of historians, the narrative was inaccurate: empirical evidence demonstrated that only one chimney, and not four, was blown up. From this, they argued, the woman's testimony was false and could not be relied upon. Given the existence of a virulent revisionism, in the form of holocaust denial material, the argument ran, historical accuracy was paramount.

As the woman's interviewer, Laub intervened, arguing that the testimony had been misread, its purpose misconstrued:

The woman was testifying not to the number of chimneys blown up but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth. (p. 60)

The message/meaning of the testimony was not the empirical data of the chimneys but the fact and the secret of her survival. Laub continued:

The woman's testimony is breaking the frame of the concentration camp by and through her very testimony: she is breaking out of Auschwitz by her very talking. (p.62)

It is in this sense that testimony admits a degree of textuality i.e. it is a message that needs decoding, reading and not a simple mimetic representation of some already determined external reality. It is not a totalised depiction that can be held up to an objective idea of *how it really was* to confirm its validity, a faithful copy of an event dependent upon a reality outside of itself for its 'truth'. In Shoshana Felman's words:

What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalisable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice as opposed to a pure *theory*. (p.5)

As Peter Nicholls points out, Laplanche and Leclaire's conception of memory is useful here in that for them the experience of working through or remembering 'has less to do with the recollection of an event than with the repetition of a structure.'<sup>42</sup> The testimony of the Auschwitz uprising repeated the structure of the breaking of a frame, the shattering of a universe that was itself originally shattering of the pre-concentrationary universe.<sup>43</sup>

Read this way Halle Suggs 'sitting by the churn . . . butter all over his face' testifies to his wife's violation at the hands of Schoolteacher's nephews:

[Sethe] shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. . . . I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, *their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up*. . . . But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more - so I add more. . . . There is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face *because the milk they took is on his mind. And as far as he is concerned, the world may as well know it*. (p. 70, my emphasis)

In 'watching and writing it up', or documenting the attack, Schoolteacher bears false witness to what he is viewing in that the data he is pursuing is not the true record of what is happening. Instead it is Halle's actions that bear tortured witness to Sethe's ordeal. The nauseating image of his smashing congealed butter into his face echoes the nauseating scene of the boys at Sethe's breast. Similarly, his broken self testifies to the breaking of Sethe's subjectivity.

**'The Work's Own Canvas': Witnessing and Decidability.**



The contrast between the two witnesses in this scene further stresses the issue of witnessing and responsibility. The emphasis so far placed upon the lack of resolution and closure of testimony should not be taken as signalling relativism, a kind of 'anything goes', free-market approach to interpretation. Within the realm of testimony in which I have located Morrison's novels, the reader carries an obligation toward realising the event that resists intelligibility, that is emerging in the telling. In the case of Morrison's texts the reader could be construed as being obliged to pay attention to what the author has termed 'the work's own canvas.'<sup>44</sup> Part of the author's battle against the effects of reading her work in terms of 'approved treatments' - sanctioned theoretical approaches that censor through the exclusion of 'the specificity of the culture, the gender, the language', that 'rank and grade the readable product' (p. 10) - is not to suggest an alternative theoretical approach but as far as is possible to disarm the reader upon entry to the text.

Whereas in her earlier fictions Morrison provides points of entry into the novel's universe in the form of what she refers to as a 'welcoming lobby' (*Unspeakable*, p.24), a transitional space that mediates between reader and text thus 'introducing an outside-the circle reader into the circle'(p. 25), in *Beloved* she eschews such devices.<sup>45</sup> Speaking of the novel's opening sentence she remarks

It is abrupt and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. (p. 32)

This intention coincides with Laub's description of the witnessing role. Referring to his lack of historical knowledge with respect to the Auschwitz uprising when interviewing the woman who testified to the blowing up of the chimneys, Laub suggests that a detailed knowledge of the event may have interfered with the woman's testimony. Arriving at the scene of witnessing armed with a nuanced

account of the uprising, Laub 'might have felt driven to confirm [his] knowledge', an action which 'could have derailed the testimony'(p. 61), in passing everything that was told to him through the filter of what was already known. By being in possession of the historical 'facts' the witness, then, potentially fails in her/his role in that the knowable runs the risk of being foreclosed upon in favour of the known. As Laub stresses however, this is not to espouse willful ignorance, a celebrated stance of not knowing as discussed in chapter 1, it is more to emphasise the limits of prior knowledge. In Laub's words: '. . . knowledge should not hinder or obstruct the listening with foregone conclusions and preconceived dismissals, should not be an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information.' (p. 61)

With respect to Morrison's work, the overinvestment in questions of aesthetics, and 'pure' literary debate (whether or not her work has literary merit or not for instance), forecloses upon its testimonial function. The author has commented upon the effect of literary references regarding her texts as 'supply[ing] a comfort I don't want the reader to have', a comfort which insulates and protects her/him from direct involvement in the novel's universe.

I want my fiction to urge the reader into active participation in the non-narrative, nonliterary experiences of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data. (Memory, p.387)

As opposed to the distanced posture of Schoolteacher 'watching and writing up', through which the text bears witness to the violence of the record founded upon the observation of the Other,<sup>46</sup> Morrison is calling for an ethically responsible, and by extension, involved, reading relation to her texts; in short, a witness.

To pick up on an earlier point, the reader's role in activating the text, like the emphasis on lack of closure is not to suggest either the supremacy of the reader over the text, or the undecidability of an event. As Andrew Benjamin states 'irreducibility is not undecidability' (p. 15), it is not the potential for boundless interpretation or whim on behalf of the reader. Abraham and Torok's theory of readability or

cryptonymic analysis is instructive here. Whereas the Lacanian account of linguistic functioning posits the notion of a primordial and necessarily *permanent* split between linguistic markers and their meanings, as represented both in Lacan's algorithm  $\underline{S}$

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and in his famous statement 'an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier', Abraham and Torok would see this separation as itself a potential object for investigation. Esther Rashkin explains:

Cryptonymic analysis can, therefore, be said to recognise the proliferation of the signifying chain whilst providing a tool for understanding how a particular signified has been severed from that chain. What is obstructed or barred in cryptonymy is not 'meaning' in any traditional sense of the term but a connection, situation or drama that resists meaning or intelligibility. (p.46)

'Cryptonymy' posits a way of thinking of the *specificity* of gaps in signification as well as the dissociation of signifier and signified, of mark and meaning, of enabling 'the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them' (*Beloved*, p. 175). In viewing the past as a denied connection and not a lost object waiting to be unearthed, cryptonymy as an analytic mode retains the particularity of history's secrets, its unspeakable things unspoken, without construing the past as already formed yet somehow lost. Interpretation is then a matter of 'discovering *why* signification or meaning has been made unavailable' (p. 51, my emphasis) as opposed to focussing on *how* the text resists decidability; 'In a cryptonymic reading, we may stop at a signifier if we can determine what it hides, how it hides it, and what drama might be linked to its process of hiding' (p. 45). In examining how a particular signifier resists being read, the process of cryptonymy allows precisely for a decidable outcome, of discovering what is being hidden without relying upon archaeology, for 'the reading of a symbolic text does not stop at observing a one-to-one correspondence between two terms' (p. 45). Instead, the textual fragments or signifiers when allowed to re-join with their missing or hidden counterparts are then transformed into a functioning symbolic unit, an operating symbol, a dynamic

relational entity which in turn requires its own counterpart. 'the operation of the symbol is itself infinite. . . To join a symbol with its complement is to encounter, in this union, another symbol itself separated from its own complement' (p. 48).

What is implied here is the temporality of interpretation, the fact that all meanings cannot be realised at once and are instead part of an ongoing symbolising process.

This cryptonymic process of interpretation is enacted in *Song of Solomon*. A meditation on history and memory, interpretation and reading, the novel is organised around an enigmatic text/song: the song of Solomon whose meaning is gradually deciphered by Milkman Dead, as it turns out, a direct descendent of the song's protagonist.

As readers we encounter a version of the song within the novel's opening pages. Sung by Milkman's aunt, Pilate, the song also represents the keeping of a promise made to the ghost of her father who keeps appearing and urging Pilate to 'Sing, sing.' (p. 208)

*O Sugarman done fly away*

*Sugarman done gone*

*Sugarman cut across the sky*

*Sugarman gone home* (p. 6)

As the narrative progresses the veiled lexical significance of *Sugarman* is revealed as Solomon. As he sets out to trace his ancestry, a journey prompted by the promise of gold, Milkman is halted in his tracks by a group of children playing a singing game. Spinning in a circle the children are singing a song that Milkman 'has heard off and on all his life' (p.300) The children are singing Pilate's song but with ' 'Solomon don't leave me' instead of 'Sugarman.' Even the name of the town sounded like Solomon: Shalimar, which Mr. Solomon and everybody else pronounced *Shalleemone*.' (p. 303). Milkman realises that his own history is encoded in its lines.

He couldn't be mistaken. These children were singing a story about his own people! He hummed and chuckled as he did his best to put it all together. (p. 303-4)

Piece by piece, line by line, the song's hidden meanings are realised. What is more, the enigmatic message 'Sing, sing.' is not, as it is supposed by Pilate, an instruction, but rather the name of her mother who died minutes before Pilate was born. The hidden significance of names for Milkman becomes absorbing in itself.

He read the road signs with interest now wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*. *How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places of this country.* Under the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead', recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places and things. Names that had meaning. . . . He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. (my emphasis pp.329/30)

Deciphering and unravelling a veiled history is not the only issue at stake in Song of Solomon, however.

Unbeknownst to her, Pilate has carried her father's bones around in a sack for a good many years. Mistaking the bones for those of an assailant she presumes killed by her brother, Pilate heeds the words of her dead father's ghost to signify her responsibility to the dead man's body.

'You can't just fly off and leave a body,' he told me. A human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when we did it. He meant that if you take a life then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them. (p. 208)

Pilate's assumed responsibility for the body echoes, I would argue, Morrison's own sense of responsibility for the bodies of the disremembered, which in turn becomes the responsibility of the critic reading the text. In an examination of

the work of critic Paul de Man, Shoshana Felman highlights the critic's concern with what happens to the poet Shelley's body in readings of his final, unfinished poem *The Triumph of Life*. The text of the poem is interrupted by the poet's death, a fact which, for de Man, constitutes a problem of reading for the critic: 'The final test of reading, in *The Triumph of Life*, depends on how one reads the textuality of the event, how one disposes of Shelley's body.'<sup>47</sup> With this, de Man is critical of the tendency to dispose of the body-in-the-text too readily, to transform the silent inscription of the body in the text's margins into an 'historical and aesthetic object' (Felman, p. 158). This reading of Shelley's poem is extended into a reading of history itself. The implications of treating history as a 'totalised, settled, understood and closed account' are that of reproducing it as a 'speech act which disposes of the scandal of the bodies'. Felman concludes: 'The task of the translator . . . is to read the textuality of the original event *without disposing of the body*, without reducing the original event to a false transparency of sense.' (p. 158)

Following this, Morrison's concern in *Song of Solomon* appears to be one of rendering the textuality of the historical event imaged through the song at the same time as dealing with the bones, the unmarked graves of that history. The problem of how to contemplate the dead becomes paramount in Morrison's writing generally. The unburied dead litter Morrison's novels: from the 'red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp' found by Stamp Paid (*Beloved*, p.180), to the feetless, headless, corpse of Paul A. hanging from a tree, to the foot that 'rose from the river bed and kicked the bottom of the boat and Sethe's behind' (p. 84) to the sixty million and more of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, the dead of African-American history form what Morrison has referred to as her debt as an author. For instance, in interview with James Wood she responds forcefully to his asking if, given the magnitude of her literary success, she feels herself to be 'immune' to the racism she depicts in her novels:

I wish it were true that it didn't apply to me any more, but it isn't. I have a certain amount of protection, but not here, not on the street where I live am I

free of it. Not ever! In addition, I am conscious to the *bone* of everyone else. I understand that one of the reasons that I am in this position is because I am good at it, but another is that I have a very big debt to pay to a lot of children who got their brains shot out in the sixties. I owe it to them, I really do. I'm happiest when I write something that both pleases me and also pays off this debt.<sup>48</sup>

This sense of debt pervades Morrison's self-descriptions of her role as a writer. It also further signals her concern with witnessing. Felman outlines another dimension of testimony: 'Contemporary writing is testimonial to the extent that it exists in a state of *referential debt*, of 'constant obligation' to the 'woes of history', and to its dead.' (p.115). In writing out of a sense of historical debt Morrison is simultaneously acting as its witness.

Despite Morrison's comment about paying off this debt her fictions continually refuse to settle up in full. *Beloved* ends with an acknowledgment of the impossibility of completely accounting for both the loss of a daughter and the sixty million of the novel's epigraph. 'There is a loneliness that can be rocked. . . . Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down.' (p. 274) Something Denver has already realised in witnessing Beloved and her mother's relationship:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. (p. 251)

*The Bluest Eye* similarly resists the reduction of its events to the 'false transparency of sense'. The sense of loss at the novel's close is palpable. The image of Pecola Breedlove, driven to madness, flailing 'her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly', allows no easy resolutions, no relief at the text's end. The loss is unequivocal: 'The damage done was total.' (p. 188). Audre Lorde's 'There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women' is suggestive here:

What do we want from each other  
after we have told our stories  
do we want  
to be healed do we want  
mossy quiet stealing over our scars  
do we want  
the powerful unfrightening sister  
who will make the pain go away  
mother's voice in the hallway  
you've done it right  
the first time darling  
you will never need  
to do it again.

Thunder grumbles on the horizon  
I buy time with another story  
a pale blister of air  
cadences of dead flesh  
obscure the vowels.<sup>49</sup>

Lorde's poem, like Morrison's novels, highlights the incompleteness of the testimonial narrative or text, the sense in which 'the literature of testimony is at once a performance of its obligation and a statement of its falling short of cancelling its referential debt.' (Felman, p. 116). The poems about dead women cannot be honest, they cannot, however much they aspire, achieve full or final truth. The idea of saying it once, getting it 'right the first time' is exposed as fantasy. As is the promise of complete healing through the testimony. Instead the urgency and obligation of the stories is made clear, they 'buy time'. They halt the threat of thunder even as they fail to account for the materiality of death. The fact of this failure is strained against with



the intensely visceral and yet inescapably linguistic images of blistered air and the 'cadences of dead flesh', images which nonetheless fall short of achieving full significance. Language cannot account for the materiality of death and yet neither can it be dispensed with.

Likewise, Morrison's texts consistently refuse the comfort of resolution, easy healing, and instead foreground its costs. Which is not the same as saying that they privilege *undecidability* in what has been taken to be a 'postmodern' sense but that they self-consciously explore sites of conflict. In her essay 'Rootedness' Morrison makes a distinction between problems and conflicts, implying that problems infer the obligation of solutions whereas conflicts are simply conflicts and therefore carry no such obligation: 'There is a conflict between public and private life, and its a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem, just a conflict.' (p. 339) Moving on to describe what she feels the functions of the novel to be she adds:

it should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are . But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe. (p. 341)

Morrison's work, rather than forming as Mbali supposes a series of manifestos, speaks to a crisis of representation and witnessing in the late twentieth century, a situation that is far from resolved.

### **Witnessing and Identification**

In allowing the testimony to impact upon her/his self, and in stripping away readerly expectation to achieve a state of almost 'pre-literacy', to borrow Morrison's term, the reader is not, as it might be supposed, a mere mirror or reflection of the testifier's words. The realisation of the testimony on the part of the witness is achieved through an act of reading and not reflection. Here I wish to stress that

paradoxically, successful acts of witnessing involve the *necessary failure* of the testimony to reproduce what is held to be the truth of the event. It is in this sense that the witness both 'makes and breaks a promise' (Laub, p.91) Laub explains further:

The testimony aspires to capture the lost truth of that reality, but the realization of the testimony is not the fulfillment of this promise. The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, differences, rather than an exploration of identity, just as the experience it testifies to - the Holocaust - is unassimilable, because it is a passage through the ultimate difference - the otherness of death. (p.91)

Testimony is '...a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds' (ibid), past and present, self and other, and not the reflection of one world within the other.

Of all Morrison's novels it could be said that *Beloved* provides the most intense examination of the processes of remembering and witnessing. In terms of its structure, demands on the reader, and its thematic concerns, *Beloved* could be said to bear witness to the process of witnessing itself; the work thus 'participates in the events it describes'.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the novel offers a sustained examination of the dynamics of witnessing and identification as reading relations to history. Through the characters of Paul D. and Beloved the text exposes the problems of mirroring as a reading relation to the past or to experience. In drawing out these issues I wish to highlight their implications for feminist criticism, and while I would not wish to reduce Morrison's texts to mere allegories for literary theory they nevertheless contain important lessons for the critic engaged in reading difference.

From the moment he re-enters Sethe's world, Paul D. forms a witnessing presence to her disavowed past. The very essence of an empathic listener: 'For a man with an immobile face it was amazing how ready it was to smile, or blaze or be sorry with you. As though all you had to do was get his attention and right away he produced the feeling you were feeling' (p. 7), Paul D. activates Sethe's testimony:

So, kneeling in the keeping room the morning after Paul D came, she was distracted by the two orange squares that signaled how barren 124 really was.

He was responsible for that. Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot. Windows suddenly had a view. (p.39)

The significances that Sethe works so hard to hold apart, line up in his presence: 'drabness looked drab; heat was hot', the relation of event to significance is restored. Paul D thus constitutes a 'testimonial bridge' through which the significance of the past is accessed. Felman writes:

Joining events to language, the narrator-as-eye-witness is the testimonial bridge which, mediating between narrative and history, guarantees their correspondence and adherence to each other. (p.101)

Later on in the narrative Paul D states his commitment to Sethe's past and by extension their future together:

Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. (p. 46)

Paul D thus establishes his role as a witness to Sethe's untold history by creating a place of safety from which she can begin to speak, by assuring her that he will continue to hold her story (thus fulfilling her need for 'the holding presence of a witness', Laub, p. 88) as he first held her body by the stove:

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palm of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say,

'Aw, Lord, girl.' And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, ... (p. 17-18)

Bearing at this point wordless witness to Sethe's injury, Paul D 'feels the pain her back ought to' (p.18) and thereby:

comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. The relation of the victim to the event of the trauma, therefore, impacts on the relation of the listener to it, and the latter comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels. (Laub, p.57-8)

This promise of wordless knowing also marks Beloved's position in the narrative. The ghost made flesh offers full understanding, knowing-without-saying through a totally identificatory relation with Sethe and her past. 'I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all.' (p. 183); 'Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All.' (p.191). However, there is a crucial difference in the relation offered by Beloved in that by knowing already she effaces the need to testify. Sethe does not 'have to explain', or put her trauma into words. Beloved is the event itself and as such needs no explanation, she is identical to Sethe's and her own trauma. This stands in contrast to Paul D. who stands at the other side of 'bridge' awaiting Sethe's spoken testimony. Beloved promises knowledge without the pain of recalling and narrating the event, however.

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off - she could never explain. (p. 163)

Deprived of the obligation to testify however, Sethe's relationship to her past, to Beloved, remains traumatic, without hope, indeed pathological (a potential which is slowly realised after the departure of Paul D. who is unable to comprehend Sethe's actions), in that the event of Beloved's death remains split off, sealed off, from the

world. The boundary of the trauma remains unbroken and hence the necessary dialogue and integration between worlds, present and past, cannot take place. Laub, again, explains:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of 'otherness', a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (p. 69)

The understanding that Beloved offers serves to further disconnect Sethe from the world. Arriving uncharacteristically late for work (p. 184) Sethe spends her day '...wondering how she could hurry time along and get to the no-time waiting for her.' (p.191) Sethe's past although fully known by Beloved continues to be unwitnessed, events therefore persist in their frozen, petrified character: time, chronology, sequence remain absent. Locked inside a significantly icy, unwitnessed, landscape, where, whilst skating, 'Nobody saw them falling.' (p. 174) Sethe and Beloved withdraw into their own undifferentiated universe: 'The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be.' (p. 183)

The blissful existence in which Sethe, 'excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember' (p. 183), is mirrored completely by Beloved soon begins to collapse. Their symbiotic merging becomes parasitic; the demands of Beloved, 'getting bigger, plumper by the day', reduce Sethe to skin and bone. The sight of her mother's skin 'thin as china silk' (p. 239) prompts Denver to 'step off the edge of the world' to find help and so breaks the boundary of that world in the process. So begins the process of witnessing.

That Paul D fails to 'hold' Sethe's testimony to the murder of her daughter is crucial inasmuch as it is through this 'failure' that he is able to maintain his difference, his otherness to Sethe's 'rough choice' (p. ) and so offer her a route out of her traumatic, and hence frozen relation to her past. Paul D, in his refusal to accept Sethe's reasoning, represents what Laub refers to as the promise 'of a sane, normal and connected world' (p.91) 'a life' or its possibility: 'We can make a life, girl. A life.' (p.46); '. . . We got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.' (p. 273). In breaking his promise to Sethe, Paul D. thus catalyses the passage through difference necessary to her survival. The breaking of the promise forms the space within which the testimonial bridge can be built. Instead of knowing already a space for knowing is created in the concrete world of the present:

There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made. (p. 39)

The frames of knowing in both worlds broken, the act of witnessing can resume.

## **Conclusion**

The process of witnessing here outlined offers a highly suggestive means of thinking about the act of critical reading and framing for the white feminist reader. The figure of the witness presents a way of thinking between straightforward identification and saying nothing, about the text's referent without falling into the trap of freezing its significance. It offers a dynamic listening/reading relation that bridges the gap between knowledge and ignorance, and warns against the *advancing* of a frame as a way of reading, of knowing before reading. Likewise Morrison's work can be read as a sustained meditation on issues of reading. Its participatory structure breaks down the presumed objectivity of certain critical approaches; the distinction between the text as an object of study and the reader as master of that text's meanings. If the witness is needfully disarmed of preconception on listening to the testimony so the reader is required by Morrison to break the certainty of an

advanced theoretical frame, to relinquish the knowledges that threaten to 'censor' her texts, that merely translate them into the terms of an already constituted discourse, the latest theory, turning them into marketable products. Finally, the figure of the witness offers a way of thinking through a readerly connection that exceeds simple mirroring; the passage through difference being crucial to the connection between witness and testifier, reader and text. Like the narrator in *Jazz* the reader who knows in advance of reading, who maintains a separation between herself and the text is bound to misread. The unidentified narrator who expresses a *doubtless* knowing in the very first sentence of the novel ('I know that woman...') is forced to a different conclusion by the end of the narrative:

I thought I knew them and wasn't worried that they didn't really know about me. *Now it's clear why they contradicted me at every turn:* they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tightlipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness....

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable - human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. I got so aroused while meddling, while finger-shaping, I overreached and missed the obvious. (pp.220-21)

The figure of the witness lifts the needle from the critical record.

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- <sup>1</sup> Critical framings of the authors texts are by no means confined to this opposition between materialist and French feminist approaches however. Arguments over the nature of Morrison's literary project, not to mention its political significance, are wide-ranging both in terms of the kinds of theories that are used and the conclusions that are reached. See Nellie McKay, ed., *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (Boston, Mass.: hall, 1988)
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991).
- <sup>3</sup> Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (Selinsgrove, London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Picador, 1989); *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988)
- <sup>5</sup> 'My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the colour, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it.' Toni Morrison, interview, in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. by Claudia Tate (Hertfordshire: Old Castle Books, 1989), pp. 117-131 (p. 125). See also Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, ed. by Mari Evans (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 339-345.
- <sup>6</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- <sup>7</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'; Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author' in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 197-210.
- <sup>8</sup> . Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature' *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (1989), pp.1-34 (p. 11) in Rigney, p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 28.
- <sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 15
- <sup>11</sup> Temma Berg, 'Suppressing the Language of Wo(man): The Dream as a Common Language.' in *Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics*, ed. by Berg et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 3-28.
- <sup>12</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Triad Grafton Books, 1981)
- <sup>13</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine' in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 361-377.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Edward Said, *Diacritics* 6 (1976), cited in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué Harari (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 158-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Nancy K. Miller, 'The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and her Fictions', *Diacritics* 12 (1982), (p. 50)
- <sup>16</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp. 245-264 (p. 248).



<sup>17</sup> Kadiatu Kanneh, 'Love, Mourning and Metaphor: Terms of Identity' in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992). Morrison echoes this point in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992) i.e. that a transhistorical notion of blackness is often relied upon to constitute the ground of white history. The Africanist narrative, it is argued, has been used so as to provide a 'history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks.' (p. 53) Also Toni Morrison points out the reasons for her noticing the functioning of what she terms Africanism in the literature of white America is that as a black woman she has no access to the kinds of racially coded short cuts that are utilised so frequently by whites.

Neither blackness nor 'people of color' stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. (p. x)

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, p. 258,

<sup>19</sup> Annette Kolodny, 'Dancing Through the Minefield' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 144-167. Cited in Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Elly Bushkin and Rena Grasso Patterson, 'An Interchange on Feminist Criticism: On 'Dancing Through the Minefield'' *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1982), 629-75 (p. 659). Cited in Miller, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. v.

<sup>22</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing' *Thought*, 59 (1984), 385-390. p.389

<sup>23</sup> Linda Anderson, 'The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction' in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. by Linda Anderson (London, Melbourne, Auckland: Edward Arnold, 1990) pp. 129-141, (p. 138)

<sup>24</sup> Remark attributed to Toni Morrison, Review, *Newsweek* (28 September, 1987) p.74 cited in Anderson, p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> See James Olney, 'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature' in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Eds.) *The Slave's Narrative* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, 1990) pp.148-175. for a discussion of this as a narrative convention in slave accounts.

<sup>26</sup> I.e their careful 'suitedness' to particular discursive situations, their use of forms, tropes etc. 'readable' to white audiences. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), especially chapter 6 'Censorship and the Imposition of Form'.

<sup>27</sup> Olney, p. 150

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Christian 'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something' African-American Women's Historical Novels' in Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, (eds.) *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (London: Serpents Tail 1990) pp. 326-341. See Linda Anderson, p. 138

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, p. 137

<sup>30</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p.48; 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken': The Afro American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*. 28 (1989), 1-34

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews'*, trans. by Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) cited in Peter Nicholls, 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison' in Sue Vice, (ed.), *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Polity Press 1992), p. 12

<sup>32</sup> . The notion of author is interesting here in that the texts authority was bestowed upon it by white abolitionists or emanuenses in the form of prefaces and other documents that framed the actual narrative. See Robert Burns Stepto, 'I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives', in Davis and Gates Jr., pp. 225-241.

<sup>33</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., 'Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave.' in Davis and Gates Jr., pp. 242-261 (p. 253)

<sup>34</sup> Laplanche

<sup>35</sup> . Nicholls, op.cit. pp.7-8.

<sup>36</sup> . Nicholls again explains:

in contrast to the 'unfolding of presence' which is 'history, 'historicity' is the movement of temporal difference, or as Derrida puts it in *Dissemination*, 'a series of temporal differences without any central present, without a present of which the past and the future would be but modifications.' This historicity shares with the temporality of the subject the qualities of self-division and disunity, but it must not be construed in terms of the empirical time of consciousness. For historicity, like the time of the unconscious is a construction...This is not necessarily to suggest that the traumatic event never took place, but rather that it has never been present and hence only exists as a repetition. pp.9-10

<sup>37</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.57.

<sup>38</sup> . Freud, for example, in his 1914 paper 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through' and later in the Wolf Man, identifies two categories of forgetting. Andrew Benjamin explains:

The first formulation concerns the 'psychical process of 'phantasies, process of references, emotional impulses, thought connections'....The immediate act of forgetting falls beyond the range of conscious intention. It is not an act of consciousness as such

Or in Freud's words:

[in] these processes it particularly often happens that something is remembered which could not be forgotten because it was never at any time noticed - was never conscious In Benjamin, *ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Felman argues further for the usefulness of crisis in the pedagogical situation. 'In the age of testimony. . . I want my students to be able to receive information that is dissonant, and not just congruent, with everything that they have learned beforehand. Testimonial teaching fosters the capacity to witness something that may be surprising, cognitively dissonant. the surprise implies the crisis. . . . In a post-traumatic age, I would suggest that teaching should take position at the edge of itself, at the edge of its conventional conception. (pp. 53-4)

<sup>40</sup> . Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation and Writing' *Thought*, 59 (1984) pp.385-390.

<sup>41</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets* (London & New York: Verso, 1995) p.5

<sup>42</sup> In Nicholls p. 6. Whereas Nicholls uses these ideas as a way of reinvigorating the postmodern, of differentiating from 'its weaker forms [which] connote exercises in aimless self-reflexivity which are worlds apart from the passionate historical imagination at work in a novel like *Beloved*' pp. 3-4, I stress their implications for theory making itself.

<sup>43</sup> See Lawrence L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) for a discussion of the concept of pre-concentrationary universe, and what has been termed *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

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<sup>44</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (1989), 1-34 (p. 10).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ntozake Shange's comment about refusing to footnote black experience for white readers. 'I'm not interested in an annotated Shange. I could let a European do that, but I'm not going to. Either you know us or you don't. If you don't, then you should look it up. . .' Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work* (Harpending, Herts.: Oldcastle Books, 1985) p. 164.

<sup>46</sup> See Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature', in 'Race', *Culture and Difference*, ed. by James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage, 1992) and Gen Doy, 'Out of Africa: Orientalism, 'Race' and the Female Body', *Body and Society*, 2 (1996), 17-44 for discussions of the violence of observation based 'knowledges' of the 'raced' body.

<sup>47</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 120. Cited in Felman and Laub, p. 158

<sup>48</sup> James Wood, 'A Terrible Privacy', *Guardian*, April 18-19 1992, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Audre Lorde, *Our Dead Behind Us*, (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p.61.

<sup>50</sup> Shoshana Felman says of Camus' *The Plague*:

...in the context of the question of the dialogue between history and narrative, it is instructive to take notice of the fact that the novel was initially produced as an underground testimony, as a verbal action of resistance which, as such, is not a simple *statement* or description of the historical conflict it narrates, but an actual intervention in this conflict. Camus' narrative intends to be not merely a historic witness, but a participant in the events it describes. (*Testimony*, p. 98-9)

A comment that I feel to be equally applicable to Morrison's text.

## Chapter 5. The 'Proper' Context: Limits and Homework.

Suppose you want to write  
of a woman braiding  
another woman's hair -  
straight down, or with beads and shells  
in three-strand plaits or corn rows -  
you had better know the thickness  
the length - the pattern  
why she decides to braid her hair  
how it is done to her  
what country it happens in  
what else happens in that country

You have to know these things<sup>1</sup>

In an essay on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* Cora Kaplan warns of the effects of a reading position based upon recognition of the already familiar.

Unless we are actually specialists in the area from which these foreign anglophone literatures come, and teaching them in that context, our more than usually fragmented and partial knowledge of the history, politics and culture in which they were produced and originally read, frequently leads us into teaching and thinking about these texts through an unintentionally imperialist lens, conflating their progressive politics with our own agendas, interpreting their versions of humanism through the historical evolution of our own.<sup>2</sup>

The witting or unwitting use of 'dominant forms of cultural interpretation', it is argued, translates texts such as Walker's into further versions of the universal human condition, and other transhistorical 'truths' (p. 177). Most vulnerable to

this treatment are what Kaplan terms 'foreign texts that appear to be written in our "own" language'(p. 177); the potential for misreading or rather misrecognition is, then, greater the closer to 'home' the text appears. Given this, the critical question becomes one of finding ways to read *The Color Purple* 'so that its cultural and political conditions of production are not deracinated, so that its narrative retains its rich, polychromatic texture, its provocative politics' (p. 182).

The answer to this question is seen to lie in gaining '. . . a specific understanding of the other cultural moment and histories in which [the text] was written, published and read'(p. 178). In short, to contextualise. Other critics have also embraced the notion of context as a means of decolonising the text. Gina Wisker, for instance, states:

One very important element in our reading, teaching and studying of Black women's writing is that of ensuring the recognition of cultural and historical context. It is only through ensuring that these texts , as any others, are read in context that the kind of essentialism which surrounds and validates the works of the 'great tradition' and its canon can be undermined and the difference and worth of works hitherto ignored or marginalised be properly acknowledged and read from a basis of something more than ignorance.<sup>3</sup>

'Respecting' the varying cultural traditions and discursive fields out of which black women's texts emerge, then, becomes a crucial critical gesture for the white feminist critic. What is more, it is one that finds support in theoretical statements from many black feminists. Deborah McDowell states, for instance:

Its limitations notwithstanding, I firmly believe that the contextual approach to Black women's literature exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed. This approach is not only useful but necessary to Black feminist critics.<sup>4</sup>

While McDowell is here addressing the black feminist critic, it is implied that paying attention to the context of a text is a necessary undertaking for all commentators of black women's writings. So, if white feminist critics have been guilty of misreading on the grounds of ignorance, then the answer would seem to lie in the direction of gaining knowledge of the Other text and where it is 'coming from'.

However, the invocation of context is not, and should not mark, the end of the story. Often, the notion of context is deployed as if it were fully determining, as if texts come automatically prepackaged with a (singular) context that the irresponsible critic removes and throws away. The critical task is then rendered a matter of simply shepherding the loose text back into its originating enclosure or signifying wrapper. There are a number of difficulties that arise as a result of this view. First, in supposing a text to have a *proper*, in this sense single, context, the flexibility of the term is denied in that it belies the extent to which there are a range of contexts which can at any one time be brought to bear upon a text's meanings. For example, the context of African-American women's writings is often considered in relation to the content or themes of the text, so much attention is paid to the history of slavery or sharecropping at the expense of other contextualising issues: '... the other cultural moment and histories in which [the text] was written, published and read' (p. 178), to recall Kaplan's phrase. The concept of context, then, is far less determinable than it first appears, and can be rendered variously.

A further problem emerges when it is considered that the use of the term 'context' is repeatedly assumed to dispense with what is seen as the 'problem' of textuality. Ellen Rooney summarises the situation thus:

In some lexicons, at least, context is an anti-essentialist slogan; to contextualise is to expose the history of what might otherwise seem outside history, natural and thus universal, that is, the essence.<sup>5</sup>

Arguments about meanings of feminist texts are frequently settled through reference to context as the legitimate source of meaning above all other discursive registers. So, for example, Judith Butler draws attention to the risks of reading Nella Larsen's *Passing* in psychoanalytic terms and suggests, in light of its 'belong[ing] to the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance [it] ought *properly* . . . be read in the context of that cultural and social world.'<sup>6</sup> Diana Fuss solves the question of essences by invoking the notion of context as arbiter in the dispute over meaning. The feminist pedagogue/critic bears '...the responsibility to historicise, to examine each deployment of essence, each appeal to experience, each claim to identity in the complex contextual frame in which it is made.'<sup>7</sup> In keeping with Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism'<sup>8</sup> Fuss argues that it is not enough to simply deconstruct essences or to point out instances of essentialism in order to undermine feminist argument/theories, as even the most constructivist of positions contains its own essential assumptions. Essentialism alone cannot, therefore, be the deciding factor as to the political usefulness of any theory or text; the discursive and cultural context becomes crucial instead. Placing a text in context operates not only to help rank textual meanings (historical over psychoanalytic as in Butler's case for instance), it also assists in traversing the difficult territory of the essentialism debates.

However, in being seen to settle postmodern issues of language and representation, or to use Nancy K. Miller's phrase, in acting as a 'brake on rhetorical spinning,'<sup>9</sup> the notion of context is constituted as immune from the very questions it is being called on to solve. In other words, the question of the textuality of the context as it is established (whether historical, literary etc.) is itself repressed. A text's context is no less vulnerable to the kinds of critique that other authenticating texts/discourses (experience for example, not to mention history) have been and continue to be exposed to, in that it, too, is language bound and therefore subject to the very critical attention that inheres with linguistic issues.

This is not to say that context is no more than yet another story we tell about language or texts and thereby to herald the slip into relativism. Rather, it is to complicate a term that has come to be valued for its stabilising properties. It is also to confront its limits. Often the notion of context is deployed in ways that suggest that ultimate knowledge of a text can be gained. For the white critic, the project of contextualisation, insofar as the text's context is rendered as absolute, potentially colludes with that of the anthropologist. The gathering of information about a race-different text with the aim of expertise constitutes a reenactment of a mode of colonial authority where, as Elleke Boehmer puts it 'To colonise something was to pile writing upon it'<sup>10</sup>. The critical ambition of respecting the tradition of the text necessarily confronts its limits. As Boehmer notes:

. . . postcolonial discourse trusts to the translatability of texts taken from other cultures. The assumption, predicated on the global event of empire, is that some hybridised version of a Western language or syncretic cognitive framework will mediate gaps in understanding. The reality is, however, that there are utterances which remain out of reach of postcolonial interpretation. World music, McDonalds, various aspects of our globalised Coca-Cola culture may camouflage this reality. And yet a certain incommensurability of historical worlds has to be conceded. (p. 247)

A crucial part of 'respecting' any text's contexts is a confrontation with that which resists as well as allows intelligibility. This tension between knowing and not knowing operates in Spivak's work around the relation of First World critic/Third World text. On the one hand, the First world reader/critic is urged to do her/his 'homework': 'learning what is going on there through language, through specific programs of study'<sup>11</sup>, whilst at the same time 'think[ing] through the limits of one's power.'<sup>12</sup> Part of this confrontation is the realisation that for instance, even the most gifted linguistically can only learn so many languages; that 'the world is a large place. Others are many'.(p. 18). Rather than engendering



critical paralysis this facing of limitations is intended to undermine the potential for grandiose theoretical statements and instead signal the collectivity of critical work. One person cannot exhaust the text's contextual significance. The responsibility to contextualise, to do one's 'homework' is a task without discernible limits in that it is, first, dependent upon the translatability of the text in question, and second, subject to the textuality of the context itself. The extent to which a reader is able to read in context is therefore not decidable either in advance or in transcendent terms. In the same way, the contours of what is unknowable about a particular text are not able to be anticipated up front, so to speak. This undecidability of the tension between knowing and not knowing is critically important and should not be read as signalling complacency on the part of the white reader. To place limits on the ability to contextualise is not to celebrate or reify wilful ignorance or the deliberate refusal to find things out, it is instead a pledge to continue to read the texts we read as opposed to returning them to what we perceive as their proper meaning, as well as a commitment to discovering what those limits are as a part of the critical enterprise. What becomes stressed in the space between knowing and not knowing is the activity of considering what it may be that constitutes the particular blindnesses and insights of any relation between white reader and 'raced' text.

Following this, it is my contention that contextualisation is far more readily referred to as a potentially decolonising move than it is actually enacted. That is, that critics often stress the need to contextualise, to respect the specific location of a text without going on to do just that, to transfer the articulation of that need into critical practice. Appeals to context are then often rhetorical gestures, strategies in an abstracted, discursive debate or language game over essences or imperialism that pay scant regard to the actualisation of, for instance, the historical location or content of texts, the complex social reality that texts inhabit, however each may be determined. By way of drawing out these points I examine, first, a particular act of contextualisation which relies on the idea of a

fixed and determining context. Gina Wisker's essay ' "Disremembered and Unaccounted For": Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* ' uses Susan Willis's *Specifying* as the basis of its historical authority, a use that I question in an extended critique of Willis's text. I then look at Adrienne Rich's essay 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' and Gayatri Spivak's 'How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book' as a means of thinking through the issues of context and textuality.<sup>13</sup>

### **Respecting Tradition: Gina Wisker and Susan Willis**

In her editor's introduction to the collection *Black Women's Writing* Gina Wisker stresses the importance of reading contextually for the white feminist critic. This concern is carried into her essay on Morrison and Walker:

We have a problem as critics and readers, then faced with the cultural imperialism of appropriation and alternative canonisation of writing by black women, which colonises them for the literary academy. (p. 81)

In an echo of Kaplan, contextualising is constituted as the means of addressing the question of critical appropriation. By way of providing a context for her chosen texts Wisker selects 'extracts from critical works by Susan Willis, Barbara Burford and others, [and] some of Toni Morrison's critical comments from interviews' (p. 81). In addition, Morrison's 'historically situated, politically focused' text: is seen to provide its own context. A dramatisation of a real historical event,<sup>14</sup> *Beloved* is, for the most part, read as a documentary history of slavery.

As a means of inscribing a context for her two texts Wisker's methodology is mostly inadequate. Leaving to one side, for the moment, the questionable authority of Susan Willis's text, there are problems associated both with the use of interviews, the assumption that the text provides its own historical context, and her invocation of the institutional context of black women's writing. Throughout the essay there is a wholesale lack of engagement

with the critical material called upon to account for the novels' contexts. Quotations from interviews are treated as literal explanations, as supplying absent meaning; texts are read literally as if descriptions of historical events. As I have discussed already the difficulties that result from representing race-different writings as repositories of truth and authenticity (see in particular chapter 1) I will here confine myself to the matter of the institution.

In her thinking about the literary/academic context of Morrison's and Walker's novels Wisker presents a contradictory account. To begin with, Morrison is deemed 'flavour of the month', an 'established' literary figure. As a result of the author's success it is seen as nothing 'other than embarrassing' to recall Sara Blackburn's now infamous review of *Sula*,<sup>15</sup> read by Wisker as an 'example of white female racism' (p. 79). However, the way in which the white critical problem of appropriation is presented is at odds with this scene of unequivocal success. To recall, besides the issue of cultural imperialism the (white) reader is seen to face the problem of an academy which colonises through the 'alternative canonisation' of black women's writing. In light of this what is implied for Morrison's aforementioned success? If it is no longer anything but embarrassing to read Blackburn's comments how does this square with an institution that colonises through canonisation?

The fact of the contradiction is, I would argue, a result of an over-investment in a binary which equates white with power and black with marginality. So, the literary establishment/academy is seen as irredeemably colonial, by extension, white, despite Morrison's declared success. Indeed the author's success cannot be incorporated into Wisker's construction because of this unconscious marking of the academy as coloniser. This over-simplification of white academy/black text; centre/margin, extends to the unqualified use of 'we' and 'us', meaning white, privileged, throughout the text. For instance, black women's writing is seen to 'interrogate a continuum of attitudes towards racial difference which make *us* feel uncomfortable because they upset *our*

unconsciously held beliefs: they confront *us* with *our* own racism, and *our* own guilt' (p. 83, my emphasis). The universalised reader is implied throughout as white; 'we' readers deal with the problem of how to read 'them', black women writers, objects and victims of 'our' knowledge. In an essay concerned with the institutionalisation of feminist criticism, Jane Gallop, echoing Hortense Spillers, refutes the idea that writing by black women, fiction and non-fiction, is plainly 'other' or marginal to the academy.<sup>16</sup> Citing the facts of Toni Morrison's, Alice Walker's and Paule Marshall's tenure at prestigious universities along with the 'growing industry in academic articles and conference papers on these very writers' (p. 60) Gallop criticises the construction of the academy as resolutely white-male and by extension as purveyor of elitist values. The situation is far more ambiguous than this construction allows, she argues:

Between 1975 and 1983 the mainstream of academic feminist criticism implicitly defined its enterprise in a way that fit the literary academy. Cooption or strategy? We may not be able simply to decide what motivated this fit. But we live in the legacy of that period; we benefit from it. It allows us not only radically to call its terms - 'women' and 'literature' - into question but to be heard through an institutions channels of transmission when we do so. (pp. 66-7)

While Wisker acknowledges Morrison and Walker's success, she unwittingly holds on to a caucacentric<sup>17</sup> view of the academy. The contradiction cannot be resolved within the terms of Wisker's discourse as it stands and instead constitutes a fracture in her conclusions. Rather than posing questions for the construction of the academy the success of the black woman writer presents a reading problem for the (white) feminist critic. 'We' white readers 'consider reading, reception and response in relation to that rich variety of Black women's writing now available to us' (p. 79). 'We' contemplate, from the centre, the problem of how to read the voices from margins.

Wisker's use of Susan Willis's *Specifying* as a source of the contextual is no less problematic. Such are its problems that an extensive examination is justified. From its opening statement *Specifying* is unequivocal regarding the importance of history to any consideration of African-American women's texts. History enters the texts not only as 'topic and substance' or background theme but in the very fibres of individual characters. So, discovering why 'Sula is Sula' or 'Meridian is Meridian'

involves reconstructing the development of the character's individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race, the struggles of her community, and the relationships that have developed within her family. (p. 3)

Describing these themes as the 'most obvious' ways in which history enters the work, Willis argues the relation of African-American women's literature to history to be 'even more essential and significant' (p. 3) than this. Black women are attributed a privileged relation to a specific history. The specific history in question is the economic transformation of America from an agrarian mode of production to one organised around industrial capital.

The single most important aspect of the history of North America, indeed, one that defines the entire modern history of the Americas and has only reached its most advanced stage in the United States, is the transition from an agrarian to an urban society. (p. 4)

Willis delineates the specifically American nature of this transformation: it is less, as in Europe, a move from feudalism to industrialisation than the evolution of the post-Columbian world itself under capitalism (p. 4). The privileged relation of America's black women to this history is determined through a kind of standpoint theory<sup>18</sup>:

. . . there are economic and historical reasons why black women are in a better position to grasp history as a concrete experience. The history of black women in this country is the history of a labour force. Almost every

black woman living in the United States has as her past the accumulated work of all her female forebears . . . As workers, black women shaped their present and intimately knew the circumstances of their moment in history. Because the mode of labor defines the epochs of history; black women have had firsthand knowledge of slavery, sharecropping, and domestic and wage labor. (pp. 6-7)

The story she offers of American black women's writing is, then, at once the story of, and a political resistance to, the development of capitalism in the West. History is seen as fully determining of African-American women's writing. Statements such as this abound:

No-one can read a novel by Toni Morrison or Alice Walker or Paule Marshall without confronting history, feeling its influence and experiencing the changes wrought by history.(p. 3).

This is the historical context and wellspring of American black women writers. I know of no other body of writing that so intimately partakes of the transformation from rural to urban society or so cogently articulates the change in its content as well as its form. (p. 4)

The authority of black women's experience of the American condition is augmented further by its maternal genealogy. 'A bridge defined along motherlines' (p. 6); 'The black woman's relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother.' (p. 5) .Willis continues:

As mothers, the reproducers of the labor force, black women have had a keen awareness of history as change. In their hope for their children's future, black women have learned to be attentive to moments of historical transition and many have struggled for social change. In their role as producers, black women have known the present; then, in relation to the economics of reproduction, they have envisioned and strived for the future. As workers, they have sustained their families; as mothers, they have borne the oral histories from their grandmothers to their children. For

all these reasons, today's black women writers understand history both as period and process. (p. 7)

These oral histories passed along motherlines combined with what is seen as a unique relation to the labour market, as it is organised around capitalist logic, place African-American women as peerless commentators of the post-Agrarian, which is to say, industrial capitalist, United States. The privileged view attributed to American black women is further born out in Willis's chosen subtitle of *Specifying: black women writing the American experience*. The true story of America is that of its black women.

The movement from an agrarian to an industrial economy is simultaneously a story of loss: loss of community, authentic relationships, humanity. Discussing the novels of Paule Marshall, Willis states:

Her writing is deeply haunted by the notion that there once existed a whole - a traditional Caribbean black community - but immigration and the pressures of life under commodity capitalism have sundered the whole. (p. 67)

The advent of industrial capitalism signals the end of authenticity and wholeness and the beginning of a fragmented, inauthentic, alienated existence. So the protagonist of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* is described as having relationships which:

...are partial, embracing no more than family members, and, like the telephone calls that link them, defined by an advanced technological society that abstracts and fragments human relationships.(p. 67)

This shattering of what was once whole is also extended to language itself. The transition from agrarian to urban is seen by Willis to herald the moment at which authentic discourse is replaced with postmodern uncertainty, where signifier and signified part company. The emergence of this faultline is directly attributable to the logic of a capitalist economy. In an extended discussion of the language practice of 'specifying' Willis argues:

'specifying' insist[s] on a direct relationship between the names and the person being named. The only thing that stands between the signified and the signifier is the name-caller who gives herself as guarantor of the relationship, with the whole community standing witness to the contract. 'Specifying' represents a form of narrative integrity. Historically, it speaks for a noncommodified relationship to language, a time when the slippage between words and meaning would not have obtained or been tolerated. Such concerns are important in contemporary black women's writing, as I will show in the discussion of Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla My Love . . .*, whose young protagonist rebels precisely against the sort of schism between signifier and signified that not only typifies the narratives and theories generated under late capitalism, but also serves the interests of domination. (p. 16)

In other words, for Willis, 'specifying' represents a time when language-use privileged connection over fragmentation, when word and meaning lined up neatly together and was guaranteed by the authority embodied in the form of a witness or community of witnesses. Furthermore, this sense of connection is offered as a form of resistance to the fragmentation that is seen to embody the 'interests of domination.' Following a line of argument associated with Frederic Jameson, the notion of the postmodern is tied to the hegemony of a late capitalist economy and culture.<sup>19</sup>

This sense of connection associated with pre-capitalist culture is also present with regard to the lack of distinction between speaker, text and audience. In the oral tradition of specifying Willis points out, there is '...no separation between teller and text' (p. 15). Nor is there any firm distinction to be made between text and audience in that narratives are participatory in structure and invite contribution from the listener. In the move toward the industrial there is an 'erasure of the speaking subject' (p.20) a dislocation of the traditional basis of authority as the speaker/witness or witnessing community no longer functions as



guarantor of what is said. Without the binding presence of the guarantor, text, meaning, and audience go their separate ways.

History emerges in Willis's account as the source both of a forceful critique of industrial development under capitalism and its alternative: a utopian vision of noncommodified relations and socio-economic organisation. Throughout *Specifying* Willis appeals to the opposition of a racist bourgeois society by a vision of a future reclaimed from a past uncontaminated by capitalist logic. This is articulated quite clearly, for instance, in a discussion of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

Milkman's journey into the past takes him out of consumer society, where he, Christmas shopping in the Rexhall store, practices the translation of human emotions into commodities, and thrusts him into the preindustrial world of Shalimar, where for the first time in his life Milkman sees women with 'nothing in their hands' (*SOS*, 262). Stunned, Milkman realises that he 'had never in his life seen a woman on the street without a purse slung over her shoulder, pressed under her arm, or dangling from her clenched fingers' (*SOS*, 262). The vision of women walking empty-handed produces an estrangement of Milkman's normal view of women, who conditioned by a market economy, haul around purses like grotesque bodily appendages.

The past, which is also entirely coincident with the South in her analysis, offers to Willis the antidote to the damaging, dehumanised existence of the present/North/industrial society. Here a vision of wholeness and integrity is offset against that of the commodity fetish; the women without purses versus the shopaholics. Unsullied by capitalist interests the women of the South are said to present a utopian vision of the possibility of genuine relations and authentic human existence: 'The descent into the past means stepping out of reified and fetishized relationships' (p. 96).

Willis's argument is compelling, to say the least, and has exerted considerable influence in the critical field. Elizabeth Abel highlights the largely favourable reviews *Specifying* has received from black feminist critics. 'Although several have decried its arbitrary historical boundaries and selection of texts, they have mostly found her historically grounded readings provocative and illuminating.'<sup>20</sup> With its promise of historicising African-American women's writing, *Specifying* is an important critical text, and what is more, a text which is in keeping with the historical ambitions of many contemporary American black women writers.<sup>21</sup> However, despite this, there is an abiding sense in which Willis's project to historicise black women's writing falls short of its own ambition.

To begin with, the extent to which Willis succeeds in her attempt to think through the specific history that forms the referent to African-American women's writings is debatable. First, it has been argued that the history to which she refers is far more contradictory, not to say complicated, than the grand story which constitutes the frame of *Specifying*'s argument. As Abel has pointed out, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, gives a very different interpretation of events to that presented in Willis's text and highlights the 'romanticisation of 'the' black cultural heritage, whose truth resides in an uncontaminated past to which the novels' protagonists repeatedly return'(p. 491).<sup>22</sup> Likewise Michelle Wallace remarks, 'In *Specifying*, Susan Willis announces the intention of historicising the literature of contemporary black women writers. But not unlike Bloom's crypto-deconstructionism, Willis's 'historicism' inserts 'Hurston' where one might expect to read history.'<sup>23</sup> In other words, Willis's interpretation of Hurston's notion of specifying is seen to replace a consideration of the history of 'Afro-American letters' (p. 179); in place of history is a grand narrative with black women uniquely poised as its tellers.

The history invoked by Willis, when subjected to further analysis, is highly problematic both in terms of its own authority as a story of black women's writing in North America and in its implications for the writings themselves. *Specifying* puts forward a unified, grand narrative, not only of black American women's texts but also of the United States generally. Willis's story of America follows a single narrative trajectory and is entirely coincident with the development of industrial capitalism which 'has only reached its most advanced stage in the United States.' This 'single most important aspect of the history of North America' (p. 4), is singular, and most important, insofar as its status is seen as overriding the potential hermeneutic power of other histories, namely, the 'personal', 'literary' not to mention, those pertaining to 'race and culture' (p. 4):

I feel that the only way to develop a theoretical approach to the work of contemporary black women writers is to define their writing in relation to a history larger than the personal and literary. Moreover, I suggest that the sense of history that shapes black women's writing is larger and more profound than one specifically determined by race and culture. (p. 171)

The economic transformation of the United States is, in every extent, *foundational* in Willis's account of an African-American women's literary tradition.

In recent years many feminist theorists have displayed a manifest suspicion of the 'big story' as an interpretive approach to a wide range of texts. Moreover, the big story that a Marxist view proposes has a number of critics. Jane Flax, for example, in *Thinking Fragments*, questions the appropriateness of Marxism to an analysis of race stating that as an ideological critique it is strangely silent with regard to the race question. Indeed, Willis's own account appears to subscribe to the orthodox Marxist view that the story of class is foundational and gender and race inequality being effects of this basic structure which will wither away with the rise of the industrial proletariat and the defeat of the bourgeoisie. As a story of black America a Marxist perspective would seem to offer a

curiously deracinated account. However, in Willis's case, she attempts to recuperate this loss by casting black women as privileged knowers of the American experience under capitalism. The point at which race threatens to disappear from her interpretation it stages a comeback in the form of '...a properly Marxian perspective where the "popular" or underclass is revealed as the source of historical definition'( p.25). Far from having no relevance to the race question, Marxism here is revealed to be *the* perspective from which to interpret texts by African-American women writers.

This recuperation is not without cost. In a discussion of Nancy Hartsock's idea of standpoint epistemology, Christina Crosby demonstrates its circular logic. Drawing on Althusserian notions of historicism as ideology, Crosby disputes the notion of history as something which 'gives women an experience of subjection which is the ground for knowledge'<sup>24</sup>. With this, the source of critique of the dominant ideology is cast as prior to theory: 'knowledge is given by that material reality'. Theory is then a matter of reading off or describing one's social and politically charged location: 'theorising is but the recognition of what one has already become: "woman" ' (p. 135). In Althusser's phrase, the logic of standpoint is not a theory but 'the vicious circle of the mirror relation of ideology reflection'<sup>25</sup>; it is, as such, a foregone conclusion:

a feminism which goes to history to find 'women' and always finds what it is looking for is bound to be ideological - falsely universalising and dehistoricising - despite its appeals to history (and to Marx). (p. 133)

By making history responsible for creating *a priori* critical subjects, standpoint epistemology denies the mediations that inescapably inform its methodology. In Crosby's words, 'The relationship . . . between 'the real' and knowledge of the real, between facts and theory, history and theory is occluded' (p. 136). Willis's story of America is curiously ahistorical; bound by its ideological presuppositions it merely confirms the Marxist frame used for its explanation. Such reflectionist logic can be found elsewhere in the text.

*Specifying* moves from a consideration of content to that of form: ‘Just as history is what the novels are about so, too, is it embodied in how the novels tell their stories’ (p. 13). Following Lukac, form reflects content.<sup>26</sup> So what Willis identifies as the ‘four-page formula’ (p. 14), the narrative form comprising short, episodic pieces of writing, ‘partakes of the rhythm of daily life as it evolved in an oral agrarian culture.’ (p. 15). It also ‘embodies the story-telling tradition’ thus representing a radical departure from the bourgeois novel form which assumes ‘sustained and leisurely reading’(p. 14). Just as black women’s consciousness, and indeed, existence, is seen as a reflection of the truth of an industrial capitalist country, and is deemed essentially oppositional and anti-bourgeois so their literary texts reflect an understanding of capitalist logic alongside an anti-bourgeois sensibility. This view of black women’s texts as essentially political both in form and content is based on a mistaken view of the role of literature as a force for/of social change. To reiterate a point raised in the previous chapter, to suppose a clear reflectionist relation between form, content and political force is to misconstrue the relation of the literary and social fields. Furthermore, such a formal conception of politics looks for its evidence in the wrong place, in addition to perpetuating a similar circular logic to that of standpoint theory. The text’s form reflects its political message; the political theory dictates that form reflects content. Bourdieu explains his objections to formal or internal textual analysis:

. . . it looks for the final explanation of texts either within the texts themselves (the object of analysis, in other words, is its own explanation) or within some sort of ahistorical ‘essence’ rather than in the complex network of social relations that make the very existence of the texts possible. . . . To be fully understood, literary works must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them, this does not imply a rejection of aesthetic or formal properties, but rather an analysis based on their position in relation to the universe of possibilities of which they are a part.<sup>27</sup>

Willis's object of analysis comprises its own explanation: the four-page formula reflects daily life, daily life is reflected in the four-page formula, the theory of the text finds confirmation of itself in the evidence it presupposes.

Notwithstanding these critiques, the idea of black women as privileged knowers of the American nightmare presents further difficulties. Not least the degree of idealisation to which the selected writers are subjected. Wallace objects to Willis's casting of black women's writing 'in polar opposition to the alienation and reification of white middle-class culture' (p. 179). In a discussion of Willis's essay 'I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture' Elizabeth Abel questions the construction of black women and their writings as a site of resistance and authenticity, as untouched by commodity culture. 'White feminists, like the frozen or mummified white women represented in some black women's texts, seem in Willis's discourse to be corpses finding political energy through the corpus of black women'<sup>28</sup>

The idealisation of black women's words is part of a series of idealisations that operate in Willis's text. *Specifying* is organised around a number of oppositions: South/North; preindustrial/industrial; whole/fragment; past/present, of which the first term is privileged over the second. Indeed, these particular sets of terms function as interchangeable in the terms of *Specifying*'s discourse, in that South signifies as pertaining to preindustrial, which pertains to wholeness; a geographical and experiential space which is other to that of the alienated, fragmentary, industrial North. The degree to which this division, not to say privileging of South over North and past over present with its attendant associations of wholeness, and anti-capitalism, is so clearly marked in the fiction is open to question. For example, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* offers a more inconsistent image of the South than Willis's interpretation allows. Milkman Dead has journeyed South in search of his grandfather's gold that he supposes to be his inheritance. Having arrived in Shalimar he asks for assistance in fixing his

car. When doubt is expressed over the availability of a fan belt Milkman responds:

‘If they can’t find one, let me know right away. I may have to buy another car to get back home.’

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whisky because the other one he had was broken. And what’s more, who had said so in front of them. He hadn’t bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them ‘them’, and would certainly despise their days, which should have been spent harvesting their own crops, instead of waiting around the general store hoping a truck would come looking for mill hands or tobacco pickers in the flatlands that belonged to someone else. (p. 266)

Here, Shalimar and its inhabitants are depicted as deeply affected by labour patterns organised upon capitalist principles. Far from offering a space untouched, and uncompromised by capitalism: preindustrial, to use Willis’s formulation, Shalimar is drawn in terms that are related to rather than separate from those of the industrial North. This division between North and South is betrayed within the critical text itself as the following extract shows. In a detailed analysis of an episode from Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* Willis states:

I want to argue that even though the incident takes place in Chicago, Marie’s account of the fish fry is a metaphoric representation of the Southern economy. . . . The anecdote offers an alternative to wage labor and industrial alienation, it matters little that the real South was equally oppressive of black people. In fact, the real South has been transcended in the making of a metaphoric memory. The function of the anecdote is to generate the notion of possibilities, not to conjure up a purely nostalgic image of the past and the South. (pp. 9-10)

While it is argued that the prostitute’s description offers a metaphoric representation of the Southern economy and is therefore not to be read literally,

this is inconsistent with Willis's position throughout her text. First, metaphor is privileged as a trope of the real, a post-Lukacian reflection of the urban and the modern: 'The narrative form that best expresses the urban as it is produced in relation to a dependent agrarian economy is based on metaphor' (p. 20). Second, the division between fiction and the real is one that is constantly elided in the pursuit of the history of African-American women's writing. *Specifying* is concerned with real histories, communities and people. Throughout, the connection between text and referent is stressed to the extent that the literary nature of the text, the way it signifies specifically as literature, is mostly overlooked. So, the argument that the referent in this instance 'matters little', notwithstanding the degree to which Willis bends the text to suit her critical needs (the episode takes place in the Midwest and not the South), reads as a rather sudden change of priorities.

In many ways this shift is another consequence of *Specifying's* standpoint epistemology. Hence there is some confusion regarding the distinction between the representation of the Southern economy as it is and its use as a space for the presentation of alternative possibilities. This blurring of the distinction between history and fantasy is one that troubles Willis's analysis generally, in that there is some slippage between the South as a material, specific location on the one hand and as utopian imaginary alternative on the other. *Specifying* is intent upon representing the material oppression it associates with industrial capitalism whilst at the same time preserving those who experience its oppressive effects as voices of hope and resistance. Indeed, there is a curious reversal in Willis's attempt to verify the oppression of America's black women, in that within the terms of her analysis those who are most damaged by the dominant capitalist ideology are not those who service it with their alienated labour but those who consume. Seduced by the commodity fetish, white women emerge as its victims. Inauthentic, empty, without a culture white women are capitalism's real losers. Somewhere within this formulation of black women as privileged witnesses and



utopian visionaries, the specificity that is the critical goal of Willis's argument is lost; as is the distinction between black women writers, their texts, their characters and 'real' black women. Specifying presents a curiously unspecific history, a history that is for the most part ahistorical even as it pursues the 'real' story of African-American women's writing.

### ***Specifying and the Literary Text***

If Willis's argument fails as a history of black American women's writing it is simultaneously problematic in its consideration of its literary politics. To begin with the story of African-American linguistic practice that Willis subscribes to is contested within black literary theory. Taken from Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* the practice of 'specifying' is taken to refer to a language practice where signified and signifier are absolutely aligned. If Willis reads black culture as originally 'authentic', however, Henry Louis Gates Jr. reads it as originally postmodern. In his essay 'The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey' Gates argues that 'The Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a rhetorical practice unengaged in information-giving',<sup>29</sup> In direct opposition to Willis' view Gates asserts the indirectness of black American linguistic practice.

Notwithstanding this disagreement, further problems emerge in connection with this narrative of development with Willis's treatment of black modernist texts. For example, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is contrasted with Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* in terms of a distinction between the spoken and the literary. Hurston's text is construed as an immediate written record of black speech to Marshall's work of literature. With this distinction there is some confusion as to its significance. On the one hand, *Dust Tracks* is privileged as representing a state of language prior to the ravages of capitalism. On the other, a story is told of the transcendence of oral, written-down forms to the more mature destination of the truly literary. In an attempt to recuperate modernism into her

reflectionist understanding Willis makes the case for metaphor as the basis of an urban narrative form. In an extended discussion of the characteristics of metaphor it is argued that metaphoric language is better able to represent 'history' in its capitalist epoch: ' . . . the text whose mode of articulating history is based on metaphor captures the complex meanings and contradictory relationships generated by capitalism'; ' . . . condensation is what enables metaphorical images to capture history, which for its duration and multiplicity would otherwise require numerous volumes' (p. 21). Hurston's task as a writer is then, of managing the transformation of spoken/oral to written literary forms; this transformation is seen by Willis as involving a move toward metaphoric language.

. . . barnyard simile becomes metaphor and a lot of the invective is redirected. In line with the relationship between condensed metaphoric images and the raw material of history that I suggested in chapter 1, I want to emphasise the development of metaphor as a literary language is what differentiates Hurston's writing from that of her more realist contemporaries like Ann Petry and makes her the precursor of today's great modernist writers like Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. (p. 32)

That Willis identifies a move toward metaphor in the texts is less important than the value that is accorded to this perceived shift. For implied in this observation is the idea of a narrative of progress from speech to writing, from the raw material of history to the cultured realm of metaphor. The direct, or as it is suggested simple, correspondence of signifier to signified that Willis contrues as pertaining to the oral is replaced by the greater complexity of metaphor's signifying structure. So Hurston's images are seen as occupying a space between 'specifying' and metaphor: 'Although drawn from colloquial expression, [they] represent a more complex form of describing than the simple "calling-out" and naming.' (p. 19) This distinction is in evidence in the following extract where Willis articulates a continuum of language-use that ranges from specifying to colloquialism:

When Hurston describes herself as feeling 'as timid as an egg without a shell', she evokes absolute vulnerability and she does so in a language that is only one step removed from the barnyard, but on its way to a frame of reference that will no longer be purely animal. 'Specifying' equates the opponent with a brute, and, by the very nature of animal existence, cannot give symbolic expression to feelings. In contrast, the colloquial image, even though it is still rooted in a rural system of specification, gives ample space for the expression of emotion. This is not possible not only because the shell-less egg is no longer a part of nature in the same way as a 'puzzle-gutted' and 'knock-kneed' animal is.

What is perhaps most extraordinary about this distinction is less the story it narrates about the progression from speech to writing, calling-out to proper, that is symbolic, signification, than the language chosen in which to do so. The development of written expression is coincident with a story of a move from nature to culture. Hurston's simile 'as timid as an egg without a shell' is construed as a step away from the brute expression of the barnyard (as 'written down' in *Dust Tracks*) and simultaneously as a step toward the implied civilisation and maturity of metaphor and symbolic expression. The raw is transcended, as is simple calling-out; the immediate and unobjectified is left behind in the move toward self-consciousness. here, Willis unwittingly walks in step with a set of racist ideas that align writing, culture, whiteness, and civilisation and conversely orality, nature, blackness and the animal. One of the best known originators of these ideas is Hegel who asserted Africa as a historyless, cultureless expressionless other-world. What follows is one of his more familiar statements:

In general it must be said that [African] consciousness has not yet reached the contemplation of a fixed objective, an objectivity. The fixed objectivity is called God, the Eternal, justice, Nature, natural things. . . . The Africans, however, have not yet reached this recognition of the

General. . . . What we name Religion, the State, that which exists in and for itself - in other words, all that is valid - all this is not yet at hand. . . . Thus we find nothing other than man in his immediacy: that is man in Africa. As soon as Man as Man appears, he stands in opposition to Nature; only in this way does he become Man. . . . The Negro represents the Natural Man in all his wildness and indocility: if we wish to grasp him, then we must drop all European conceptions.

What we actually understand by 'Africa' is that which is without history and resolution, which is still fully caught up in the natural spirit, and which here must be mentioned as being on the threshold of world history.<sup>30</sup>

Immediate, natural, occupying the space on the cusp of history, the 'African man' bears more than a passing resemblance to Willis's construction of 'specifying'. Just as the transcendence of nature is the requirement of accession into the realm of the civilised, so the transcendence of the animal conventions of name-calling is necessary to enter that of literature. Hurston's colloquialisms succeed in paving the way out of the barnyard, in that they represent a transitional mode: a step beyond the brute expression of mere calling-out. However, it is only when, like Hegel's African man, the author achieves objectivity and distance, that she is able to make the transition to the sophisticated world of metaphoric substitution and hence, signification.

What enables Hurston to transcend colloquialisms such as these and write more complex and condensed metaphors is the same element of distance that allows her to look back on and study the folklore she was born into. (p. 34)

In breaking out of the undifferentiated space name-calling Hurston is able to produce a properly symbolic account of her own culture.

In addition to rehearsing this set of oppressive meanings the way in which Willis distinguishes between natural expression and the cultural, coded

symbolic is itself subject to question. In contradistinction to the conclusion that ‘the shell-less egg’ is no longer a part of nature in the same way as a ‘puzzle-gutted’ and ‘knock-kneed’ animal is’ I would contend that all three formulations are equally beholden to language and culture. In other words, it is difficult to see precisely, first, what makes the shell-less egg less connected to nature than a puzzle-gutted animal, and second, how such a complex linguistic image as a puzzle-gutted animal comes to be thought of a natural in the first instance.

It is difficult to resolve this contradiction, save to suggest that it is, perhaps, indicative of the extreme degree of idealisation present in the work. The overinvestment in orality produces as an effect the devaluing of written and indeed modern and postmodern forms. The construction of metaphoric representation as hyper-real, as better able to represent the fragmented form of modern life is one way of recuperating the effects of over-valuing realist and oral forms. And so on.

In contrast to Willis who assumes a fixed and determined notion of context I wish now to turn to two essays that problematise the concept.

### **Locating Location: Adrienne Rich and Gayatri Spivak**

In ‘Notes Toward a Politics of Location’<sup>31</sup> Adrienne Rich speaks of the importance of situating feminist theory and practice as a counter to the universalist assumptions of seventies feminism. If ‘a few years ago [she] would have spoken of the common oppression of women . . .’, (p. 210), aligning herself with Virginia Woolf’s statement ‘as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world’, at the time of writing Rich recognises the need to account for differences between and among women. As a way of beginning this project: ‘a struggle for accountability’ (p. 211), Rich attempts variously to think through the particularity of her own and other women’s words. The effort to read the words of ‘the other woman’ involve Rich in the pursuit of her own situation. The essay opens with a self-conscious

statement as to her geographical location and moves through a number of strategies focussed upon particularising and contextualising her speaking position. Unlike Willis, Rich does not presuppose a single method for establishing her own or the others' context and it is this that makes her essay particularly useful.

What is interesting, first, about Rich's procedure as opposed to Willis's is the instant connection that is established between the context of the self and that of the other. Rather than merely constituting a story to be told, a determinable history, the essay places emphasis upon the relatedness of the contexts of black and white women in the United States, First and Third Worlds. The first American woman astronaut is considered in the context of the 'female proletariat . . . largely from the Third world [who] will create the profits which will stimulate the "big companies" to invest in space' (p. 223). A reference is made to a 'Third world poster' in a Manchester bookshop which reads 'WE ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU ARE THERE' (p. 226). The story of Rich's birth is overdetermined by race: segregated wards mean that her race is considered before her gender. 'I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black child was located by color and sex - though the implications of white identity were mystified by the presumption that white people are the center of the universe' (p. 215). Contexts are not merely observable but are directly connected to the position of the observer.

Equally interesting is the abiding sense of the failure of the inscribed context to fully account for where one or the other is coming from. Throughout the essay attempts are made to situate the critic and 'different' women, and like her girlhood efforts at location, what is produced is the need for more and more framing.

When I was ten or eleven . . . a girlfriend and I used to write each other letters which we addressed like this:

Adrienne Rich

14 Edgevale Road  
Baltimore, Maryland  
The United States of America  
The Continent of North America  
The Western Hemisphere  
The Earth  
The Solar System  
The Universe (pp.211-12)

Beginning with the scene of writing itself, Rich locates herself in her own house. Distracted by a bumble bee bumping against the window she gets up and tries to coax it outside. Having freed the bee she returns. 'I sit down and pick up a secondhand, faintly annotated student copy of Marx's *The German Ideology*, which "happens" to be lying on the table' (p. 211). In this scene some of the problems of a self-reflexive approach, discussed in the following chapter, are anticipated. In one sense Rich is seemingly describing her direct physical location; the detail of the bee, the book on the table, add to the scene's verisimilitude. The details provide an anchor, a way of rooting or locating Rich spatially in terms of her immediate surroundings. And yet the scene also self-consciously signals its fictionality: the copy of *The German Ideology* 'happens' to be lying on the table. The text hints at its construction. The casualness of the book's location is undermined. The 'staging' of this scene is also indicated by the text's invitation to read it allegorically: 'I, too, have been bumping my way against glassy panes, falling half-stunned, gathering myself up and crawling, then again taking off, searching' (p. 211). The bee operates as a mirror image of Rich's position as a critic, trapped inside a theoretical enclosure that is no longer useful or sustaining: 'its mode of being cannot be fulfilled inside this house'. The choice of glass as an image of restriction is particularly revealing, or rather readable, in the light of Rich's pushing against the doxic, unspoken, assumptions of her

available theoretical frames: the transparency or invisibility of whiteness as a racial category being one.

Marx's text 'casually' lying on the table is taken up as a potential way out of the glass enclosure of 'white Western self-centredness' (p. 219), a new beginning to the search for accountability and locatedness. 'Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in - the body' (p. 212). With its assertion of the body as 'the first premise of all human history' *The German Ideology* offers an authority that coincides with Rich's project as a radical feminist, that of the material. In a much cited passage Rich offers the particular body as a means of locating the subject and thereby contextualising speech/texts/events, as a means of returning 'back down to earth' (p. 219) in the face of abstraction and universalism. However, even as Rich moves towards the body as a source of guarantee, as the grounds of location, there is an extent to which the move is unsettled or rather acknowledged as not uncomplicated: 'The difficulty of saying I' can be matched with that of 'saying "we"'; 'even ordinary pronouns become political problems' (p.224).

As much as the urgency of locating feminist discourse is asserted, Rich refuses to settle the source or means of that location easily. The various beginnings to her project do not lead to obvious conclusions. Rather than supply automatic limits, as in Willis's text, for Rich the context functions as finally unresolvable, which is not to capitulate to relativism but to suggest what has been termed the textuality of the context.

In order to gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text, the empirical context needs not just to be *known* but to be *read*; to be read in conjunction with, and as part of, the reading of the text. We thus propose to show how the basic and critical demand for *contextualization of the text* itself needs to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of *textualization of the context*; and how this shuttle movement or this shuttle



reading in the critic's work - the very *tension between textualization and contextualization* - might yield new avenues of insight, both into the texts at stake and into their context - the political, historical, and biographical realities with which the texts are dynamically involved and within which their particular creative possibilities are themselves inscribed.<sup>31a</sup>

The context, then, is not a fiction, but neither is it a reified story or final, stabilising, textual enclosure. 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' is a text that demands active reading and so participates in the struggle it depicts.

In her essay 'How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book',<sup>32</sup> Gayatri Spivak takes a comparable approach to Rich in combining rigorous research whilst, at the same time, preserving the textuality of the context. Developing her notion of 'homework' Spivak demonstrates the necessity of what she terms allegorical reading, meaning:

semiotic in the most formulaic way (this "means" that). This may be the only way in which the literary critic can be helpful for the study of culture, and for the historical study of the aftermath of colonialism and the postcolonial present. It is an enabling limitation, a *decoupage* for the sake of the discipline (p. 244).

In contextualising R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, the text that forms the subject of the essay, Spivak does not restrict her reading merely to explaining that 'this means that' however. Rather than gloss the text with a set of knowledges, the critic subjects one of the texts whose status is that of explaining the context of *The Guide* to a deconstructive reading, using other competing sources of information. In an extended investigation of the history of the temple dancer (a character Spivak predicts will be of interest to the Western feminist reader/critic) the authority of one of the more readily available 'source books' on the subject (Frédérique Marglin's *Wives of the God-King*) is challenged. Despite the intense display of erudition there is an abiding sense in which Spivak fails to exhaust her subject. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon the deferral or suspension of facts

about the temple dancer or *devadasi*: information leads to other information. So, the suppressed agency of the *devadasi* in Marglin's text, often overlooked by the Western reader overcome by 'postcolonial piety' (p. 247), is highlighted by Amrita Srinivasan; Srinivasan's 'utopian solidarity' with the *devadasi* alongside her contempt for contemporary popular culture is challenged through reference to a conversation between Folabo Ajayi Soyinka and Sanjukta Panigrahi which, for Spivak, demonstrates that 'the popular can mediate the relationship between practicing artists' (p, 255) and so on. As this is a process without a 'natural' end the essay's ambition is less the pursuit of the truth of the text than the undoing of the orthodox critical relationship between Western reader and 'ethnic' text.:

Such readings in the discipline of Cultural Studies cannot claim the attention of the disciplinary historian of the aftermath of colonialism. They can timidly solicit the attention of the teacher of multicultural literature courses so that s/he can remain aware of the differences and deferments within 'national identity' and 'ethnic minority' and not take the latter as the invariable starting-point for every decolonisation of the mind. (p. 261)

In complicating the issue of cultural self-representation the Western reader is less likely to mistake such representations for authentic truths and furthermore, the apprehension of which as *the* anti-colonial programme.

As rigorous as 'How to Teach . . .' is, Spivak does not simply recommend this relentless search for framings of framings of framings. As has been noted, a crucial task for the Western feminist or hegemonic reader is the facing of her own limitations. 'One of the first things to do is to think through the limits of one's own power. One must ruthlessly undermine the story of the ethical universal, the hero.'<sup>33</sup> The fact of restricted capacities for learning languages, for understanding, must be confronted. It is with this in mind that I turn to Spivak's 'In praise of Sammy and Rosie Get Laid'<sup>34</sup>. In contrast to 'How to Teach . . .' this essay is almost shocking in its admittance of its lack of expertise, and consequent

limitations. It opens thus: 'I'd like to preface my remarks by saying that I don't know how to talk about films' (p. 80). Set within a pedagogical context the essay determines its limits tightly:

I am a literary-philosophical critic, and that's the only way I know how to talk about film. I'm actually looking at these films in a very special way, as didactic pieces. And I'm interested in the fact that there is a lot to read there. Now that's an old-fashioned way of looking at films and I think it should be understood that that's what I'm doing. (p. 80)

Having established its boundaries, Spivak moves on to consider the way Hanif Kureishi's film is more readily readable to British than American 'cultural workers' (American students not having the 'wherewithal' to read the film) in addition to its subtle rendering of the British 'social text' and its renegotiation of 'the relationship between aesthetics and politics.' In other words, Kureishi's work refuses the kinds of easy, politically correct, representations of postcolonial agency that American academic audiences expect and it this, precisely, that Spivak values. So, the character Rosie is celebrated for her moments of unreadability:

Now of course many critics might object to this inability to read characterologically but it doesn't upset a reader like me because those moments of bafflement are the moments which make the film didactically useful and that's how a deconstructionist reads. It is the stalling of a programme of reading that is dramatised here. (p. 82)

Here the limits of knowledge are presented as radical. The lack of intelligibility pertaining to Rosie is read as itself a sign of the film's progressive politics. Likewise, Kureishi's portrayal of the lesbian characters is read by Spivak as 'extraordinary' mainly due to their 'didactic focus [being] blurred' (p. 83). Instead of stable, coherent, even authentic representations *Sammy and Rosie . . .* presents a 'whole chain of displacements in terms of which you are shown how a quick fix or a quick judgement or a quick read is productively resisted by the film.' (p. 87).

These limits are then further extended into Spivak's method. The essay ends with an additional assertion of its limits: 'These are incomplete musings', together with a pledge to do more homework: 'I am painfully learning film-talk and will have more to say about groups of post-colonial films soon.' (p. 87)

'In praise of Sammy and Rosie . . .' seems absolutely to conform to Spivak's political programme. It is self-conscious in its advertisement of its limits whilst at the same time straining at those limits with the promise of learning the discipline of film discourse. The combination of homework and the realisation of constraints seems to be achieved. However, there are degrees to which Spivak's essay recuperates the power that it appears to relinquish thus undermining its political potential. First, the way in which the radical force of unreadability is inscribed in the text is profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, American students are said to not be able to fully appreciate Kureishi's film in lacking the necessary reading skills (i.e. knowledge of the British social text) that are presumed to be in the possession of British audiences; they cannot read *Sammy and Rosie*, it resists intelligibility to an American viewer. On the other, unreadability is the mark of progressive politics. What escapes Spivak's formulation here is the extent to which she renders the unreadable text (Rosie) readable through recourse to deconstructive discourse. The contradictory character may stall a programme of reading but the critic recuperates that unintelligibility through her own theoretical frame. Spivak's unreadable is nonetheless readable in ways that the American student's is not. Furthermore, the extent to which Spivak's advertising of her essay's shortcomings stand as evidence of her thinking through the limits of her own power is also debatable. The fact that this rehearsal of <sup>critical limits</sup> takes place within the pages of a prestigious journal serves to undermine this reading. Given Bourdieu's observation that those able to dispense with the rules of the game are usually its most powerful, well disposed, players, Spivak's admittance of not knowing how to talk about films is less an acknowledgment of her lack of power than a demonstration or illustration of the

considerable power at her disposal. It is questionable whether the said journal would accept the 'incomplete musings' of a graduate student's favourite film, for example. Self-confessed limits are not always readable as or coincident with lack of power.

### **Conclusion**

All of this is to say that the question of contextual limits cannot be answered in absolute terms. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that limits impose themselves and to a great extent are outside the individual critic's reach or control. The balance between homework and limits is not decidable in advance. The establishment of a context is a project without discernable boundaries and is, hence, not the stabilising force that some critics have suggested. But it is precisely the sense of limitlessness that is seen as valuable by the anti-colonial critic. In his work around the sociological context of the literary text, Bourdieu stresses the work entailed with situating texts within their discursive fields. The sheer difficulty of reading the field adequately could be read as potentially productive in that it martial against a single critic getting it right, it calls for work, collective work, a process of reading and theory production. The off-puttingness of contextualising needs to be set against its productiveness as an antidote to grandiose reading strategies

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- <sup>1</sup> . Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: Norton, 1986)
  - <sup>2</sup> . Cora Kaplan, 'Keeping the Color in *The Color Purple*' in *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 177.
  - <sup>3</sup> . Gina Wisker, 'Black and White: Voices, Writers and Readers', in *Black Women's Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke: MacMillan 1993), pp.1-18 (pp.5-6). See also Eva Lennox Birch, *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994): 'What I hope to do is to examine certain distinctive elements in early black writing and oral culture, such as spirituality, political awareness, community, creativity and the effects of slavery, . . . These elements, as American black scholars have demonstrated, are the products of particular social, political and historical circumstances, which white readers have to recognise in their approach to black writing. (p. 11)
  - <sup>4</sup> . Deborah E. McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism' in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 186-199 (p. 192)
  - <sup>5</sup> . Ellen Rooney, 'In a Word: Interview' in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-23 (p. 1)
  - <sup>6</sup> . Judith Butler, 'Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge' in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 266-284 (my emphasis, p. 271). Reprinted from Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993).
  - <sup>7</sup> . Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 118.
  - <sup>8</sup> . See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988)
  - <sup>9</sup> . Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London: Routledge, 1991)
  - <sup>10</sup> . Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 97.
  - <sup>11</sup> . Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, p. 416
  - <sup>12</sup> . Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'In a Word: Interview' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-23 (p. 19)
  - <sup>13</sup> . Gina Wisker, ' "Disremembered and Unaccounted For": Reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ' in *Black Women's Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke: MacMillan 1993); Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* ( ); Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987)
  - <sup>14</sup> . See 'The Case of Margaret Garner' in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. by Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 60-63
  - <sup>15</sup> . See chapter 1 for an extract and discussion of this review.

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Gallop, 'The Institutionalization of Feminist Criticism' in *English Inside and Out: The Places of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Susan Gubar and Jonathan Kamholtz (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 60-67 (p. 60). Hortense J. Spillers states 'The American academy, despite itself, is one of the enabling postulates of black women's literary community simply because it is not only a source of income for certain individual writers, but also a point of dissemination and inquiry for their work' from 'Afterword: Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction' in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. by Hortense J. Spillers and Marjorie Pryse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. (p. 249).

<sup>17</sup> . The term 'caucacentric' is Michael Awkward's.

<sup>18</sup> . See Nancy Hartsock 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983) for an influential formulation of standpoint theory.

<sup>19</sup> . Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> . Abel, 1993, p. 491

<sup>21</sup> . See Barbara Christian, "'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something": African-American Women's Historical Novels' in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. by Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990) for an account of the historical preoccupations of contemporary black American women writers.

<sup>22</sup> . Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*

<sup>23</sup> . Michelle Wallace, 'Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston? Critics Carve Up the Legend.' in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 172-186 (p. 178).

<sup>24</sup> . Christina Crosby, 'Dealing with Differences' in *Feminists Theorise the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 130-143 (p. 135).

<sup>25</sup> Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (London: NLB, 1977) cited in Crosby, p. 133

<sup>26</sup> . See Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin Press, 1962) and *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1972) for the development of the critic's thought on socialist realism.

<sup>27</sup> . Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (pp. 10-11)

<sup>28</sup> . Elizabeth Abel, p. 494

<sup>29</sup> . Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey' in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 285-321 (p. 287)

<sup>30</sup> . G.F.W. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, 5th rev. edn (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955), pp. 216-18, cited and translated by James A. Snead, 'Repetition as a figure of black culture' in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 59-79 (pp. 62-3). See also Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black* which documents this long tradition.

<sup>31</sup> . Adrienne Rich, 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 210-231

31. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.xv.
32. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'How to Teach a "Culturally Different" Book' in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 237-266.
33. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p.19
34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'In Praise of Sammy and Rosie Get Laid', *Critical Quarterly*, 31



## Chapter 6. Self-Reflexivity: Decolonising the (Imperial) Mind.

In light of the normativity of whiteness and the potential for critical appropriation, some white feminist critics have argued for a specific reading relation to the black text. Many have adopted the strategy of declaring their whiteness within their critical writings. Of the nine white contributors to the collection of essays *Black Women's Writing*<sup>1</sup>, for example, six make self-conscious reference to their own whiteness, and situate themselves, in relation to the texts they study, specifically as white readers. While some critics admit almost parenthetically to being white before moving on to produce readings of various black women's texts, others are more interrogative, foregrounding their whiteness as a part of their critical work. Some recommend that the critic cultivate a degree of self-awareness in their critical endeavours, incorporating a self-reflexive gesture into their methodologies. Minrose C. Gwin proposes such an approach in her essay 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or ... The Necessity of Being Other':

. . . if such reading is to have any meaning at all, it must curve back upon itself to become a reflexive process which not only reads its own cultural assumptions . . . but which also turns back upon itself to read itself as white other in many black women's texts.<sup>2</sup>

For the white reader, then, reading writing by black and other race-different women involves a *necessary* encounter with what is perceived as one's own complicity in white supremacist structures of thinking and of existing. Gina Wisker elaborates:

It is only by looking closely and honestly at the difficulties and the joys of reading Black women's writing - in the majority of cases here for the white feminist - that we can develop self-aware, culturally contextual, critical reading techniques and, while we might argue that there is no overt racism in our feminist classrooms, perhaps some of the blunders of any covert racism can be avoided.(p. 5)

For Wisker, 'looking closely and honestly' entails a confrontation, on the part of the white reader, with one's own 'otherness' in the context of writing that, in her view, implicates the white reader in a history of racism and colonialism. Referring to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* she states:

Its exposure of the pathology and the legacy of slavery directly confronts the reader and, as a white reader in the academy, I feel I have a (necessarily problematic) responsibility to try to deal with the tradition of these issues, in context. (p. 79)

The white feminist reader, then, has a specific critical responsibility to black and race-different writings.

Making visible what has previously passed unnoticed or assumed is an important feminist political activity and is no less so in this context: it has been argued on more than one occasion that dominant ideologies succeed by reason of their assumption of an *unmarked* relation to that which differs and is hence marked as deviant or 'other'<sup>3</sup>. As I have indicated throughout, the normativity of whiteness succeeds, in part, though assuming the unmarked side of an opposition to blackness or 'race'. Whiteness operates as the supposedly neutral term in an otherwise conspicuous field of differences, deviations, others. Speaking as a white critic rather than as a critic, or as a white feminist critic rather than as a feminist critic is then strategically important by way of undoing the privilege of assuming the position of centrality from which all other meanings radiate.

Many claims have been made for the radical potential of self-reflexive criticism. From its suggested greater honesty to a means of placing limits on the postmodern proliferation of meaning, the inclusion of the self in the critical frame is seen to provide a number of answers to some of feminist criticism's key areas of debate. Stepping out of the shadows afforded by orthodox critical methods, exposing the scene of (white) feminist theorising itself, is seen to comprise a means of continuing the logic of contextualisation as an anti-colonial method. Including 'the self that writes' in the theoretical picture can be read as an extreme form of

contextualisation of the text: a further indication of where the text is 'coming from', an acknowledgment of the mediating effect of the critic's gaze in the construction of the literary text in question. ('Here is the text *as I see it*'). Indeed, it is in this sense that a self-reflexive approach has found favour with some black feminist critics. Barbara Christian, for example, writes:

Inspired by feminist discussions about objectivity and subjectivity, I constructed an introduction to my volume [*Black Feminist Criticism*] that, rather than the usual formal introduction found in most lit crit books, *was intended to introduce me in my specific context*. It was a personalised way of indicating some of my biases, not the least of which was the fact that the literature I chose to study was central to an understanding of my own life, and not only an intellectual pursuit.<sup>4</sup>

Self-reflexivity in white-authored feminist criticism is also intended as an effort to join in the post-colonial project of decolonising the mind.<sup>5</sup> As it has been shown above many white feminists view the encounter with the race-different text as an opportunity to raise awareness of race issues. Wisker states, for example:

These texts by Black women writers interrogate a continuum of attitudes towards racial difference which make us feel uncomfortable because they upset our unconsciously held beliefs: they confront us with our racism, and our own guilt. (p. 81)

The critic is then forced to face up to 'her own racism' as a necessary component of the reading experience.

This is nowhere more true than in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for the novel's dramatic exposure of the horrors of slavery and its legacy forces white middle-class readers to be uncomfortably aware of their national and historical complicity. (pp. 83-4)

In short, reading racially different women's writing is for the white feminist reader, no matter how well-intentioned, a needfully difficult and uncomfortable experience and a coming to terms with her own race privilege.

In accord with claims made for reading in context, self-reflexivity is also valorised for its role as a producer of limits. As with contextualisation, critical self-writing offers, in Nancy K. Miller's view, boundaries in the face of boundlessness. Discussing similarities between critical statements from Adrienne Rich and Roland Barthes she comments :

... despite the gulf separating their views of the intellectual's role in cultural criticism, what joins them, I think, is the sense they share of the ways in which one's own body can constitute an internal limit on discursive irresponsibility, a brake on rhetorical spinning. The autobiographical act - however self-fictional, can like the detail of one's (aging) body, produce this sense of limit as well: the resistance particularity offers to the grandiosity of abstraction that inhabits what I've been calling the crisis of representativity.<sup>6</sup>

Autobiographical criticism offers not only a sense of limits in an ever more limitless world, but also a means of establishing critical accountability in connecting the critical self with the, in orthodox terms, object of study. This notion of critical responsibility is echoed in Nicole Ward Jouve's *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*.<sup>7</sup> In exposing the source of much critical authority - the third-person mode of objectified discourse - critics such as Miller and Ward Jouve hope to undermine the potential for textual appropriation or colonisation. In Ward Jouve's words:

There is an appropriate honesty, however, in working on, writing out of, the here and the now. In all its ordinariness and modesty. I am glad on reflection that the essays that follow have such a homely pitch. If we cannot make something out of what we are, out of what we know, how shall we ever cease to colonize others? (p. viii)

The ordinary, the honest is offered as a counter to the grandiosity of abstraction; the here and now, the immediate, the subjective, an opposition to the devastating pretensions of the transcendent and the objective.

In this chapter however, I wish to contest some of these claims: mainly the idea that a self-reflexive critical approach is an automatic, guaranteed method of

decolonising the text. The logic of much autobiographical criticism is that of stripping away the false perceptions brought by the white reader to the black text in order to arrive at an uncluttered, clear view. Reflecting upon one's own whiteness in order to achieve closer proximity to the real significance of black women's words, as with other positions that privilege the goal of truth, only succeeds in raising further difficulty. Some critics have assumed whiteness to carry a fixed significance which similarly carries paralysing effects into the discourse. White self-reflexivity also runs the risk, in refocussing the critical act through a consideration of what it means to be white, of placing whiteness back centre stage. It can also operate as a reassertion of mastery, of stability in the attempt to destabilise. White critical privilege can be upheld even as it is being ostensibly undermined; self-reflexivity can serve to shore up a relation of white dominance to the black text. My discussion divides into four parts: naming, confessing, confronting and decentring whiteness. In each I look at a particular way in which self-reflexivity is practised, from simple naming of one's perceived position to more interrogative critical work, stressing the problems as well as the gains of attempting to include the self that writes in the critical picture.

### **Naming Whiteness**

It has become almost a commonplace for white feminist critics to declare their racial identity as significant to their work. Readings of black women's texts are offered as emanating from 'a white feminist's point of view'. Critics are said to be speaking 'as a white reader in the academy', 'as a white woman'<sup>8</sup>. Eva Birch presents a more explicit example:

So what is my own subject position when I approach the writing of black American women as reader and teacher? I am white, female and, by virtue of education and occupation though not through family origins, now regarded as 'middle class'.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking as white woman/feminist is to declare one's interests in the critical endeavour, to say where one is 'coming from'<sup>10</sup>, to locate one's critical commentary.

Within the context of normalising discourses which assume whiteness as transparent or invisible, such declarations are only to be welcomed. As Ruth Frankenberg states in her study of the social construction of whiteness 'Naming 'whiteness' displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance.'<sup>11</sup> Also to be welcomed is the implication that in declaring themselves as white, these feminist critics are also relinquishing any pretence to the kind of authoritative criticism described by Catherine Stimpson in chapter 1. A white feminist perspective is a particular perspective, a non-authoritarian perspective: a partial, not a totalising view. It is also a view determined by relations of domination. The white reader, consequently, is seen as having a responsibility to acknowledge this in her reading of any texts by black women. To read as a white feminist, to adopt a position as a white reader, is to acknowledge the existence of a continued history of white supremacy both within the text and in the world it inhabits.

It has also been suggested that to draw attention to the critic's whiteness is to signal the *untrustworthiness* of what is written; to say that what is written is flawed by the writer's whiteness. Whereas Wisker seems to envisage a largely positive outcome from her anti-racist endeavours, others are not so sure. In *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*, for example, Nicole Ward Jouve, makes the following suggestion:

Perhaps every white person should affix an authorial health warning to their texts. Something like 'white woman speaks with forked tongue'. It's not because you are aware of a danger, nor because you mean well that your words or actions do no harm. Hell is paved, etc. Writing is never innocent. White writing is less innocent than any other. As Gayatri Spivak has said, every First World woman's book is typed out on a word processor made cheap by the low-paid labour of a Third World woman. Natalie Sarraute used

to say that the novel was in an 'era of suspicion'. Today, the politics of white interpretation is in an era of far worse suspicion.<sup>12</sup>

To read or produce critical commentary 'as a' white feminist critic is to produce something defective, short of the mark, suspicious. Eva Lennox Birch qualifies her examination of black American women's writing, similarly, when she reads Barbara Smith's comment: 'When white women look at black women's works they are, of course, ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics' as 'self-evident.'<sup>13</sup>

The problem with using white to signify authorial inadequacy is that it implies racial politics as a kind of essence, as something that whites don't have and can't acquire.

Birch accepts Smith's assertion too readily; her words are read as a kind of commandment, an essential truth and not as a contestable and, at the very least, historically contingent text. With this notion of untrustworthiness comes the corresponding idea of black women's words as uniquely trustworthy and as somehow speaking for themselves, the problems of which having been raised in chapter 1. Assuming too permanent a stance of inadequacy also produces similar effects to the strategy of saying nothing (Chapter 2). Authorial health warnings could serve to substitute for serious engagement with structures of racial domination and so operate as a defensive tactic, entrenching rather than dismantling dominant divisions.

Even if such a significance is not intended there is nothing automatic about reading 'as a' white critic. As Alison Light has pointed out, 'Reading the black text as a white reader, even as a feminist or socialist reader, does not guarantee reading as an anti-racist'<sup>14</sup>. Naming oneself a *white* feminist, for example, carries no corresponding obligation to rethink reading practices, methods and theories. The anti-racist commitment, of which the declaration of one's whiteness is a sign, needs to be carried over into the critical methodology itself and not left as a prefacing remark or indicator of intentions alone. The self-conscious signalling of authorial whiteness is therefore only a beginning and not a solution in itself.

The act of naming oneself as white, feminist or otherwise, and leaving it at that, as a means of decolonising the black text, is also to underestimate the representational difficulties associated with any identity claim, and to misunderstand the nature of subject positions. For instance, in both Wisker's and Birch's case the term 'white' is assumed to carry a unified negative significance. This is made more than explicit in Birch's analysis:

Any white reader who approaches black American literature must start by recognising that the experiential reality described is a unique one. Black roots in American history were planted in institutional slavery. To this fact white readers of black writers must constantly return, *for it is the source of the gulf which lies between our history as white imperialists, and theirs as the oppressed.* (1994, p. 13, my emphasis)

'We' the oppressors, the imperialists, 'they' the oppressed, the colonised. Ruth Frankenberg discusses the problems that accrue with assuming such a division. On being asked to state what white meant to her, one of Frankenberg's interviewees replied that she thought 'of people like the Ku Klux Klanners when I think of "white."' Another referred to the 'largest colonial legacy anyone has ever seen in history'; another to U.S. imperialism (p. 169). While Frankenberg highlights the positive aspects of these equations between whiteness and global systems of power she simultaneously points up their limitations. Given the fact that systems of domination exert their force by being for the most part unnamed, along with that of the inevitable complicity between 'individual white selves and white dominated power structures' (p. 170), making the link between whiteness and global projects such as Western imperialism is an important move. However, in doing so, the interviewees, like Birch and Wisker, subscribe to an overarching equation which serves to obscure their anti-racist intentions. Focussing what it means to be white through extremist white supremacist activity and ideology not only obscures 'the everyday structuring of their lives by racism', the more mundane ways in which racist social organisation benefits those with white skin, it also masks the complex



histories of the various imperial projects that make up the term imperialism. In assuming an 'undifferentiated "we" of domination' (p. 170) white women obscure the connections between the fact of their whiteness, the privileges that a racially stratified social structure bestows upon them, and the various histories of white supremacy. This fixed and determining view of whiteness simultaneously writes white anti-racist women into a paralysing position where 'racism [comes] to stand for a static condition of being, possibly even an "original sin" that the white individual could never undo' (p. 173) If there is a problem with asserting race neutrality, a liberal position where race is seen not to matter here the opposite is the case, 'asserting a complicity with racial domination that was totally encompassing, totally definitive of whiteness and individual white selves' (p. 171) This extreme identification with the white supremacist, in the case of the anti-racist, often produces a dualism, a swing in the other direction which denies the identification as strongly as it is asserted. Frankenberg refers to a particular informant who moves erratically 'between two poles: "I am like the Ku Klux Klan/U.S. imperialism" and "I am *not* like the Klan/U.S. imperialism" and diagnoses a situation in which 'either one is fully complicit with racism and imperialism or not complicit at all' (p. 171) Having arrived on the side of the equation where one is not complicit, a corresponding push in the opposite direction is produced, and so on. A short circuiting of intention replaces real engagement with racial difference.

A comparable oscillation between identification with the oppressor and race-neutralising tactics can be seen in both Birch's and Wisker's texts. What is more the fixing of racial significances is further betrayed by the fact that neither critic is able to incorporate differences of class into their analyses. This is made evident in elisions of race and class that occur in both texts. For instance, Wisker speaks of the response of 'white *middle-class* readers' to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as one of being 'uncomfortably aware of their national and historical complicity' (p. 83), as well as the unique position of black women whose colour makes them particularly well placed to write about the triple burden of race, sex and class' (p. 81). More stark,

however, is this example from Birch's essay in the same volume: 'The unevenness of Hurston's style in which her own recorded voice is sometimes black, sometimes that of an educated woman, is matched by the uneven tone of the whole text.' (p. 143) The exclusivity of the terms black and educated reads as little short of racist. In buying into such an overdetermined configuration of meaning where white is assumed to connote undifferentiated privilege over black disadvantage, Wisker and Birch, albeit inadvertently, rehearse a series of racist associations: white is made to line up alongside 'we', middle-class, educated, privileged, imperialist, oppressor, in opposition to black, 'they', poor/working-class, underprivileged, uneducated, slave, victim.

Further problems emerge when gender enters the critical scene, for racial difference disappears when gender difference is considered. For instance, the 'self-evident truth' of white women's inadequacy with regard to dealing with racial politics is declared, by Birch, to be 'an impassable barrier to understanding if the *only* way of looking at that work is from the viewpoint of race' (1994, p. 2). The investment in the idea of whiteness as extreme in its oppressive force produces a similar duality when it comes to considering gender oppression. Having cast white women as unequivocal oppressors Wisker and Birch cannot accommodate gender into their model as the binary does not allow for being oppressor and oppressed at the same time. Race then disappears, in Birch's case, or else is reintroduced as one of a number of additional burdens to the foundational model of gender, in Wisker's. A familiar set of difficulties is mobilised: 'we' white women are all oppressors switches to 'we' are all women oppressed by men, and any consideration of race vanishes in the process. Once again black women are asked to choose between race and gender oppression. Elizabeth Spelman comments: 'Ironically, the categories and methods we may find most natural and straightforward to use as we explore the connections between sex and race, sexism and racism, confuse those connections rather than clarify them.'<sup>15</sup> This point is made explicit by Carol Ramazanoglu:

The experiences of black women cannot, then, be incorporated into feminist analysis simply by adding on Asian or West Indian families. The oppression of black women must be seen as contradictory in that the common interests of all women in patriarchal societies are cut across in variable ways by class, race and ethnicity. Black women do have interests in common with each other, and in common with white women, but they also have interests - for example, of class, sexuality, and ethnicity - which cut across these common ones.<sup>16</sup>

By identifying 'white' with 'racist' whilst holding onto a notion of gender as *the* source of oppression, white feminist critics such as Wisker and Birch are trapped in a dynamic of guilt and denial that is difficult to resolve.

### **Confessing whiteness**

In 1985 *Feminist Review* published a piece by socialist-feminists Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh which attempted to address black feminist critique through what they termed an autocritique of their *The Anti-social Family*.<sup>17</sup> Stressing the importance, for white feminists, of re-examining 'our own practices' (p. 23), Barrett and McIntosh reread their text in the light of black feminist theory in order to consider the extent to which its fundamental concepts are suited or not to an analysis of black and Asian families. Before doing so, however, reservations are raised as to the suitability of the type of critique they propose:

Clearly there is something of a dilemma here for writers like ourselves, for to engage in a public reconsideration of past work is to assume that this work was significant enough for it to be useful to 'set the record straight'. Hence there is something pretentious, by definition almost, in the idea of indulging in an autocritique. In addition, there is an danger of a public breast-beating exercise that enables white women to carry on as before but with the added reassurance of having articulated some fashionable guilt. (p. 24)

Having aired these anxieties the risk is decided as worth taking and the authors proceed with their self-analysis.

As an approach this is by no means confined to this particular article. In a comparable move, literary critic Elizabeth Abel begins her analysis of white feminist readings of black writing by narrativising her initial reading of Toni Morrison's short story 'Recitatif' in order to disclose how white women often, albeit unwittingly, project culturally scripted fantasies about black women onto their texts and 'interpret' those texts according to highly specific, though unrealised as such, cultural agendas:

Twyla's sense of social and physical inadequacy vis-a-vis Roberta, like her representation of her mother's inferiority to Roberta's, signalled Twyla's whiteness to me by articulating a white woman's fantasy (my own) about black woman's potency. (pp.473-4)

Other critics have included comments from students which serve the same narrative purpose; to illustrate the awakening of a racially aware consciousness. For instance:

Like other seminar members, Julie felt a sense of oppression in the indictment against her inherited and assumed racism, but she went on to reason that this can lead to growth, clarity and change. (Wisker, p.82)

Seminar students underwent an uneasy process of self-examination when confronted by the enormity of an inescapable racism that had contributed to the self-definition of these writers and themselves. (Birch, p.138)

In many ways, as Rita Felski has pointed out, such narrative confessions are 'clearly related to the exemplary model of consciousness-raising'<sup>18</sup> and the importance of CR groups to feminism is not to be underestimated. Ann Russo outlines the importance of consciousness-raising techniques to white women attempting to deal with their racism and white supremacist inheritance<sup>19</sup>. Creating spaces to study specifically the meanings of race for white women is also a recommendation of Tia Cross et.al.'s paper 'Face-to Face, Day-to-Day, - Racism CR.'<sup>20</sup> For the white feminist critic switching the anti-racist focus to thinking through one's whiteness is useful because

it gets away from the notion of anti-racism that is founded upon the idea of benevolence, of charity to black women . As Ann Russo puts it, in this sense ‘working on the problem of racism becomes a matter of “helping” these women out, as if the problem of racism were “their” problem . . . . Focussing on white supremacy means we look at racism as a white problem and issue’ (p. 299).

In indicating the political importance of confession in the history of second wave feminism Felski also highlights its ‘ambivalent status’ (p. 88) in current feminist thinking.

In particular if the function of confession is the pursuit of a greater truth or more honest view, ‘setting the record straight’ to borrow Barrett and McIntosh’s phrase, then problems abound. Felski, for example, draws attention to the will to self-identity that drives the confessional act:

The more frantic the search for an inner self, for a kernel of meaning untouched by a society rejected as oppressive and alienating, the more clearly subjectivity is revealed to be permeated by and dependent upon those very symbolic constraints from which it seeks to liberate itself. In other words, the act of confession can potentially exacerbate rather than alleviate problems of self-identity, engendering a dialectic in which the production of ever more writing as a means to define a center of meaning merely serves to underscore the alienation of the subject even as it seeks to overcome it. (p. 104)

In short, the moment of self-revelation, of reading in truth, the straightening of the record is not only endlessly deferred but is rendered the more opaque the more relentlessly it is pursued. In addition, the proposed link between self-reflection and self-awareness, the founding narrative of confession, is placed under some doubt in that the moment of awareness is never fully realised. This is not to argue against consciousness-raising per se but to question the usefulness of confession as a narrative act in the context of race.

To return to Barrett and McIntosh’s paper, the process of deferral can be seen to operate in their discussion of the preface to *The Anti-social Family*. An attempt to

signal, in the original text, their 'belated anxiety' over the potential ethnocentrism of their argument, the preface is criticised for its 'ignorance and neglect . . . that pervaded the book as a whole' (p. 25) While it functioned as a means of apprehending some of the text's shortcomings, its authors admit that it merely magnified them in the process. However, in making these observations, the anxiety evident (self-indicated) in the original preface is less dealt with than displaced in its critical commentary. The text's potential methodological problems are 'confessed' in the essay's opening paragraphs. The anxiety over appearing 'by definition almost', pretentious, self-indulgent is aired in a repetition of the original prefacing act. The very attempt to address the shortcomings of the prior text is, then, deferred, the confession of the potential problems of confession displaces rather than addresses the text's difficulties. 'Ethnocentrism in Socialist-Feminist Theory' reproduces the problems of its subject more than it resolves them.

The ambition of setting the record straight is no less problematic for being unrealisable. Although white feminists may need to engage with the ways in which they are the beneficiaries of structures of racial domination, to do so in this way is to reproduce the relation of dominance that self-reflexive approaches are intended to undermine. To hope to achieve a position of a 'straight record', in other words a clean slate, the critic is, first, entertaining a fantasy of inhabiting a subject position of pure 'non-racism' or producing a wholly racially 'correct' piece of writing, and second, reconstructing the other as an object of knowledge through self-correction. An interviewee of Frankenberg observes:

A lot of white women who get into discussion about racism, and go into the internal process of it, might get to a point of clarity about where their prejudices and racist thought are, feeling, "So that's great, now I'm not so racist anymore!" And then stop there . . . You're cleansed of certain sins and now you can go home. (p. 168)

Setting the record straight operates as a version of this belief; the idea that a piece of work can be purged of its ethnocentric or racist assumptions and rendered racially

unproblematic. The promise of release contained within the urge to confess is achieved, the 'problem' is solved. Again, the point that white critics/women, and, by extension, their writings, are accorded privilege whether they wish for it or not, is lost. Regardless of the degree of racial correctness achievable in a piece of writing its authors continue to be white, and hence racially privileged in a racially stratified universe.

The idea of the final correction also undermines the anti-colonial intent of self-reflexivity by reconstructing the posture of the ethnologist collecting data. If the self-conscious examination of one's own ethnocentrism is intended to disrupt the authority that is normally assumed with unmarked whiteness, the ambition of a correct account seriously compromises this. Trinh. T. Minh-ha comments:

As an aesthetic closure or an old relativising gambit in the process nonetheless of absolutising meaning, reflexivity proves critically insignificant when it merely serves to refine and to further the accumulation of knowledge.

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A point echoed by Peggy Phelan:

Quantum physicists have attempted to measure the altering 'energy of the observer' - and to transfer the desire for an epistemology of secure scientific facts to a more insecure epistemology of probabilities and uncertainties. And yet the particle continues to turn into a wave and a wave keeps becoming a particle. Anthropologists and ethnologists have attempted to use 'reflexivity' as a new model for observing the other, but such attempts have done little to unsettle the fundamentally unequal relation which prevails in this mode of scholarship. The project is not to locate the observer but rather to see that the given to be seen - from the quantum to the 'native' - is apprehended (and of interest) because of the failure of the perceiver to be seen. (p. 20)

The promised epistemological insecurity of the self-reflexive approach is recuperated in a gesture of mastery. Uncertainty is replaced with greater certainty, the record is finally set straight. The implication of a clean slate is also instructive here. The final

correction is simultaneously the re-establishment of innocent ground. All risk is gone, problem solved.

What escapes the practitioners of confession is that the 'problem' of racial conflict is solved partly through the forestalling of black feminist/Third world feminist critique, through getting there first, so to speak. Self-criticism functions to stave off criticism from the 'other' and as such can be read as a defensive tactic and not as anti-colonial; a recuperation and not a renouncement of critical authority and power. Ramazanoglu responds to Barrett and McIntosh's approach thus:

This level of tightly defended 'autocritique' seems too complacent to be appropriate in a feminist journal as a means of opening up the dialogue that they seek between the exponents of white feminism and the anger and frustration which have been widely expressed by black women. If we are going to beat our breasts in public shouldn't we unbuckle the armour-plating first? (p. 83)

Here autocritique closes down rather than opens up debate the effect of which is to 'lose sight of the seriousness of the divisions between women which black women have brought to light' (p. 83)

At their worst, narrative acts of confession could function as no more than the staging of a racist incident that is then overcome, a moment where consciousness was raised, where racial privilege was realised or unconscious caucascentrism or racism was detected; a sign that the feminist in question is worthy of the critical act she intends to commit. The textual positioning of the confession is crucial here. Placed at the beginning of the critical endeavour, confession could be read as a means of gaining entry to what is perceived as black feminist territory, or else as clearing a space of legitimacy for the execution of an already formulated critical act. Elizabeth Abel's confession runs this risk in its placement even though its concerns are carried into the main body of her work. Those of Eva Birch and Gina Wisker are much more problematic in that worries over their perceived inadequacies are for the most part divorced from their methodologies. Their remarks read more as an



innoculation against accusations of theoretical insufficiency than as serious interventions in the debate over reading and race. More worrying still is their use of students' comments to stand for their own confessions. It is hard not to read this as an act of critical dissociation despite appeals to a student centred approach.

Confession, then, if not followed by a rigorous and continued attempt to think through the implications of race privilege for a reading of black women's writings mostly fails as a means of decolonising the text. This is particularly so when the confession is ostensibly concerned with closing off the possibility of being read by the racial other to which it is addressed. The possibility of real readerly engagement on the part of the black feminist is foreclosed in the fantasy of achieving her unconditional approval.

### **Confronting whiteness**

One of the methodologically more developed investigations into the possibilities of white feminist participation in the field of black women's writing, Minrose Gwin's 'A Theory of . . .' argues for the indispensability of a self-reflexive critical stance. Although in many ways linked to the notion of confession Gwin's method advances a stage further by incorporating the confessional mode into the very fibres of her critical method. In her discussion Gwin shows how white women often feature as the breakers of promises in black women's writings. Therefore, in reading black women's texts, it is argued, white women need not only to take account of this extended, above all, *referential* history of betrayal, but also to reverse the way in which black woman (as sign) has operated as self-consolidating 'other' to white woman.

The reading process advocated by Gwin for the white woman reader is thereby one of learning to undo the ways in which she has been 'enfolded' into dominant 'cultural narratives' by reading herself as 'other', by positioning herself as the breaker of the promise, as the white oppressor. Having thus confronted the full

extent of her otherness to black women, the white woman reader is then, and only then, able to listen *truly* to what black women have to say.

I must drag myself to the brink of the unrepresentable, into what Juliet Mitchell calls that terrifying moment of the 'splitting of the subject', to give over to that dark space of otherness created for me by another woman, and to become acquainted with its cultural landscapes. . . . I want to be able to really hear black women and to hear black women I must confront, and *read*, my otherness in their texts, however painful that may be. For, if I am ever able to become other to my own otherness in black women's texts, I must first be able to read that otherness truly. (p. 23)

While the project of undoing the ways in which privilege structures the encounter between white woman reader and black woman's text is clearly a crucial one, the extent to which Gwin's formulations contribute to this task is questionable. As with the case of naming or declaring oneself as white, the idea of confronting what is perceived as the otherness of white identity to black women constructs whiteness in overly abstracted terms; whiteness is made to signify as undifferentiated privilege/dominance, which is then overcome or neutralised through confrontation with what is seen as this fact. Implicit in this is the fantasy that white supremacy/racism can be ultimately apprehended, that whiteness is something that can be literally *encountered*. In addition she assumes a similar degree of complicity with structures of domination: 'we as white women may need to 'read', with pain and fear and grief, our complicity in what Jean-François Lyotard has called the 'grand Narratives' of culture, of which patriarchy is one.'(pp.22-23):

I must allow myself to be caught by surprise and in that epiphanic and terrifying moment, to see myself as other to black women's subjectivity - in short, to encounter myself as an object. . . . I must be able to read my white womanhood as a sign of everything I personally abhor. (pp.21-22)

Once the 'epiphanic and terrifying moment' (p. 22) of the primal encounter with white womanhood has passed, reading *in truth* can begin. Here Gwin's analysis can

be seen to converge with popular or New Age therapy discourses, in that the pain of reading one's otherness is set against the promise of release, catharsis, cure. The black text is equivalent to the empty chair of the therapeutic encounter: the site of the self's 'working through'.

In constructing the relation of white reader/black text in terms of encounter Gwin is also perpetuating the overinvestment of whiteness with ahistorical, extremist meaning (as simply abhorrent) referred to above, and thus gliding over the more mundane effects of reading as a white woman, in addition to losing the significance of gender to her enterprise. Indeed, in her response to Gwin's paper, Barbara Christian is critical of its project in terms of its proposition of reading as white 'other':

I would hope that white women are reading the Works of Black Women, not as "white *other*," (which is an alienating even abstract term) but as white women, which, after all, is who they are. . . . In actively choosing to look out at the universe, and really know it they may *need* to know our point of view, and perhaps see themselves in ways that they had not before, thus refining their definition of the concept , *woman*.<sup>22</sup>

What Christian is implying is that not only is gender a crucial yet overlooked feature of Gwin's reading identity, but also that the point of her reading technique is to disrupt the notion of white woman as norm. While Christian does not contest the drive to 'really know' she stresses the necessarily disruptive nature of the reading process for white women. In stating her critical goal as one of reading in truth, Gwin effectively puts a brake upon the disruption she needs to bring to her own readerly subject position. The vital transformation that is hoped for in confronting herself as other is given a false limit, an imagined end that is unrealisable. Similar to Gwin, Peggy Phelan summarises the problem of reading in the context of First World reader/Third World text as one of making the other the material for one's own self-representations: 'Within the psychic and aesthetic economy of the Western gaze, the visible image of the other necessarily becomes a cipher for the looking self.'<sup>23</sup> And

yet while Gwin seeks to disrupt this economy through recourse to a greater truth, a clearer vision of both self and other, Phelan recommends the opposite: the acceptance of the limitations of the capacity for clear sight, for self-seeing, for 'knowing' the other.

Seeing the hollow blindness of our own eyes is dangerous because it risks both self-absorption (one sees nothing other than the self) and self-annihilation (one sees only the nothing of the self). But until one can accept one's internal other as lost, invisible, an unmarked blank to oneself and within the world, the external other will always bear the marks and scars of the looker's deadening gaze. (p. 26)

For Phelan, then, the inward gaze is ultimately impotent, lacking, 'always already lost'. It cannot be either the source of absolute knowledge or the undoing of a representational field that makes the other bear the cost of self-representation. In routing her attempt to undermine the economy of white/black reading relations through the pursuit of her own truth Gwin short circuits her method. Reading oneself succeeds only in reproducing the blind-spots that are endemic to the (split) subject. Placing to one side the representational difficulties that ensue from looking to black women's fictional characters as sources of white women's truth (the problem of reading such texts as sociology, as data, for one), the seeing produced by the other, however mediated, is never identical with the imagined seeing of the self. In Lacan's words, 'you never look at me from the place I see you'<sup>24</sup>. Access to the other's knowledge of ourselves is as cluttered with obstacles as our desire for self-knowledge. The moment of 'true' self-revelation is endlessly deferred and displaced.

Felski argues similarly that the 'yearning for total intimacy, immediacy, and fullness of meaning' emphasises the 'reality of uncertainty and lack' so producing a further oscillating effect between intimacy and alienation. The fear of alienation drives the longing for intimacy and vice versa, Felski explains:

The process of introspection, of the analysis and evaluation of motive, can intensify feelings of guilt rather than resolve them; the compulsion to disclose

oneself as fully as possible leads to a search for ever more telling details, the continual interrogation of one's own motives, in the search for the impossible ideal of absolute honesty. (p. 113)

The pursuit of the moment of self-truth is rendered obscure; the primal confrontation with whiteness reverts to confession. Whiteness becomes something to atone or apologise for, rather than as something to be investigated or criticised; its mundane specificity is lost.

### **Decentring whiteness**

If colonial privilege can be represented as that of being able to see without being seen,<sup>25</sup> the drive toward self exposure in reading/theorising the racially Other text can be read as a potentially radical move. The decision to emerge from the off-stage location of objective criticism, the position of outside the frame of meaning, (with its attendant authority) becomes readable as one to decentre, indeed [surrender]de-authorise the white feminist critical project. With this decision comes the blurring of the distinction between subject and object, reader and text. Again, this is a potentially radical move given the interests of maintaining such a distinction for the colonialist. As Elleke Boehmer argues: 'It became habitual for Europe to approach other cultures as *objects of study*, bodies of knowledge to assemble and to bring into shape.'<sup>26</sup> A bringing into shape which represses the act of shaping itself. The objectifying colonial gaze as a producer of knowledge, and as a source of authority, predicated itself upon the idea of neutrality, upon passive seeing: Victorian ethnologists, merely *observe* the antics of 'savages', so to speak, and in doing so not only deny their own relation to their objects of study but also the ways in which such a relation functions to distort what is thought to be seen. Bourdieu puts it thus:

The distortion wrought on practice by the objectification of practice (for instance, the operation which consists in distributing properties in tables with two columns, left/right, feminine/masculine, wet/dry, etc.) is destined to pass

unnoticed, since it is constitutive of the very operation that the ethnologist has to perform in order to constitute practice as an ethnological object. (p. 100)

This distortion takes the form, for example, of translating practices or rituals into algebraic formulae. In bringing to bear the instruments of objectification ('the photograph, schema, diagram, genealogy or, quite simply, writing.' p. 98) upon an event or phenomena *observers* 'by failing to analyse [their] relation to [their] object, project onto their object the relation they have with that object,' (p. 98) The effects of objectification are not confined solely to the transformation of practice into discourse, of unwritten into written. The relationship of reader to text, similarly, can be construed in this way. Referring to Bakhtin, Bourdieu is critical of what is termed a 'philological' approach to language: the treatment of language as if it were something dead and consequently fixed in meaning. The pure object of knowledge, to summarise, is a construction which is arrived at through a considerable act of violence: '...it is only in the eyes of the observer that ritual can change from dance into algebra, from gymnastics into a symbolic and logical calculus.', (p. 99)

From the moment a rite is retold, it changes meaning and you pass from a bodily logic oriented towards functions, to a philological relation: the rites become texts which have to be deciphered, they are pretexts for decipherment. The need for coherence and logic appears, linked to communication, discussion and comparison.' (p. 100)

The blurring of the subject/object distinction forms a crucial part of Nicole Ward Jouve's project in her *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*. Like Bourdieu she is critical of the objective stance integral to orthodox literary criticism.

The critical genre, it seems, makes its adepts feel that they are being miraculously transported on a magic carpet from which they can survey, or peer into, the operations of the rest of humankind, the common herd of writers as it were. They themselves are removed from the obligation of having to bother with the self that writes. They inhabit a secure, objectified, third-person mode that protects them from having to be self-aware. (p. 1)

For Ward Jouve, objectivity offers the critic protection in the form of freedom from responsibility for what is written. Objectivity also gives the illusion of dissociation from the meanings that are created: the critic's position, floating above the text/event, has the appearance of detachment, even disinterest. What is more, it is a detachment which constitutes the *necessary distance* that forms the basis of colonial authority. The securing of a *commanding* view of any text/event was founded upon the establishment of the distance necessary to see not only the whole, but the whole at once, at a glance. Boehmer summarises:

The gaze was made manifest in the activities of investigation, examination, inspection, peeping, poring over, which were accompaniments to the colonial penetration of a country. In ethnographic description and scientific study, in the curious scrutiny of the colonized by the colonizer, there was much of the attitude of the map-maker. In writing, the gaze appears as bird's-eye description, and is embodied in the high vantage point or knowledgeable position taken up by a writer or traveller as he re-creates a scene.<sup>27</sup>

In its extreme manifestations the idea of necessary distance made possible and indeed, permitted the production of authoritative accounts of the colonized, based upon little more than the imagination alone. James Mill, for instance, founds his *History of British India* (1817) squarely upon the premise that 'the subcontinent could best be understood by an informed outsider, one who had never visited India, such as himself.'<sup>28</sup> Fiction presented as fact, the objective view wielded an inestimable power as a structuring force in the world of Empire.

The legacy of this as a way of viewing texts/events/cultures is more than considerable, as Ward Jouve notes, suspecting it as a possible source of justification for a continuation of the colonial attitude in literary criticism.

I belong to the race that has taken a few centuries only to destroy or threaten what it has taken God or nature millions of years to make. Critical writing has grown in the same period. Who knows but that it is tainted with the same greed, the same tendency to exploit and to destroy. Today, in our infinite

appetite for exoticism, for the new, we go on gleefully sacking all other cultures to find something exciting to write about. (p. vii)

By way of loosening the colonial grip upon texts, and by extension, the world, Ward Jouve proposes that the pursuit of the (in her view, fallacious) objective be relinquished, in favour of the more honest, indeed modest, project of the subjective. For Ward Jouve this is more than simply an option or alternative for the critic but rather a facing of facts.

In any case, as I have tried to show at the outset, any writing constructs and betrays a subject. It is not a question of choice. One might as well make something of the process. It is not because consciousness can never be full, never more than fragments or a patchwork, that the enterprise is fallacious. Indeed, it is because subjecthood has become so difficult, has been so deconstructed, that there is need to work towards it. (pp. 10-11)

So, given the inevitability of the relational quality of meaning, or as Bourdieu puts it: ‘... nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies,’<sup>29</sup> it is better to accept than deny one’s own active role in the construction of an ‘object’, whether text, practice or culture. With this Ward Jouve privileges the autobiographical as a means of decolonising the text, stressing ‘...the importance of self-knowledge, or rather the quest for self-knowledge, in the writing of criticism.’ She continues:

Unless criticism springs out of genuine analyses of the real world, and in its turn affects it (and in the word ‘real’ I include the self that lives out of and in history as well as writes), then it inhabits the realm of fantasy. It perpetuates a sterile state of fantasy, like cogs that no longer clutch into the dents of a wheel, and turn in the void, mad with their own unimpeded speed. (p. 8)

The autobiographical is seen to usher the real into what, in Ward Jouve’s thinking has become the increasingly detached and, by extension, unreal critical universe. This notion of bringing criticism back down to earth finds an echo in Nancy Miller’s *Getting Personal*. To reiterate, the body is seen as constituting ‘an internal limit on discursive irresponsibility, a brake on rhetorical spinning’ (p. xiii) The particularity



of autobiography is constituted as a counter to the smooth presentation of ideas that characterises the abstract: the graininess, the materiality of the personal is contrasted with the over-blown, global pretensions of abstraction.

As I am particularly interested in the potential of self-reflexivity in the context of reading and race I focus here upon Ward Jouve's text alone, mainly due to its being developed in the context of anti-colonial practice. The distortions of the orthodox objective view are many and the authority that has been assumed with whiteness is not to be underestimated. However, the extent to which Ward Jouve's methodology addresses these issues is questionable. Most crucially *White Woman Speaks*. . . reduces the colonial to an essence, or structure, that is identical with objectivity and in doing so overlooks the particular histories that constitute its project. The colonial contest is more than an attitude of mind or epistemological habit; Ward Jouve blinds herself to important and meaningful aspects of the texts she studies in focussing on their form alone. Just as crucially, the gesture of decentring is confounded by the self-absorption of the method. Ward Jouve centres the text around herself in the name of anti-colonialism, neglecting the colonial content of the issue of translation, for example. Finally the colonial ambition of the view from above, though opposed even denigrated in the text, creeps back into its approach to the work of Doris Lessing, for one. The return of objectivity in *White Woman Speaks* . . . , despite its banishment, raises interesting questions as to the potential for a truly subjective, that is non-objective, discourse.

In the text's opening essay Ward Jouve who 'live[s] and write[s] in two languages: French and English', explores 'what [her] own 'bilingualism' entails' (p. 1). In particular she is interested in the problem translation poses for self-identity, a problem which she places on a continuum with the generalised or even universal identity crisis that she associates with all women 'who strive to speak with their own voice experience'. Her own predicament is seen as 'a more graphic form', a magnification of this crisis, and hence a legitimisation of her own self-exploration. The

connection between Ward Jouve's own experience and that of other women's is thus established.

In her account of her own bilingualism Ward Jouve presents herself as divided more or less down the middle. As well as having had no childhood in England and no adulthood in France, she calculates that approximately half of her life has been spent in each country. And yet this distribution of languages and self is in no way as comfortable as this neat equation suggests: 'My presence in one country, one language always means my absence from the other.' (p. 19) What is more, the division between English and French is presented as having further significance as a division between the patriarchal and the feminine, the academic/theoretical and the creative, adult and child, public and private, second-hand and original, the conscious and the unconscious. It comes as no surprise, given these accrued meanings that translation produces overwhelming feelings of alienation and anxiety: 'Translating made me feel sick' (p. 29). The movement from French to English triggers nothing short of an existential crisis:

The activity of translating destroyed whatever bit of identity the writing of the stories had constructed for me in French. It threw me back into the horror of indifferentiation, of possible non-sense. (p. 29)

Faced with the 'gaping chasm' that opens up between the two languages when translation is contemplated, Ward Jouve chooses to highlight, and indeed occupy, their distinctions. She then settles upon inhabiting a schizophrenic identity position (legs astride the Channel) as a means of negotiating her internal divisions, accepting them rather than attempting some sort of resolution.

I realise then that I need the partition, the cut between the two. I am perhaps not so far away from schizophrenia as I'd like to think. I can live as two people. I'd go mad if the two were forced to acknowledge each other, rather than go their separate ways, the way it pleases each. . . .Where would I be if I could do the same thing in both? Drowned, of course: in the grey waters of the Channel.', (p. 30).

As interesting as this is as an account of Ward Jouve's personal struggle to exist in two different cultures the context of the investigation introduces a number of problems into the discourse. Given the expressed concern with colonialism in the preface and introduction to *White Woman Speaks* . . . it is surprising that there is no consideration of language as a colonial issue. Nowhere is it considered that some women who speak in a language that is not the mother tongue as an effect of the colonial contest. Sujatta Bhatt's poem 'Search For My Tongue' testifies to a markedly different experience of speaking two languages:

You ask me what I mean  
by saying I have lost my tongue  
I ask you, what would you do  
if you had two tongues in your mouth,  
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,  
and could not really know the other,  
the foreign tongue.  
You could not use them both together  
even if you thought that way.  
And if you lived in a place you had to  
speak a foreign tongue,  
your mother tongue would rot  
rot and die in your mouth  
until you had to spit it out.<sup>30</sup>

Written in Gujarati and in English 'Search For My Tongue' bears witness to the issue of language and power in the shadow of Empire. The poem's protagonist faces not a schizophrenic identity-choice but the potential annihilation of her native culture by that imposed by imperialism. In the African imperial context Ngugi Wa Thiong'o refers to the destruction of native culture and language as a 'cultural bomb', the weapon, *par excellence*, in imperialism's arsenal.

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own.<sup>31</sup>

The cultural bomb is intent on making the mother tongue 'rot and die', on making its users 'spit it out'. In Bhatt's poem the protagonist is silenced by the loss of her native tongue: 'I can't speak. I speak nothing. Nothing' (p. 63) Although the Gujarati is translated within the body of the poem the poem resists the incorporation of the one tongue by the other. The poem thus testifies to the losses of translating into English:

I think:

(aakash, suraj)

and then: sky, sun.

Don't tell me its the same. I know

better. (p. 67)

A little girl is observed carrying a black clay pitcher, selling water at the station:

She filled her brass cup with water,

stretched out her arm to me,

reached up to the window, up

to me leaning out the window from the train,

but I can't think of her in English. (p. 65)

The gulf between the two languages is mirrored by the distance between the protagonist and the girl reaching up to her: English stretches out and ultimately fails to reproduce the Gujarati scene. In the context of the Caribbean, Grace Nichols's 'Epilogue', from 'I is a Long-Memoried Woman', speaks of the irretrievability of the 'mother tongue' for the African slave.

I have crossed an ocean

I have lost my tongue  
from the root of the old one  
a new one has sprung<sup>32</sup>

The new, Creole, Nation language, a resistance to the imposition of the language of the coloniser, takes the place of the old.<sup>33</sup>

None of this is to castigate Ward Jouve for not dealing with the entire and complex history of language and imperialism; it is rather to point up the gap between her intentions and practice. In justifying her self-investigation as being relevant to 'women', in addition to professing a concern with colonialism, Ward Jouve nevertheless perpetuates an entirely Eurocentric view of bilingualism. This would be less of a problem were it not for Ward Jouve's legitimation of her project through appealing to its broader relevance. Despite its preoccupation with the personal and the particular *White Woman Speaks* . . . cannot give up the pursuit of the big picture, the view from above, the general. While ostensibly disdaining the objective view, Ward Jouve nevertheless reinstates it, rerouting it via the particular, the personal. This is evident in the ease with which the text moves from the particular to the general:

Still, about connections: what is odd is that you may work on, discover, something that seems totally private, even eccentric, in a state of total isolation - and it turns out to have an unexpectedly political, a public, face. . . . More pretentiously, let me say that the writing of fiction (which is supposedly 'private', imaginative) can turn out to be the expression of something much larger, more impersonal. (pp. 32-3)

In the place of a consideration of issues of power, language and translation, the text makes euphemistic reference to the way in which 'mobility, in terms of place, culture, speech, imaginary projection of self, affects more and more women' (p. 17). The use of the word mobility implies a degree of choice that glides over the facts of the forced migration of a large proportion of Africa 's population, for instance.

This neglect is produced in part by Ward Jouve's construction of colonialism as solely the epistemological habit of objectivity. *White Woman Speaks* . . . relentlessly pursues acts of critical objectification and equates them, falsely, with colonialism. Objectivity is thus constructed as colonialism's essence, and by extension, subjectivity emerges as the anti-colonial stance. The problem with this equation is that it first, it denies the myriad ways in which the various colonial powers achieved domination of various areas of the globe, in addition to foreclosing upon the need for further investigation as to the specificity of each colonial project. If colonialism can be reduced to an epistemological mannerism or even an attitude of mind then anti-colonialism becomes a mere matter of therapy or individual retraining. This is not to deny the connections between the objective construction of the world and Empire but instead to complicate it. It is to heed Edward Said's comment that 'no one overarching theoretical principle governs the whole imperialist ensemble'<sup>34</sup> whilst recognising within the patterns of imperial domination the dense particularity of its manifestations. If objectivity eased the production of power/knowledge which served the causes of domination: authorising the taxonomies of race, the geographical division of the world, the recording of observations, Empire cannot be reduced to objectivity per se. To do so is simultaneously to deny an entire history of Western global domination along with the colonial/imperial inheritance which white Westerners to greater or lesser degrees continue to trade off today. The extent to which colonial discourses continue to circulate, or litter, British culture can be seen in the casual way in which they are picked up, assumed in the most unexpected circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

This elision of the colonial and the objective pervades Ward Jouve's discussion of Doris Lessing's work. In an essay on Lessing's *Children of Violence* sequence the critic discusses 'what [she] find[s] wrong with the language of a woman [she] admire[s]' (p. 119) and in doing so attempts to expose her own role in the reading process. Laying her 'own head on the chopping block' (p. 119) she presents a sustained examination of Lessing's textual politics. Tracing the significance of the

image of mud through the novels, it is argued that: 'The disappearance of mud . . . is bound up with the disappearance of the home.' (p. 124) and in turn the disappearance of home is linked to the loss of significance itself. This escalating loss in the text is connected to the grand losses that mark the twentieth century, the losses that signify the crises that inhere with modernity: 'Mud is lost. Leaving the children of violence, a prey to violence, the 'forces' of two world wars, the splitting of the atom, the Cold War, madness. (p. 127) The sequence's heroine, Martha Quest, journeys in the direction of mud to void, home to loss of home, Africa to Europe, and in doing so becomes a thoroughly modern subject. However, even as Lessing takes on the big themes of twentieth century life she does not extend them into her mode of representation or narrative; Ward Jouve's quarrel with the author is over her continued use of a form of fictional writing that continues to 'put the sky at the top of the picture'(p. 175 ). In presenting Martha's radical doubt alongside the falling away of certainty about the world in general, Lessing, in Ward Jouve's view, persists in holding onto a means of representation that shores up the very fictions she seems to be exposing. In short, the 'twentieth century' content of the fiction is betrayed by its 'nineteenth century' form. So, 'Martha may at the end of *The Four-Gated City* discover that her consciousness of reality had been false: but the manner in which she is led to make that discovery in itself perpetuates that falsity.' (p. 174) In addition to eschewing the personal in favour of the universal ('The ambition informing Lessing's work, and especially the last volumes of *The Children of Violence* is absolute. It is to evolve from 'I' to 'We', carrying into 'We' all the old 'I's of the *Bildungsroman*.' , p. 135), Lessing via the 'A to Z principle', the 'subject-verb-object routine', the 'detached observer', and what is more, 'the most comforting . . . sense that there is no more than what there is'(p. 160-1), fully orients the reader in the text. Nothing is not known. Even as Martha experiences doubt or uncertainty the authorial voice is unwavering. So, as well as putting the sky at the top of the picture, the writing self remains at the text's centre; characters' thought processes are explained, dreams interpreted, feelings described, progress is made, *chronologically*, developmentally.

Ward Jouve's main quarrel being that this coincides with and indeed lends support to a colonial world view that relies on notions of distance, objectivity, and transcendence: 'It pretends, with colonial simplicity, that because you're not really 'involved', you are, you can be, 'objective'. 'all-knowing'. Which is yet another, unrecognised fiction.' (p. 177)

The critic also takes issue with what she identifies as Lessing's partitioning of race in her texts. In the *Children of Violence* sequences the black characters are seen to appear as barely more than ciphers for awareness of racial prejudice, or ideas or causes to be fought for. At the same time as writing the sequence, Lessing was producing, in Ward Jouve's view, the more racially explicit work of her African short stories. This act of splitting is all the more problematic for Ward Jouve given the sequence's pretensions to objectivity: 'the 'totalising' ambition of the texts', (p. 145). 'How' she asks, 'could [Lessing] hope to represent an inclusive consciousness in the character of Martha when all the time she made her blind - I don't mean *ideologically* blind, I mean blind where it really matters.' (p. 145) By way of answering her own question Ward Jouve speculates as to Lessing's position as an author, concluding: 'Presumably the author is not herself aware of this particular partitioning, for if she were, how could it still affect *Landlocked*, published three years after *The Golden Notebook*?' (p. 146)<sup>36</sup>

Intentional fallacy aside, such speculation is interesting when considered within the general frame of Ward Jouve's argument. In pursuing the idea of inclusivity, in asking for a more representative view of Rhodesia, for example, with its perceived ten blacks for every white, as a means of criticising Lessing's textual politics, Ward Jouve is demanding of the author the very coherence she not only equates with a colonial world view but also refuses for herself. To return briefly to her statements around the issue of translation:

I realise then that I need the partition, the cut between the two. I am perhaps not so far away from schizophrenia as I'd like to think. I can live as two people. I'd go mad if the two were forced to acknowledge each other . . .



Ward Jouve never considers the possibility that Lessing may be inhabiting such a divide, as a white settler in Africa, for instance, nor indeed any other textual possibility.

When it is considered that Ward Jouve's project, from the outset, is to never forget race ('No-one who writes today can or should forget their race and their gender', p.vii) there is remarkably little mention of race in the text. For instance, in her reading of the *Children of Violence* texts their criticism of white supremacy is largely neglected. Martha Quest's journey of loss and the novel-sequence's movement is summarised in wholly deracinated terms: 'two world wars, the splitting of the atom, the Cold War, madness'. To this list could be added the dismantling of Empire, the falling away of colonial rule: a key theme of the texts. What is more the argument pertaining to Lessing's partitioning of race in her texts takes place itself in a separate, partitioned, section. Subtitled 'Africa' Ward Jouve's critique reproduces the very problem it seeks to diagnose in bracketing off race as a concern. Elsewhere, there is scant reference to race in any specific form. Rather the emphasis appears to be one of dissociation from the particular manifestations of racial inequality. Throughout her essay on translation, for example, a distinction is formed between English and French in terms of the constructed and the natural. Living in England Ward Jouve continued nevertheless to write secretly in French: 'And so, paradoxically, English rendered me the service of making my French more 'natural' (in the sense of less and less conscious and controllable, cut off from models and a context, with "roots" even further away from sight).' (p. 25) Hidden, cut off, unconscious, maternal French is a language of innocence in Ward Jouve's personal universe. A childhood in France means having

. . . none of the instinctive knowledge, the intimate relation to - green and water and 'long summer days' and the Battle of Britain and Monday wash and Thursday baking and 'Grammar' versus 'Comprehensive' and miner's cottages and terraced streets and pop music and India - which growing up in

England in the 1940's and 1950's and early 1960's would have given me. (p. 19,)

Conversely, an adulthood in England has meant missing out on May '68, as well as 'everything that' s been happening to France in the twenty or so years from Pompidou to Simone Weil and the resurgence of racism and the expansion of *ordinateurs* and *vacance de neige . . .*' (p. 19) In her culturally divided existence Ward Jouve also implies having missed out on belonging to a racist and imperialist culture as is the fate of the singularly English or French citizen. Had she spent her childhood in this country the connection to Empire is implied as inescapable: an 'instinctive knowledge' of India, and all that it stands for, would have been the critic's fate. Had she stayed in France the resurgence of the New Right would have informed her adult life. This evasion along with the construction of her native language as one of innocence, deeply compromises Ward Jouve's professed anti-colonial intention.

In saying all of this I am less concerned with either making an issue out of the contradictions themselves, in settling these particular questions, than I am with addressing the bigger question of what it says about the pursuit of a self-reflexive, or rather non-objective, relation to a text or event. The self-reflexive gesture, as it is construed by Ward Jouve, seems concerned with installing herself at the scene of writing in order not only to disrupt the fantasy of a clear view of the text but also to achieve, paradoxically, a more honest reading. The critical self's inscription in the text, the relentless self-questioning, the twists and turns of each argument, the shuttle movement from assertion to the undermining of assertions are all poised to arrive at a final reading which gets it right, which achieves the truth of the text. So, the sequence of novels is reduced to single truth: the fact of their own internal contradiction. And that truth is achieved by completing the critical picture through extending the frame to include the self that writes. In 'daring' to expose herself in the act of creating meaning Ward Jouve's ambition is to do it all at once, so to speak, to present an absolute meaning even as it is delimited in an exaggerated gesture of

critical responsibility. Somewhat defensively, (or as Oprah might say 'passive aggressively') Ward Jouve puts herself on the line, her neck on the chopping-block thus constructing the reader of *White Woman Speaks* . . . in an aggressive relation to her text. Should the criticism fail the reader can always take an axe to its author. While this is not to totalise the potential effects of Ward Jouve's text: it also, like Miller's proceeds in a spirit of exploration and experiment, there is an abiding sense that her self-revelations, indeed the experiment itself (here are my investments, this is what I'm doing) are structured around a demand for a greater truth; the ease with which the text moves from the personal/individual to the general/universal is one such betrayal of this ambition.

## **Conclusion**

Much of the work, and the biggest problem, of writing this chapter has been in deciding how to approach the material given the traps set up by the texts: the construction of objectivity as a colonial stance, for one, the positioning of the reader as violent for another. As I agreed with the initial premises of much of these writings ( the privilege of the neutral observer/critic over the native/text) criticising them produces its own problems. To assess the material from outside would seem to replicate the very position that is under scrutiny. However, as I have argued, there are also problems with some of the assumptions that self-reflexive positions make. Not least that of being able to somehow represent the self that writes. My first effort at this chapter was written in a Ward Jouvian/Milleresque style as I tried to incorporate myself into the metacritical scene. As I went slowly cross-eyed in the attempt I came to realise some of the problems of this method, that is, problems of representation are far from resolved by deciding to include an analysis of what one can only ever presume to be, one's own position or transference material. It seems that there is a distinct limit as to how 'knowing' I can be about myself, how in charge of my own relation to the text I can be. What is more, I would now dispute the extent to which self-reflexivity can offer a means of relinquishing critical mastery, in the way Ward

Jouve supposes in her assertion of the homely and the modest. As I 'exposed' my reading position, tried to step outside of myself in ever decreasing circles of self-analysis, it felt less that I was 'letting go' of mastery than I was attempting to reassert it, albeit in another guise. Jane Gallop airs similar suspicions in her Irigarayan reading of Irigaray's work in *The Daughter's Seduction*. Seeming almost dizzy from rigorous self-questioning Gallop observes parenthetically:

(In all this talk of correct narrative position, staging one's own transference, risking one's identity, I begin to feel less and less sure of what might be the 'correct position' for me, of whether I, like Irigaray, am trying to regain self-mastery by the best ruse of all. . . . But then, this parenthesis itself seems at once the most and the least unsettling gesture of all. It is a last-ditch attempt to regain the correct position, the correct position here being to be unsettled from any position. The real risk avoided here is the risk of being wrong.)<sup>37</sup>

In other words taking up a position of 'not knowing' seems an entirely 'knowing' thing to do in that being seen to choose, self-consciously, the position of 'not knowing' is far from being found to not know. To put it another way staging my own 'not knowingness' or confessing to 'non-mastery' is a more comfortable position to adopt than it would at first appear. Transfential reading, then, at least as it is practised here, ends up recuperating, through its reassertion of the idea of the correct position, the notion of non-mastery as mastery.

There is a further way in which self-reflexivity can be seen to gain the theoretical upper hand. Contrary to the intention of de-authorising the text through the personal it could function to reconsecrate the writing as highly prestigious and hence authoritative in that it is the most privileged of agents who get to flout convention, break the epistemological rules. If a critic decides to blow the gaffe/expose the logic of the field in which she is operating her success depends upon her standing (the amount of symbolic capital at her disposal) in the intellectual field. If the risk pays off the critic stands to gain massively rather than lose recognition, consecration, capital. My decision to not participate in the risk is in part a reflection

of the degree of capital at my disposal (relative to already established critics in the feminist critical field): those who are socially disposed to play the game can afford to dispense with its rules.<sup>38</sup>

In pressing so hard upon the practice of self-reflexivity however, I do not wish to imply that autocritique is automatically regressive or 'colonialist'. Rather in highlighting some of the hidden effects of self-reflection, of acknowledging whiteness for the white critic, I question its use as a guaranteed means of ensuring an anti-colonial relation to the 'raced' text. This is not to say that self-reflexivity is worthless as a critical method. It is instead to suggest it as 'a weapon against yourself, an instrument of vigilance, [a way of] realising the limits of one's vision'<sup>39</sup> as opposed to a final correction; a process and not an answer.

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- <sup>1</sup> Gina Wisker, ed., *Black Women's Writing* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993)
- <sup>2</sup> Minrose C. Gwin, 'A Theory of Black Women's Texts and White Women's Readings, or ... The Necessity of Being Other' *NWSA Journal*, 1 (1988), pp.21-31 (p. 22)
- <sup>3</sup> I.e. it is customary to speak of writers, women writers, black writers, black women writers, etc. it is rare to hear the formulation male writers. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1994)
- <sup>4</sup> Barbara Christian, 'But What do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History' in *Changing Our Own Words*, ed. by Cheryl A. Wall (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 58-74 (p. 67)
- <sup>5</sup> See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi and London: Heinemann and James Currey, 1986)
- <sup>6</sup> Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xiii
- <sup>7</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1991)
- <sup>8</sup> Elaine Jordan, "'Not My People": Toni Morrison and Identity' in Wisker, pp. - (p. 123); Wisker, p. 79; Jordan, p. 111..
- <sup>9</sup> Eva Lennox Birch, *Black American Women's Writing: A Quilt of Many Colours* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p.3.
- <sup>10</sup> Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 32
- <sup>11</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: ) (p. 6)
- <sup>12</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue*, (London: Routledge 1992), p.viii.
- <sup>13</sup> Barbara Smith, 'Toward a black feminist criticism' in Birch, 1994, p. 2
- <sup>14</sup> Alison Light, op.cit. p.95
- <sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (London: Women's Press, 1990), p. 115
- <sup>16</sup> Carol Ramazanoglu, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory: A Response to Barrett and McIntosh', *Feminist Review*, 22 (1986), 83-86 (p. 85)
- <sup>17</sup> Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', *Feminist Review*, 20 (1985), 22-47; *The Anti-social Family* (London: Verso, 1982).
- <sup>18</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 87
- <sup>19</sup> Ann Russo, "'We Cannot Live Without Our Lives": White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism' in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 297-313.

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- <sup>20</sup> Tia Cross, Freada Klein, Barbara Smith, and Beverley Smith, 'Face-to Face, Day-to-Day, - Racism CR', in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*, ed. by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1982)
- <sup>21</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, p. 47
- <sup>22</sup> Barbara T. Christian, 'Response to "Black Women's Texts"', *NWSA Journal*, 1 (1988), 32-36 (pp. 35-6).
- <sup>23</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 26
- <sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 91, in Phelan, p. 21.
- <sup>25</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) pp. 15-37. Also bell hooks *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround, 1992)
- <sup>26</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.72
- <sup>27</sup> Boehmer, p. 71
- <sup>28</sup> Boehmer, p. 73
- <sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 131
- <sup>30</sup> Sujata Bhatt, 'Search For My Tongue' in *Brunizem* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), pp. 63-70.
- <sup>31</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong' o, p. 3.
- <sup>32</sup> Grace Nichols, 'Epilogue' in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 64.
- <sup>33</sup> .See also Merle Collins essay 'Themes in Carribean Writing Today' in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, ed. by Helen Carr (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 179-190, for a discussion of the Carribean context of the imposition of so-called Standard English and the linguistic resistance of Creole or Nation language.
- <sup>34</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 60
- <sup>35</sup> For instance, a jar of roasted peppers boasts, on its label, of the time 'Britain ruled the waves, the plantocracy - the colonies' and laments the 'lost era of opulence' that colonial rule is seen to represent. Those thus affected by this loss can nevertheless console themselves with 'fond memories' and 'Madame Josephine's splendid secret recipes' of which the peppers are but one example. The affront continues:
- For 400 years the French and the British fought for the tiny Carribean island of St Lucia, leaving a cuisine of unbelievable splendour, synonymous with the kitchens of Troumassée Plantation House. Be taken back to a lost era of opulence, to Madame Josephine's kitchens and her wonderful culinary skills, which assault the palate with sheer pleasure and sensuality.
- In an astonishing piece of revisionism, the assault on St Lucia's native inhabitants is entirely overlooked; Empire is reduced to an adventure in gastronomy; the colonial contest to the pursuit of new recipes. The manufacturers of these 'Poivron Doux' are Troumassée House Foods, PO Box 453, Wine Street, Bristol, BS99 1BB. See also Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London: Verso, 1992) for some interesting analyses of commodified images of the colonial period.

36 With this she is referring to the *Notebook's* denouncement of partitioning: '...we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize.' (p. 180).

37 Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 103

38 This argument is also made by Terry Lovell in the context of Terry Eagleton's discussion of the textual politics of Lovelace and Richardson 'Game-playing, rule-breaking, are a function of confidence of legitimate status, of knowledge of the game and its rules'. See 'Writing Like a Woman: A Question of Politics' in *The Politics of Theory: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature July 1982*, ed. by Francis Barker et al (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1983), pp. 15-26 (p. 22)

39 Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 27.



## Conclusion: Ending Innocence

In an essay concerned with the reception of postmodern philosophies within feminist thinking Jane Flax offers a sustained critique of the 'dream of innocence'<sup>1</sup> that she sees as haunting current feminist theory. Singling out the Enlightenment as *the* source of innocent knowledge-claims (i.e. those based in truth or universal benevolence or the greatest good) Flax traces its influence in Marxist, liberal and empiricist, feminist thought. 'The End of Innocence' stresses the 'dangerousness' of these assertions of innocence in feminism and argues for 'a radical shift of terrain' (p. 457):

. . . there may be more effective ways of to attain agreement or produce change than to argue about truth. Political action and change require and call upon many human capacities including empathy, anger, and disgust. . . . Once we begin to make claims about gender injustice, we have irrevocably entered the realm of politics. We need to learn ways of making claims about and acting upon injustice without transcendental guarantees or illusions of innocence. (pp. 458-59)

The end of innocence marks the beginning of politics. The innocent, unmarked ground of truth gives way to the contested territory of the political. With this shift comes the necessary assumption of responsibility. As opposed to what is construed as the child-like posture of those who hold onto Enlightenment notions of authority ('We remain children, waiting, if our own powers fail, for the higher authorities to save us from the consequences of our actions', pp. 459-60) the relinquishing of innocence is one of responsibility.

To take responsibility is to firmly situate ourselves within contingent and imperfect contexts, to acknowledge differential privileges of race, gender, geographic location, and sexual identities, and to resist the delusory and dangerous recurrent hope of redemption to a world not of our own making. (p. 460)

Donna Haraway makes a comparable appeal in her work. In 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' for instance, she notes how: 'White women, including Euroamerican socialist feminists, discovered (i.e., were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the noninnocence of the category "woman."<sup>2</sup> Like Flax, Haraway is suspicious of feminism's Enlightenment inheritance, particularly in its manifestation as universal knowledge or truth. A crucial aspect of a commitment to noninnocence is the assertion of 'situated knowledges': a 'shorthand term' for the logic of the 'ungraspable middle space' and 'contradictory moments' that govern the complex category 'woman' (p. 111). By way of an illustration of noninnocent criticism Haraway presents, in *Simians Cyborgs, and Women*, a reading of the work of British/Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta.<sup>3</sup> Paralleling Nicole Ward Jouve's assertion - white writing is 'never innocent' - the critic makes her own interests and stakes explicit: 'the potent ambiguities of Emecheta's fiction and of the fictions of her life' (p. 121). In declaring both her reading position ('as a Euro-American, middle-class, university-based feminist') and critical investment Haraway fulfils the other related requirement of noninnocence: the critic's necessary accountability for the meanings that are produced. Critical responsibility is a crucial part of non-innocent reading

The declaration of the end of innocence is then a necessary move and constitutes a means of realising the harm that lies at the centre of the feminist 'dream of a common language'; the good and the obvious; a way of extinguishing the 'old dream of non-partisanship at the heart of feminist politics'<sup>4</sup>. The era of noninnocence is one without transcendental guarantee, without exterior authority. It necessitates the recognition that readings of texts and events 'are also mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and imagined readings of a text that is originally and finally never simply there' (*Simians*, p. 124). It is the acknowledgement of reading as a compulsorily contested activity.

As it has been shown throughout this study many of the problems that obstruct white feminist readings of black writings arise out of the tendency to want to establish, from the outset, some secure ground from which to proceed to read. It is in

attempting to seek an automatic or transcendent solution to the so-called 'problem' of reading that creates problems. The notion of noninnocence would seem to be especially pertinent here: the embrace of the necessary partiality of reading is the undoing of critical imperialism. The acknowledgement of the potential for reading strategies to backfire undermines the capacity for white feminist appropriation. Having said that, to assert the end of innocence is not to dispense with its influence. Both Flax and Haraway proceed as if innocence can be eradicated by decree, and while I agree with their diagnoses of the effects of innocent knowledge claims in feminist discourse I am less confident that they can be theorised away. A source of this doubt is the persistence of moments of innocence in both critics' assertion of noninnocence.

First, in Flax' case, the movement toward non-innocence is constituted via an act of symbolic violence<sup>5</sup>. In the place of a politicised argument or theory here Flax offers reasoning based in the matter of taste and propriety as grounds for giving up the pursuit of 'innocent' knowledge. Non-innocence is the *mature* choice. The childish pursuit of innocent ground to be relinquished in favour of the more adult game of politics. The assumption that to foreground politics is to take care of innocence, to herald its demise, however, is to underestimate the degree to which politics itself can operate as an unexamined, and hence in some cases, *innocent* term in feminist discourse. Diana Fuss argues 'paradoxically, politics often occupies an apolitical position in our thinking - a position of unquestioned power and privilege.'<sup>6</sup> Circulating as essence, politics can function as a reassertion of innocence in feminist thinking.

In making the end of innocence a matter of renouncement Flax also commits an act of violence toward the feminist past, and implicates herself in a narrative that writes off feminist intellectual history as childish and naive in relation to an ever more sophisticated present. With this Flax fails to take account of the extent to which feminist theories are influenced indeed shaped by the discursive field in which they are circulating and are hence strategic and euphemised, and thereby cannot

incorporate the idea of strategic essentialism into her discourse. As Haraway points out, highlighting the strategic moment of feminist thinking, 'Binaries, rather suspect for some feminists I know, can turn out to be nice little tools from time to time' (p. 111). What is more, the Enlightenment itself circulates as essence, as an innocent term in Flax's account. The source of some of the West's more pernicious ideological projects the Enlightenment is the unequivocal negative to postmodernism's positive. Oppositional logic aside, in recommending the wholesale abandonment of Enlightenment philosophy Flax essentialises a complex historical phenomenon. Bourdieu suggests a different approach:

I think it is better to call universal reason itself into question, resolutely accepting the fact that reason is a historical product whose existence and durability are the product of a determinate type of historical conditions, and are determining what those conditions are. There is a history of reason; that doesn't mean that reason can be reduced to its history, but that there are historical conditions for the appearance of social forms of communication that make the production of truth possible. . . . To say that there are social conditions for the production of truth is to say that there is a politics of truth, an action constantly exercised in order to defend and improve the functioning of the social universes in which rational principles are applied and truth comes into being. (pp. 31-2)

As opposed to Flax's journey, via acceptance of the postmodern dictum of radical disillusionment, Bourdieu stresses the *already* political and historical nature of innocent categories, reason, the universal etc. Through indicating the social genesis of supposedly groundless foundations, the role of history as a means of challenging foundational logic is emphasised. Instead of greeting all aspects of the Enlightenment with suspicion and focusing critical energy on avoiding or excising its logic, Bourdieu asks, 'who has an *interest* in the universal? What is its history?'<sup>7</sup>

In contradistinction to Flax, Haraway acknowledges the role of history in thinking or working through contingent differences. If Flax asserts responsibility

achievable through a willed disillusionment with the fictions peddled by the Enlightenment, Haraway chooses a different route. To reiterate, noting the embeddedness of some binaries in Western culture, Haraway invokes their usefulness echoing Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism. Haraway therefore, refuses to simply rule out or invalidate the use of categories or formulations on the grounds of their Enlightenment inheritance. Preferring phrases such as 'working through'(p. 124) the end of innocence for Haraway, may usher in the beginning of politics but it also necessitates the beginning of history.

That said, Haraway's noninnocence, too, has its moments of innocence. There is a point to which her self-consciousness with regard to her own investments and motivations, serves to push against Haraway's claims to relinquishing innocent ground. In Bourdieu's phrase, 'Non-naivety does not exclude a form of innocence'<sup>8</sup>. The degree of knowingness displayed concerning her non-innocent stance, its almost scientific presentation with its declaration of location and interests, can read as a re-assertion of innocence. As I argue in chapter 6, the adoption of a self-reflexive stance can function as a retrenchment of mastery and knowingness, an escape from accountability, in Jane Gallop's words, the 'best ruse of all'<sup>9</sup> Self-criticism can function defensively, to deflect the attention of the reader and so maintain the innocence of the critic even as it appears to be being relinquished. By being my own critic I can close off my text to the intervention of other reader.

The reappearance of innocence in both texts is readable not merely as theoretical error but rather as evidence of the impossibility of non-innocence as a pure stance or theoretical position. Which is to say that critical or theoretical innocence, like seeing or essentialism, cannot be dispensed with, banished, outlawed, through pronouncement. To privilege politics is not to automatically counter claims of innocence. Non-innocence or 'politics' or 'reading' or 'anti-essentialism' needs constantly to be re-asserted, not merely declared. Flax's worry about the issue of foundations in feminist criticism, while well warranted, cannot be resolved through recourse to theory alone; it cannot be reduced to the status of a merely theoretical

'problem' which can then be solved by formulating a bigger, better brighter theory, (for example, postmodernism). Rather, with Bourdieu, I would argue that, like the question of foundations, the question of how to read needs to be answered empirically, historically, and 'cannot be raised in absolute terms.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Flax, 'The End of Innocence' in *Feminists Theorise the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge 1992), pp. 445-463 (p. 446).

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's' in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 190-233 (p.199)

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> . Haraway, 1991, p.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu presents a sustained development of the notion of symbolic violence in *Distinction*. Perhaps the first thing to note about the phenomenon of symbolic violence is that it is necessarily misrecognised as violence. That is, it is euphemised, 'soft' in Bourdieu's word, violence. Toril Moi explains:

It is important to realise that symbolic violence is *legitimate* and therefore literally unrecognisable as violence. If explicit ideological or material struggle between groups or classes develops, such as class conflict or the feminist struggle, symbolic violence may be unmasked and recognised for what it is. In the very moment it is recognised, however, it can no longer function as *symbolic* violence...insofar as they tend to deny the importance of economic structures, pre-capitalist societies, Bourdieu argues, make widespread use of symbolic violence. In late capitalist societies, on the other hand, symbolic violence flourishes most perniciously in the domains of art and culture, perceived as sacred refuges for disinterested values in a hostile, sordid world dominated by economic production... (Toril Moi, 'Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 1017-1049 (p. 1023)

A euphemised form of authority, symbolic violence functions as a kind of logicless logic, an appeal to a state of affairs or way of being that relies for its legitimacy upon notions of the obvious. In Bourdieu's thinking, *taste* is the supreme weapon, the smart bomb, of symbolic violence. Socially constructed yet denied as such, taste, functioning through the mechanism of distinction (between good and bad, high and low -brow, for example) serves to secure the interests of dominant groups by presenting them as matters of *pure aesthetics*. Cut loose from its highly interested original ground, a taste for cultural forms and products masquerades as disinterested, as good or bad, sophisticated or naive

<sup>6</sup> . Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989)

<sup>7</sup> . See Spring 1995 edition of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 7, for recent feminist work on rethinking the universal. Especially Joan W. Scott's 'Universalism and the History of Feminism', pp. 1-13 and Naomi Schor's 'French Feminism is a Universalism', pp. 15-47

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 148

<sup>9</sup> Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, p. 33

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