7.
POSSESSING THE VOICE OF THE OTHER: African Women and the 'Crisis of Representation' in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

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> "...the fact of being biologically or culturally African neither guarantees nor necessarily permits any sort of purely authentic "African" reading, in relation of total oneness with its text or with Africa itself ... The question thus becomes a practical one of establishing guidelines for a kind of reading that lets the Other talk without claiming to be possessed of the Other's voice."
> — Christopher Miller's "Theory of Africans" (Miller 1987:282)

I open with a quote from Christopher Miller because it pinpoints one of the issues that plague feminist politics today, that of speaking about, for, or to, the Other. This is because even if feminism requires some women to speak on behalf of others, such acts of representation are fraught with problems in that who speaks and who is spoken about or for has depended largely on other categories such as power, race, class and sexuality. Indeed much of what has been written about mainstream feminism's privileging of experiences of white middle-class women as experiences of all women, and its assumptions about all women who are not white and middle-class, has had a lot to do with representation; that is how mainstream feminists, often homogenized as Western feminists have represented themselves and Others. Indeed some self-labeled Third World theorist such as Chandra Mohanty, Uma Nayaran, Cherri Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua[1] have emphasized the importance of recognizing the ethnographic diversities of different women's

realities as intersections of race, class, power and sexuality continue to create problems for categorizing of gender. They have also pointed out the dangers of ignoring the historical, cultural and political contexts when formulating theories about women. But even if we feel that such criticisms of mainstream feminism's omissions have run their course, the politics of solidarity persist within feminism, the need to institutionalize difference still exist.

In her essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others" Linda Alcoff, identifies two widely accepted claims relating to speaking for others (Alcoff 1994). The first one concerns the relationship between location and speech; that the position from which one speaks affects the meaning of his or her speech. Therefore where one speaks from "has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claim and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech"(Alcoff 1994:287). This is perhaps the reason why most critics tend to leave their identities and locations visible. One example is Chandra Mohanty in her introduction to a volume of essays by Third World women, where she writes: "I [also] write from my own particular political, historical, and intellectual location as a third world feminist trained in the U.S., interested in questions of culture, knowledge production, and activism in an international context" (Mohanty 1991:3).

Whether such acts of self-identification are always possible is debatable, as it is now commonly understood that identities are fluid and always shifting. But it is clear that such acts are necessary, because for instance, in Mohanty's case, by foregrounding her position within the category Third World women she ensures that the meaning of what she says is not separated from the conditions which produced it. She also acknowledges the difference within Third World women, and this anticipates her definition of Third World women as "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations"(Mohanty 1991:4).

The second claim that Alcoff identifies is that power relations make it dangerous for a privileged person to speak for the less privileged because that often reinforces the oppression of the latter since the privileged person is more likely to be listened to. And when a privileged person speaks for the less privileged, she is assuming either that the other cannot do so or she can confer legitimacy on their position. And such acts, do "nothing to disrupt the discursive hierarchies that operate in public spaces" (Alcoff 1994:287). Most of the criticism against mainstream feminism has pivoted on these two claims. First of all, that when Western women speak simply as women, without specifying their location, (white middle class women) the meaning of what they say is often misunderstood and taken out of its context as representing all women. And second, that when Western feminists take up the cause of Third World women they reinforce the subjugation of Third World women by denying

them the right to articulate their own problems.

Indeed these two claims inform Alice Walker's attack of feminism in her oft cited womanist essay, "One Child of One's Own." Walker's argument in this essay is that by excluding black women and continuing to speak on their behalf white women are subjecting black women to the same kind of chauvinism they decried in patriarchal structures. She writes scathingly of white women's appropriation of the term woman for themselves; and points out that as they are now claiming the name woman for themselves; "Then Black women must perforce be something else" (Walker 1983:376). And this appropriation does not end with the name only, but moves beyond, to the bodies of black women, she continues; "white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go"(Ibid:372). In the same essay she upbraids Patricia Meyer Spacks for excluding writings by black women in her book *The Female Imagination* on the grounds that she [Spacks] like Phyllis Chesler, is "reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences [she] hasn't had" (Ibid). Walker's rejection of this argument implies that white women can and should represent black: "Perhaps it is the black women's children, whom the white woman – having more to offer her own children,...- resents.... She fears knowing that black women want the best for their children just as she does. Better then to deny that the black woman has a vagina" (Ibid:374).

It is clear from this then that such acts of representations have dangerous consequences for those represented, not only because of the images they circulate about them but also because of the part they play in preserving the status quo. Thus as Walker points out, in speaking of "the female imagination" rather than "the white female imagination" Spacks excludes black female imagination, and invalidates black women's experiences.

Ironically though, the criticism that Walker levels at Spacks and white feminist scholars, is pretty much the same kind of criticism that has been leveled at her for her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. The main charge against Walker has been that of cultural imperialism. That her depiction of Africa and Africans is beholden to her Western hegemonic heritage as an American rather than the African self she claims in the novel.[2] Her response to such criticism, it can be argued, is just as disingenuous as Spacks' in its tenuous linking of the past to the present. Where Spacks claims the Brontë sisters, Walker claims her slave "great-great-great-great grandmother."[3] Again the problem with the representations by both women is their location, where they locate themselves in relation to the other they seek to portray. But to return to Walker, the accusation of cultural imperialism relates to her two mutually exclusive positions of "being possessed of the Other's voice" and

simultaneously locating herself as the vessel by which the Other gains voice. The first claim obscures Walker's ideological upbringing, allowing her to judge and moralize about what she views as African culture, from an inside position. And the second casts her as a philanthropic Westerner who intervenes on the other's behalf.

Walker deploys three strategies to deal with this contradiction the first is by displacing her imperialist reading onto another text. The novel foregrounds its politics through the use of Mirellia Ricciardi's autobiography, *The African Saga*. Walker's novel derives its title from the following lines in Ricciardi's text: "With the added experience of my safaris behind me, I had begun to understand the code of 'birth, copulation and death' by which [the Africans] lived. Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them" (Ricciardi 1981:147).

The inscription of Ricciardi's words as the author's in the novel's opening epigraph: "There are those who believe Black people possess the secret of joy and that it is this that will sustain them through any spiritual or moral or physical devastation" (Walker 1993:ii). This sets the scene for textual appropriation and confrontation which demands that the reader read Walker's texts against such texts as Ricciardi's. The implicit irony of Walker's words foregrounds the author's reading of Ricciardi's text, and makes clear her intention to interrogate Ricciardi's discourse and, to paraphrase Mikhail Bhaktin's, to populate it with her intention. Indeed later in the novel Tashi and Mbati, the novel's African characters read Ricciardi's novel, setting up a *mise en abyme* in which the reader reflects on the novel about characters who reflect on a novel. The fact that the characters read Ricciardi's text towards the end of the novel emphasizes the novel's indictment of Ricciardi's text. The reader, having witnessed the events the characters go through in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is drawn into the text to question, along with the characters, Ricciardi's words.

> Mbati stares at me blankly. I return her look.
>
> But what *is* it? I ask. This secret of joy of which she writes. You are black, so am I. It is of us then that she speaks. But we do not know (Walker 1993:255).

This kind of reading serves to authorize Walker's speech, to locate her firmly on the side of the colonized. The reader is invited to join Walker in trying to see beyond texts like Ricciardi's, to question along with the characters the motive for dissemination of such images about the Africans. When Tashi asks, "Why don't they just steal our land, mine our gold, chop down our forests, pollute our rivers, enslave us to work on their farms, fuck us, devour our flesh and leave us alone? Why must their write about how much joy we

possess?" (Walker 1993:256).

It is up to the intrepid reader to recognize in this lament traces of a similar statement by the most credible critic of colonialism, Franz Fanon, when he suggested that: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys" (Fanon 1995:154).

And perhaps attribute the same credibility to Walker. Against Ricciardi's white colonialist reading, Walker's credentials are established. But despite Walker's recognition of Ricciardi's colonialist position, Walker also succumbs to the same colonialist discourse, in that her representation of Africans, like that of Ricciardi and other colonialist writers, evinces her obsessions and pathologies as a representing subject rather than the Africans she is attempting to represent. What she tells us about Africa and Africans relates to her experiences, her "added safaris." Her reading of African women and their bodies evinces the same kind of ethnocentrism she decried in white feminist scholars. With her representation of the African woman's body, she does not account for the different meanings that different cultures attach to the body. Her reading of African women's bodies is informed by her Western culture and its privileging of the body.

Thus Walker's position when she reads female circumcision[4] as genital mutilation is what Uma Nayaran has called the colonialist stance because she "reproduces a Western tendency to portray Third World contexts as dominated by the grip of "traditional practices" that insulate these contexts from the effects of historical change" (Nayaran 1997:49). This kind of representation highlights the role of the enlightened Westerner in the African's salvation. As Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us: "The invention of needs always goes hand in hand with the compulsion to help the needy, a noble self-gratifying task that also renders the helper's service indispensable. The part of the savior has to be filled as long as the belief in the problem of endangered species lasts" (Minh-ha 1989:89). Thus Walker creates a position of power for herself, from which she can save the benighted Africans from themselves.

The second strategy that Walker employs is that double-consciousness. Walker employs what seems to be one of the most democratic narrative strategies by incorporating as many voices in her text as she possibly can. The novel is a polyphonic text made up of stories from different characters in the form of recollections, letters and perhaps diary entries. The narratives of the different characters are meant to complement, complete and sometimes contradict each other, allowing for as many perceptions about female circumcision as possible. Thus reading the novel requires the reader to participate in the narrative by completing some of the narratives, and deciding on which

of the narrators are reliable and which are not. However the multiplicity of voices is a stylistic device and does not offer divergent perspectives, while the narrative is fragmented, the story is thematically monolithic. The characters never fundamentally contradict each other but move toward a more integrated vision.

But the text does maintain a double-voice, symbolized by Tashi's bi-cultural-ness but because the double-voice of the text is structural rather than thematic, it does not disrupt or undermine the colonial stance of the text. Tashi's bi-cultural-ness is crippling rather than enabling. The two identities exist within the same text, but one is subjected to the worldview of another. The Western worldview is the yardstick with which everything is measured. Take for instance the scene that most critics return to again and again in the novel. Olivia tries to dissuade Tashi from undergoing female circumcision, and Tashi asks her: "Who are you and your people never to accept us as we are? Never to imitate any of our ways? It is always we who have to change" (Walker 1993:21). Most critics have ignored or missed the rhetorical nature of Tashi's questions and have read more into this scene than there really is, for instance that the novel is making a case for cultural autonomy (Turner 1992). If that is so then the case is very weak, for instance the whole section of the narrative is laced heavily with irony. There is no doubt that the Tashi who now recalls this event recognizes the error of her ways, as she can say things like "I had in my mind some outlandish, outsized image of myself" (Walker 1993:20) or "I was crazy. For why could I not look at her" (Ibid:21) Tashi's recollection of the event anticipates her rejection of the sentiments she utters. Tashi eventually turns away from her "outlandish" image of her self and embraces instead Olivia's image of her.

The double-consciousness of the text also allows Walker to explore all the consciousness of the characters, albeit selectively. Thus M'lissa, the most vilified character in the novel, gets her token say as a circumciser, but we need to ask, if it's M'lissa or her author who is asking, "but who are we but torturers of children?" (Walker 1993:210) By trying to contain two opposing views in one narrative Walker only manages to subject one worldview to another. This is because she uses language, discourse and epistemic modes of Western culture to nullify even the possibility of such things in Africa. The Africa she creates, like the Africa of the colonialists has no language, no people, no ideology and is instead what Achebe calls "a place of negations" (Achebe 1988:2). The lack of a frame of reference for the Africans is one of the most limiting aspects of the novel.

For instance in her classic essay, "Can the Subaltern speak" Gayatri Spivak emphasises the role of ideology in subject constitution. Thus robbed of any way of representing themselves African women like Tashi are totally dependent on Walker for their salvation. However she reads female circumcision from her Western culture and speaks out against it just as other Western feminists have done. And her motive, like Frans P. Hosken, Mary Daly and Hanny Lightfoot Klein is to save African women from "ritualized atrocities" (Daly 1978:155). And just like them she wants to name what she believes to be taboo. She depends on these writers for the language and discourse with which to represent these women. But unlike these writers Walker aligns herself with the women she hopes to rescue in her fiction and in the process conceals the extent to which speaking for African women empowers her as an African American. In speaking about and for African women Walker does nothing to disrupt the hegemonic hierarchies, but rather reinforces them because she acts as a legitimating presence who facilitates discourse on a taboo subject. Furthermore, central to Alice Walker's corpus is the Black women's [read African-American] struggle for self-definition against the evils of sexism, classism and racism. As Barbara Christian (1985) suggests in *Black Feminist Criticism*, Walker's struggle focuses on the "struggle for black people, especially black women to claim their lives." Christian characterizes this struggle as a form of rebellion,

> Her willingness to challenge the fashionable belief of the day, to re-examine it in the light of her own experiences of dearly won principles that she has previously challenged and absorbed. There is a sense in which the "forbidden" in the society is consistently approached by Walker as a possible route to truth (Christian 1985:82-3).

Possessing is continuation of that struggle. Africa and the Africans serve merely as a backdrop, a convenient vehicle for her to play out her mode of contrariness and to confront the forbidden in her society.

Finally the third strategy that Walker deploys in her novel is essentialism. She relies on an essentialist differentiation between Africans and African Americans. Tashi is an African woman who suffers emotional and psychological trauma as a result of what Walker terms genital mutilation. Tashi is portrayed as a "true" or authentic African woman, who by the novel's end attains the hybrid identity of an African American. She becomes an outsider in Olinka after murdering M'lissa and she remains an outsider in America even after marrying Adam because of her remaining tie to Africa, symbolized by her "mutilation." Tashi's authenticity is placed against Olivia's much more complex identity as an African American growing up in Africa. With the two characterizations the notion of irreducible, fixed identity is promulgated because despite growing up in Olinka, and learning Olinka culture, Olivia and Adam are "essentially" American. The same is true for Tashi who grows up

around the American missionaries but retains [to her detriment] Walker would have us believe], her "essence." It is only after Tashi leaves for America that she learns the nature of her subjugation. While this claim depends on the essentialist notion of identity, that is a true African self that can be recovered, the two constructions of black womanhood are never reconciled in the novel. African American women and African women are represented as different and all the negative stereotypes of black womanhood are projected to African women. African American women like Raye, Olivia are portrayed as strong, assertive and independent. In contrast to African women like M'lissa, Nafa/Catherine who are either timid over-worked slaves in the latter case or witches who are nothing "but tortures of children" in the former

In conclusion, then I would say that I cannot come to total conclusions about the common experiences of Black women. I hope with my reading of Alice Walker I have demonstrated that if our concerns continue to be prescribed for us then we will hardly get anything done. Indeed, the fact that I am preoccupied with Walker's text, her omissions and misreadings, rather than getting on with the urgent task of defining for myself who I am and what my purpose is, is a testament to the unequal power relations that we are trying to address. Thus, Walker's incessant wailing over the blameless vulva is distracting most of us from the work we need to do. Unfortunately we do not have the luxury of ignoring it in hope that it will go away, but have to address it lest it drowns out whatever else we have to say as African and Black women.

NOTES:

1. See for instance Mohanty's classic essay "Under Western Eyes" Uma Nayaran's *Dislocating Cultures* and *This Bridge Called My back: Radical Writings by Radical Women of Color* eds. Gloria Anzaldua and Cherri Moraga.
2. See for instance Oyeronke Oyewumi's "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color "Black"" in this volume and Margaret Kent Bass "Alice's Secret."
3. See Walker's rebuttal that "Spacks never lived in nineteenth-century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?" p.372 and her assertion that Slavery gives her the rights to represent African women as she is speaking for her "great-great-great-great grandmother who came here [to America] with all this pain in her body" in Alice's Walker's Appeal, an interview with Paula iddings *Essence* July 1992 p. 60.
4. I use the term female circumcision rather than female genital mutilation, the term most preferred by the opponents of this practice, because it is value laden. And I also do not use genital surgeries which I feel is too clinical and elides the coming of age pathos of this practice. And finally because, as the many cases of deaths and penile

mutilations have shown in South Africa, male circumcision is not always "just a removal of a bit of skin" *(The Color Purple*, 202].

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