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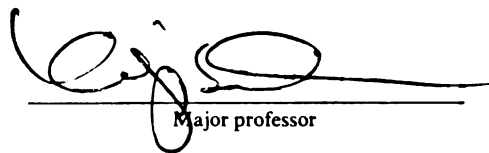
BRIDGING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE:
READING AND [R]EADING DIASPORIC POLITICS IN
ALICE WALKER'S POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY AND
AMA ATA AIDOO'S CHANGES

presented by

ANGELETTA KIM MARIE GOURDINE

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

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AMA ATA AIDOO'S CHANGES**

BY

ANGELETTA KIM MARIE GOURDINE

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**Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

BRIDGING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE: READING AND [R]EADING DISAPORIC POLITICS IN ALICE WALKER'S POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY AND AMA ATA AIDOO'S CHANGES

by

Angeletta Kim Marie Gourdine

The concept of an African diaspora has motivated scholars from all disciplines to investigate the cultural connections amongst the peoples collected under this rubric. This critical study surveys the development of "blackness" as a cultural and identity construct, and how the concept of "blackness" affects African American encounters with African texts. Analyzing two literary texts, one by an African American woman and one by an African woman, I discuss how the discourse of blackness has (1) allowed for a gendered identity move from black woman to blackwoman, which I identify as black[]woman and (2) licensed the writing of cultural fictions.

In this work the writers of fiction are the readers of cultural texts. The major cultural text these writers read is the African diaspora. Following Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s distinction between Signification and signification, in this project, I distinguish between Reading and reading. While reading implies only interpretation, Reading is interpretation with the addition of a negative underlying or

implicit commentary. Using Alice Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy, and her reading of ritual female circumcision, I argue that in an attempt to locate herself in the diasporic space, she has written an Africa that accommodates that need; Walker's reading actually Reads African women. In response, I examine Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes. In this novel, Aidoo Reads constructs of African women like those of Walker and explodes notions of monolithic African gendered experiences. Though Aidoo explores the historical relationship between Africans and African Americans, her discourse only reads that history.

This Africentric project brings these women "face to face," confronting each other with their own words, uttering their conditions, and concerns all in search of a blackwomen's literary tradition. Not only do the fictional discourses illuminate black[]women's oppression and their struggle to mitigate the pains of that, but the critical discourses indicate, as well, black[]women's capacity to oppress each other.

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DEDICATION

In Memory Of

**Victoria Graham
22 Mar 13 - 11 Nov 93**

**Priestley M. Gourdine, Sr.
18 Jun 45 - 24 Dec 91**

The spiritual beams that have shone this way.

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second best support system a graduate student can have: Friends. To all the people who count themselves among my friends, especially Tonita Branan, Ronnie Hopkins and Rashidah Muhammad, I say thanks for indulging my impestuous moments (I know it was not always easy).

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Deciding to discuss how African Americans respond to African literature presented me a major difficulty: How do I know what the responses will be? After I have decided, based on my own experiences, what they would be, how could I "prove" my hypothesis accurate? The text that follows is the result of my struggle to answer the latter question. This project analyzes African American readings of Africa as encoded in literary texts. As a critical analysis of literary works, this projects borders on ethnographic methodology; Though I did not desire ~~too~~ interview African Americans for their opinions on how they read Africa, I do use their voices as presented in some literatue by African American. Further, because my arguments challenge certain linear conceptions of time, they are often circular. I have constructed this project to both span time and space and discuss/critique such expanses. Hence, it is as much about the literature it discusses as it is self reflexive. It reads literature, *Reads* literature, and it just *Reads*.

AKMG

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION:
HOW IT FEELS TO READ COLORED ME¹

This project examines how Africa is constructed in the African American literary imagination, and it interrogates blackness as a critical theory through which African Americans read African texts--cultural and literary. As the title of this chapter indicates, my critical inquiry focuses on how blackness as a cultural and identity construct affects African American encounters with African texts. Furthermore, this study provides an African commentary on African American readings through blackness. Two literary texts will be discussed in this project, one by an African American woman and another by an African woman, but the "stories" in both these texts are of Africa. In this vein, I engage in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. terms criticism of "comparative black literature" (Figures 237).² Gates's paradigm indicates a study of cross-cultural reading, but in the context of African American readers of African texts, the notion of cross-cultural reading is quite problematic because of the cultural continuity that affects this reading situation. In this work, I survey the development of a discourse of black cultural continuity and examine texts written within this discourse.

Manning Marable presents a position that highlights the border upon which I locate my discussion. He argues, in "Race, Identity and Political Culture," that "blackness, or African American identity is much more than race" (295). Because race is something that is imposed on a group from without, blackness has come to be more than just a racial group identifier; it has become an ethnicity marker. Blackness is "a cultural umbilical cord connecting [African American peoples] to Africa" (Marable 295), so to be black, then, is to be African and American particularly, but also African and Caribbean, African and Brazilian or African and English. Thus, blackness has less to do with race, per se, than with culture; it names a collectivity and defines its cultural milieu. Therefore, I use ethnicity, instead of race, to indicate that the collectivity is not being characterized based on shared biology, but based on common social history.³ Blackness connotes identity but also positionality. To be black is not only to claim for yourself a particular sociocultural history, but it is also to align yourself with a sociopolitical orientation. The black people who subscribe to blackness or are inscribed by it are various. Blackness, as Marable uses it, and functioning as I describe above, is metonymic. It at once names a larger population while representing a specific segment of that population. The objective is to organize a sociopolitical body around the tenet that first and

foremost, blackness signifies "all people of African descent--the Latin, the Jamaican, the Haitian, the Brazilian, the Caribbean, and the African American" (Kouyate B8). D' Jimo Kouyate further suggests that "although they were not born in Africa, they are still African people" (B8). This cultural syncretism has led to the development and intellectual and creative exploration of the African diaspora.

The African diaspora is an ethnic collective defined as "the population of indigenous Africans [dispersed] through a planned systematic or curious movement from the African continent" (Snead 4). Werner Sollors tells us that too often we take ethnicity to be a "fixed, self-evident category," when in fact processes like that above constitute ethnicities as "invented" (xiii). While I too agree that ethnicity does not always already exist, I am not thusly minimizing the reality of social and political struggles waged on the grounds of ethnic differences. The paramount issue for me, however, is this: if we posit that ethnicity is an invention, then we are afforded a different lens through which to examine its functioning. Specifically, I am interested in how the syncretic process of diasporization impacts on literary interpretation. One such functioning is as a "cultural presence" (Holloway 12).⁴ Karla Holloway reminds us that ethnicity "operates in fictive places in [black texts]; in the imaginative realms, [ethnicity]

becomes the ultimate signifier as it plays within the imaginative domains of fictional language" (12). It is precisely how blackness [r]eads in these "fictive places," "imaginative realms" and "imaginative domains" that I explore in the works of Alice Walker and Ama Ata Aidoo.

Take, for example, Ama Ata Aidoo's novel Our Sister Killjoy. The novel is clearly about the conflicts between African intellectuals, been-tos and others. It is easy to associate Sissie's struggle with that of an African American intellectual. Similar issues exist for both groups (e.g., how to reconcile individual achievement with community responsibility).⁵ However, Killjoy is teeming with other African related intellectual issues like the question of the artists' language: How can the decolonized mind create and be appropriately represented in the colonizer's language?⁶ While it is not my position that the reading which focuses on familiarity should be ruled out or eliminated as a possibility, it is my argument that an explication of Aidoo's text should not be limited to cultural similarities. Our Sister Killjoy is as much about the African writer's linguistic dilemma, as it is about African women's voices, or the dilemma of the black [African] intellectual.⁷ The text is situated in a culture and the actions that take place within it should be explicated with attention paid to that particular culture. While Kouyate's comment submits that the connections between Africa and African America are

a foregone conclusion and should be accepted as point of fact, the literature itself reflects the ongoing struggle to negotiate the nature of this relationship. That is, African American literature has revealed varying attitudes toward Africa from Phillis Wheatley's poetry to Alex Haley's Roots to Alice Walker's recent novel Possessing the Secret of Joy.

Furthermore, these varying representations mark a certain attitude and positionality toward Africa and its place in African American culture. Countee Cullen offers a cogent example of how critical an issue "Africa's" location in black American culture is. As well, the final line of Cullen's well known poem "Heritage" demonstrates some aspects of the struggle that are highly relevant to my discussion later on:

Lord forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.

The poem poses a question that was seminal in Cullen's age and has reemerged to become a primary question as the twenty-first century comes upon us.

The question appears in the first line of "Heritage," when the poet asks, "What is Africa to Me?" The "me" is of course the black American, the Negro. This poem epitomizes the struggle for cultural identity, racial identity. It demonstrates the foundation of an ethnicity as one black American attempts to negotiate his identity in relation to an African past:

*One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his father loved
 Spicy grove and banyan tree,
 What is Africa to me?*

The speaker accepts that there is a connection, but ponders how that connection should be represented and on what grounds it should be forged. If we accept that Africa is bound to black American identity, we can begin to trace the construction of that identity. Cullen's final lines suggest that because of temporal distance, the need to know and answer that yearning has facilitated the shaping of an Africa, a mythic grounding place. This shaping did not begin with Cullen, and it continues beyond him. Through even the most basic review of how the discourse of African America came to have such prominence, we can see the effects of this discourse on literary imagination in the shaping of cultural fictions.

Newly Creating Africa: African American Cultural Fictions

Cultural fictions are the texts around which I focus the major portion of this project. I define these fictions as literary works that explore culture itself--cultural images and cultural presences. Though it could be argued that since all literature explores some facet of culture, literature is cultural fiction, I suggest that cultural fictions go beyond mere explorations. These texts seek to first, isolate and identify a particular cultural image, practice, or dilemma, and then to use that cultural fact for

the purposes of representing that culture in a way conducive to furthering the writer's political aim. Cultural fictions are fictional works with didacticism at their core. For centuries, the African American literary imagination has been actively exploring Africa. Not all of these representations are culturally fictional, however. Here, we will trace the development of black American cultural fictions of Africa from early black American writings.

As early as Philliss Wheatley, for example, we get a conflicted attitude toward the Continent. She at once remembers it as home but recognizes that because of her forced removal she had to make a new home. She wrote:

'T was not so long since I left my
native shore,/ The land of errors and
Egyptian gloom:/ Father of mercy! 't was
thy gracious hand/ Brought me in safety
from those dark abodes. (Redding 6)

Wheatley casts Africa simultaneously as home--her "native shore" and as "dark". Moreover, she never suggests returning, as she values the freedom her soul relishes in the New World. George Moses Horton, on the other hand, wrote of the slave's "grief and anguish" (Brown 275). Further, he looked toward heaven "to soothe [his] pain," so that he may:

Soar on the pinion of that dove / Which
for long has cooed for thee, / And
breathed her notes from Afric's grove /
The sound of liberty. (Brown 275).

Wheatley's "land of error," her "dark abode" was Horton's edenic "grove" with "doves" cooing songs of liberty. These

two eighteenth century writers set the frame for examining the literary attitudes that followed.

Nineteenth century literature reflected a similar disparity of attitudes in the work of Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney. Douglass declared that Africa held nothing for the black American with respect to gaining freedom from slavery. Contrary to the emigrationist argument that African offered black American men and women physical and political refuge from the inhumanity of slavery, Douglass averred:

Depend upon it savage chiefs of the western coast of Africa, for ages have been accustomed to selling their captives into bondage . . . they will not more readily accept our moral and economic ideas than the slave traders of Maryland and Virginia. Therefore be less inclined to go to Africa to work against the slave trade than to stay here to work against it. (Hill & Kilson 164)

Douglass's anti-African sentiment, and firm conviction that the home of the African American was America was matched by Martin Delany's strong emigrationist politics. Delany clearly saw Africa as a safe haven for black Americans and fervently believed that black Americans should relocate to and begin new colonies in Africa. Unlike Douglass, Delany considered Africa not only a solace for blacks, but also a berth from which black Americans could wage the struggle to reclaim their humanity. Delany argued that:

Our cause is a just one; the greatest at present that elicits the attention of the world--Our race is to be redeemed;

it is a great and glorious work, and we are the instrumentalities by which it is to be done. But we must go from among our oppressors; it never can be done by staying among them. (183)

The arguments put forth by Douglass and Delany re-present those presented by Wheatley and Horton, respectively. However, the nineteenth century ended before the identity and political issues were resolved. In fact, black American literature documents the ongoing significance of this issue. This compulsion to define Africa's place in the black American experience saw another rise in the later half of this century. Examining a few of the later literary characterizations further illustrates the different positions.

In the 1965 Black Man's Burden, John Oliver Killens discusses the "burden" Africa presents for the American Negro:

Negroes are the only people in this world who are set apart because they are who they are, and at the same time told to forget who they are by the same people who set them apart in the first place. (Killens 28)

He explains that the Negro is at once punished because he is of African descent, and admonished for actively claiming an African heritage. This controversy has presented such questions as "Is there a black, African American culture?"⁸ and "What is the role of Africa in that culture?" and even "What's in a Name?: Black or African American?"⁹ In fact, W. E. B. DuBois identified culture--literature and art--as a

significant part of the Negro race's message to the world (see discussion below). Here, in the works of African American fiction writers, the various answers to these questions are presented.

In 1966, John O. Killens wrote:

Just as surely as East is East and West is West there is a 'black' psyche in America, and there is a 'white' one, and the sooner we face up to this psychological, social and cultural reality, the sooner the twain shall meet. . . . Most of us came here in chains, and many of [them] came here to escape [their] chains. [Their] freedom was our slavery. (8; my emphasis)

The present is always linked to the past: Race and Slavery, America and Africa. For the black American the present recalls the past in differing ways. Killens, a black Aesthetician, argues that a cultural matrix for Africans in the diaspora is necessary for their survival in the New World. This "cultural reality" involves no renunciation of heritage, but a synthesis of old and new into a new whole: a hybrid. What is involved here is a writing of the black self. Some like Killens acknowledge the African influence on that self, others like Bruce Wright do not:

Black is where thatched temples burn
Incense to carved ebon-wood;
Where traders shaped my father's pain,
His person and his place,
Among dead statues in a frieze,
In the spectrum of his race.

(145)

Wright suggests that "black" lives in the land of thatching, a reference to a style of building homes in Africa--a

reference augmented with the mention of traders and his ancestral pain, slavery. Wright, unlike Killens, does not see Africa as vital to his present survival. Africa is black, and this begs the question of what, then, is the African in America. As we saw earlier, in answering the question of his "heritage," "what is Africa to me?" Cullen, as well, responds with many negative images: "nakedness," "wild barbaric birds," "heathen gods Black men fashion out of rods" (252-3). In contrast, some fashion another Africa, an idealized Garden of Eden wherein Africans, blacks, live free of restraints and in peace. A classic example of this idyllic, unchanged utopian image of Africa is provided in Alex Haley's Roots.

In the final chapter of that journal of his ancestry, Haley describes Juffure, the village of his ancestry thus: "like most back-country villages, it was still very much as it was two hundred years ago" (576). Like most idealized descriptions this one is unreal, but its purpose is to provide an element of identity, connecting Africa to the African in the United States. On the other hand, Ralph Ellison describes Africa in terms of its artifacts, mainly an "ugly African god" (148). This god is housed with other "cracked relics from slavery time" in a University archive room, and the protagonist avoids the room lest he glance at these unpleasant images (148).

Relative to these representations, Dan Izevbaye suggests that literature can be used to forge particular cultural and personal agendas. However, the representations in literature, he asserts "have no power outside the active response of its audience" (129). In fact, I believe writers themselves act as readers/critics when presenting Africa in their fictional creations. Therefore, these responses that Izevbaye speaks of are influenced by the writers' struggle to sort out the African American connection. It is my position that these writers write for themselves. I read their texts as manifestation of their literary imagination functioning as vehicles for situating the writers in the world, negotiating their identity with respect to Africa. This is clear in Alex Haley and Countee Cullen and will be demonstrated with Alice Walker.

Eddy Harris, in his 1992 work Native Stranger, not only documents his journey to and from Africa, he also narrates a connection with his past. He concludes that he is "a product of a new culture and defined by it. And [he] sees the world through American eyes" (29). The routes of displacement have demanded a replanting of roots, and this (re)rooting cannot be eschewed. As Harris tells us, the African American:

is another race, newborn and distinct,
 forged in the blast furnace of slavery,
 tempered and tested in the foundry of
 survival Yes, Africa is the
 birthplace of mankind. Africa is the

land of my ancestor. But, Africa is not home (28-9; 312).

The title of Eddy Harris's text provides a way to explain Haley and Cullen's new representation of Africa: "Native [and] Stranger." Their texts are constructed by cultural critics (fiction writers) who recognize that they are at once present in the space that they are attempting to define--Africa--and are simultaneously absent or excluded from that space. These representations, because they are "a product of a new culture," will be reviewed in terms of cross-cultural reading. The cultural links between African Americans and Africa allow for a certain understanding to be assumed about African cultural texts. Yet, there is also enough distance from Africa[n texts] to allow the cultural critic to make an Africanist criticism of it.¹⁰ What bridges the gulf of being absent and present? Clearly, the obvious answer lies in demonstrating that the African self somehow latently resides in the African American self. For example, Alice Walker believes she can create a Tashi because she is licensed by her ancestral foremothers, whose voices are her muses. However, she can criticize the beliefs of Tashi's people because she is a Western woman concerned about the treatment of women and the damage wreaked upon "the blameless vulva." It is this inside/outside position that allows writers like Walker to not only read African cultural texts, but Read them as well.

Following Gates's distinction between Signification and signification, in this project, I distinguish between Reading and reading. Gates tells us that Signifyin subsumes several black rhetorical tropes, including, "loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, [and] playing the dozens" (Figures 236).¹¹ Smitherman further develops Gates's notion of Signifyin. She tells us that Signifyin is "the verbal art of put down, ritualized insult; to needle [sic], talk about someone," and most importantly, Signifyin is "generally non-malicious and principled criticism" (Black Talk 238). But one of the forms that Signifyin can take is that of Reading. Reading is the act of "tell[ing] someone off in no uncertain terms and in a verbally elaborate manner" (Smitherman 216). In addition, Reading can often be disguised or indirect. Much like Gates's Signifyin, Reading is paradoxically related to reading; it is at once identical and different. While reading implies only interpretation, Reading is interpretation with the addition of an underlying or implicit commentary. Hence, Reading involves interpretation, but the interpretation is taken to signify, or represent, something other than the text. The interpretation stands for something beyond an uncovered "meaning." The interpretations rendered when someone [or something] is Read always reveal more than the obvious. In

this sense, Reading involves not only interpretation but representation and revision.

Texts like Walker's *read Africa* in a search for essences. In fact, Walker claims to have found her essence in her African past. In particular, though, she has discovered black women's essence, and as a black woman in America, she finds she is connected to and affected by the treatment of other black women, wherever they may be.¹² Correspondingly, her concern for black women and her grounding in a Western feminist tradition changes her reading to a Reading. As Foucault tells us, the pursuit of origins is "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities and their carefully protected identities" (*Counter-Memory* 142). Furthermore, this search is "directed to 'that which is already there' . . . however if [one] listens to history, [one] finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things . . . that there is no essence or that essence is fabricated" (*Counter-Memory* 142). What results in Walker's text, then is an African woman who serves as a pure example of African women's suffering because of ritual female circumcision. Yet, what we find beneath that woman is an "altogether different" woman from what was the intended object of Walker's search: an African woman who speaks with an African American voice. This woman Reads [other] African women.

Related to my argument, Izevbaye argues that the search for essences can complicate communication across cultures. Particularly, "specific cultural conditions crucial to an understanding of the text may not be available to the reader who proposes to find a more fundamental meaning in it" (133). Following Izevbaye, then, I would argue that even though Walker has constructed Tashi, Walker cannot understand Tashi's experiences as an African cultural text because the conditions of her understanding are constrained, limited by her own distance from Africa--a distance Walker herself fails to acknowledge.

Furthermore, Izevbaye states that "critical methods reflect the place of audience in lending significance to the literary text. Meaning matters most at the point of reception" and the critic's--i.e., Walker's as a culture critic and my own as a critic of her fiction--essential "task is to clarify the process by means of which meanings are communicated" (135). Specifically, I want to focus on how the black collectivity struggled to define its collectiveness and situate Africa within that definition. This focus inevitably brings us to discussions of race--biological, social, and cultural--and how these various definitions have been used to outline the ethnic entity known as African American. For this inquiry, I view literary works as interpretations of cultural texts, and their writers as readers. When notions of ethnicity,

embodied in Kouyate's claim, assert themselves, the literary texts that are created reveal much about interconnections between identity and interpretation. Arthur Schomburg, in "The Negro Digs up His Past," offers us an entry into examining these connections. He argues that "[t]he American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" (233). Furthermore, the "closed" Negro past must be "open[ed] up [through] study of African cultural roots and origins" (237). One notable example of this widespread attempt to study and reveal connections between black people all over the world is Molefi Asante's Africentricity.¹³

Asante and Me, or the Africentric Project: The "Roots" of Race(d) Culture, Culture(d) Race

Molefi Kete Asante, chair of the African American Studies department at Temple University, is the premiere Africentrist, and his work constitutes the major corpus of the Africentric movement.¹⁴ What is significant about Asante's work is that it characterizes the adoration of Africa that black Americans are experiencing in this, the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Asante's undertaking epitomizes how Africa, for people of African descent in the New World, has become not only "a mode of connection" but also "an ethnic and cultural resource" (Irele 53). Furthermore, an African cultural vision in African America is "an essential element of [an African

American] liberating consciousness" (Irele 64). In an effort to define African American history, culture, and social phenomena, Africentricism, Asante suggests, is both "theory and practice [and] its theoretical aspects consist of interpretation and analysis from the perspective of African people as subjects rather than as objects on the fringes of European experience" ("Africa at Center" 46). As such, it is historical. There are two interrelated foci in Asante's Africentric project.

Primarily, Asante aims to revise previous historical depictions of the Africa's past. To achieve this, he struggles to establish Egypt as "a black African civilization" ("Africa at Center" 46). This attempt at revisionist history, in Asante's eyes, will allow Africa to gain its rightful place in the history of Western civilization, World civilization, and will in effect, (re)cast with cultural precision the African American present and future. The popular appeal of Asante's Africentric project lies in its emphasis on the centrality of a black African culture. This centricism gives the history of Africa a sense of unity. Just as Europeans have always had the security of Greece and Rome, Asante places Egypt similarly for continental and diasporan Africans. He tells us:

We know that only one ancient
civilization could be considered
European in origin, Greece. And Greece
itself is a product of its interactions

with African civilizations.
 (Afrocentricity 39)¹⁵

Asante argues that Egypt is the mother of all civilization. Hence, Europeans are descendants of black Africans, and Egypt the forerunner of Western civilization itself. In fact, according to Asante, Greece is "a gift of the Nile" (Afrocentricity 38). But more significantly, once this history is established, black people in America and all over the world will know that theirs is a strong cultural, intellectual and scientific history, not one of primitivism and darkness. It is only fair to acknowledge that few historians would question the validity of Asante's basic claims that (1) Egypt was an African civilization; and (2) Grecian science, philosophy and architecture were heavily influenced by Egypt and the Egyptians. However, what is problematic about Asante's work is that too often he depends on speculation and polemics where well documented research and scholarship would be more appropriate (e.g. his arguments about Egypt's role in the development of civilization and culture in Africa).

He informs us that "Afrocentricity maintains intellectual vigilance as the proper posture toward scholarship which ignores the origins of civilization in the highlands of East Africa," and that any scholarship which does not adhere to this intellectual vision [and political agenda] is suspect (Afrocentricity 39). Hence, he acknowledges the work of Basil Davidson, Melville Herskovits

and Robert Farris Thompson as "pre-Afrocentric" because they are committed, as he is, to a corrective historical vision, that is, viewing African and African related issues from an Africentric perspective. An Africentric scholar, or anyone conducting research from an Africentric perspective, recognizes that "to understand the African American experience" requires availing oneself "of the richly textured standing place of African Americans" (Cultural Hero 5). More directly, he casts bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michele Wallace and Cornel West as "African Eurocentrists" who "feel inclined to disagree with any idea that has popular approval among the African American masses" (Cultural Hero 4-5). Their inclination is demonstrated by their critiques of Africentricity as, generally speaking, "ethnic fundamentalism" (Gates, "Pharaohs" 47).

Despite the contentions between Asante and other black American scholars about the essentialist strain of his Africentricism, I am particularly interested in how he casts Africa and how such casting manifests itself in a particular attitude toward Africa and Africans. Of specific interest, Asante connects Egypt to the development of civilization and culture all over the continent. He tells us:

the foundation of all African speculation in religion, art, ethics, moral customs, and aesthetics are [sic] derived from systems of knowledge found in ancient Egypt. (Afrocentricity 38-9).

Asante's attribution of all African and diasporic culture to one source, Egypt, is unfounded in my view. Furthermore, he suggests that there exists some cultural center in Africa's continental history:

"African cultural unity, particularly in terms of Western Africa, is a factual reality based upon many categories of human knowledge". (Cultural Hero 19-20)

Though, he fails to provide examples of this "factual reality" or specific instances of its manifestation. Instead, he argues that "the essential historical qualities of the African American" include "having roots in the great mythic, oral and literary works of people of Africa descent," and this tradition can be viewed in the "arts produced by the people of the African world" (Cultural Hero 18; emphasis added). To this ungrounded speculation, Asante feels confident in adding that:

all one has to do is to look at the murals, the engravings, and statuettes which provide abundant physical evidence of the antiquity of Egypt's Africanity. The people of Egypt were no different than the African people of the United States, Brazil, Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, or Zimbabwe. (Kemet 98)

These claims are indicative of the kinds of overreadings and overinterpretations that I find problematic. There are gross overgeneralizations here about the development of culture in Africa. Accordingly, I think Paul Gilroy is quite accurate in asserting that Asante's theory and practice would be better labelled "Americocentricity"

(Atlantic 191). Specifically, Asante endeavors to use African cultural holism to establish that an African derivative or extension culture exists in America. His argument is not only to postulate that the lineage exists, but also, and most importantly, to establish the direct lineage. Unfortunately, his postulation is often (re)presented as fact without recognition that scholarship requires critical evaluation, regardless of immediate intellectual and/or political utility. To paraphrase Cullen, Asante's need has indeed shaped an African creed.

The overwhelming motivation for Molefi Asante is that of developing an approach to examining African American culture which accounts for pre-slavery existence and which removes the anthropological veil of darkness from the legacy of Africans prior to the arrival in the New World. Through grasping this history, Africentricity aims to enact a pragmatic base from which to reform African American culture and society. In a critical sense, Asante explores African's and African Americans' "unutterly painful relation to the white world" and manifests the result of "the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of themselves held by other people" (Baldwin 35). It is my sense that Asante's syncretism involves a kind of (re)invention of Africa. It is not, though, necessary that such a (re)invention always be a falsehood, or even be

characterized as such. What is important is how this reinvention is represented and what the aims of that representation are. Crucially, however, while Asante may add a new dimension to black cultural studies, his arguments are not novel. Instead, he merely continues a long history of Western writing and thinking about Africa.

Christopher Miller informs us, in Blank Darkness, for example, that Africa as a polity with a collective history and culture is an invention itself. Africa did not preexist the word Africa, but the former was constituted by the very Western utterance of the latter, and Africa was defined in terms of the West's discontinuity with itself (Miller 61-62). This place name ("Africa") originally identified a small area near Carthage, but with the coming of the European Other, it came to denote the entire continent. Specifically, Miller points out that Africa as we presently think of it, historically, is a fiction born out of European "ideas and concerns" (5). "Africa" is an Africanist construct, an externally derived idea, that more than anything represents Europeans' struggle to understand themselves; hence they created their opposite, as is also argued by Mudimbe.¹⁶ One means by which this invention was circulated was through the inscription of certain characteristics--physical and social--upon the place and its inhabitants.

In The Invention of Africa, V. Y. Mudimbe argues that "identity and alterity are always given to others, assumed by an I- or a We- subject, and expressed or silenced according to personal desires" (xi). With respect to the West's creation of Africa and the inscription of an African history through these representations, Mudimbe suggests that "history is a legend, an invention of the present. It is both memory and a reflection of our present" (194). In terms of African American representations of Africa in literature, Mudimbe's notion of a creative history is explicated best in the unchanged edenic Africa of Alex Haley. The history constructed of memory is best seen in Toni Morrison's Beloved. Beloved is centered around an incidence during slavery and Beloved negotiates an historical space in the novel, a space that involves Africa but does not seek to (re)construct and/or (re)name it. As Holloway tells us, though "origin and source are thematic issues in this novel," the presence of the original place, Africa, is neither idyllic nor negative: it is (re)membered (182). The foci of this memory are spiritual presents, not an Africa historical presence: "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (Morrison 42).

It is my conviction that these varying African American representations of Africa lie in the essentializing power of Nommo. In Muntu, Janheinz Jahn discusses nommo as the "magic power of the word," "a creative act" (121; 133).

Nommo, he tells us, is not only the giving of a name, but "the designation of the image" (157). Jahn continues that an object "is 'complete' only when it is Nommo, a productive word, effective word or function" (172). The image has no intrinsic meaning until it is named by its creator. In like fashion, Africanist discourse serves to designate Africa and inscribe its completeness.

Miller documents the development of Africanist discourse and describes it historically; however, Asante's project illustrates that some African Americans have developed a discourse that is akin to Miller's Africanist discourse. Though the discourse Miller describes and Asante creates are not literary fictions, they function to name Africa in a manner similar to, and serve as the foundations for, the fictional discourse with which I am concerned. This new--African American Africanist--discourse is best seen in writers like Haley, to a large degree, and Cullen, to a lesser degree. African American Africanist discourse demonstrates an embrace of Africa while writers within it struggle to name Africa and through this naming name themselves; their objective: creating a fictional and cultural space through the magic power of the "written" word. Asante's project foregrounds the legacy of African American Africanist discourse, a positional discourse which began taking shape in the early nineteenth century.

"What is Africa to Me?": Blackness in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond

As early as 1848, attempts were being made to establish a cooperative black identity. In "An Address to the Colored People of the United States," Frederick Douglass suggested that slavery was a problem for all black people, those in the North as well as the South. He argued that "we are one people--one general complexion, one in common degradation, one in popular estimation" (210). For Douglass, it was necessary to (re)establish the common bond amongst all people of the same color.¹⁷ The means through which this sense of cohesion among blacks was achieved in the United States took many forms ranging from arguments about common ancestry and shared color to the development of a notion of an ethnic community. This range is represented, in my opinion, in the switch from a belief that blackness denotes only a biological group to one in which blackness names a sociopolitical collective (Marable 295-96). In fact, the sociopolitical view of blackness was reinforced by the fact that simultaneous to the North's promoting abolition and embracing industrialization and the South's adopting Jim Crow laws, European powers were colonizing Africa.¹⁸ During the sociopolitically charged racial times of the late nineteenth century, one of the premier black racial theorists and intellectuals emerged in the person of W. E. B. DuBois.

DuBois argued prophetically that the difficulty of the twentieth century would be "the problem of the color line" (Souls 13). For him, color was race, or at least indicative of it. Color was the visible marker, and the color line was a racial boundary, the perimeter/parameter of racial differences. Having established the color line, the frame of racial division, DuBois predicted that racial strife and struggle would be the crucible of the future. In 1897, DuBois submitted that "the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races" ("Conservation" 21). He further added that anyone "who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all human history" (21). Races afforded DuBois a tangible way to talk about historical evolution. For DuBois, race "is a vast family of human beings" defined, in part, by "purely physical characteristics" ("Conservation" 21; 20). The constructs of "race" as family, "race" as nation, imply not only a biological and sociological explanation for racial divisions, but also a cultural and historical one. In these ideas surrounding the idea of race as family, we get the beginning of an ethnicity, blackness as Marable has defined it above. DuBois argued that each race was "striving, each in their own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal" ("Conservation" 24). Inherent in DuBois's notion of a race

"message" is the notion of culture and history. This conclusion revealed DuBois's belief that blacks in the United States of America were American by citizenship but were also members of a larger historical group, a race which was international ("Conservation" 26). Clearly, DuBois was forging a belief in race as superseding geographical and/or national boundaries, and suggesting cultural ones, a racial/cultural family.

Paul Gilroy, in "It's a Family Affair," concedes that the notion of "'race' as family is everywhere," (305). But he argues that this paradigm should not be the center of our discussions of what it means to talk of [b]lack politics, culture, social reality (305). He suggests that the idea of the "race" family conflates the ideas of cultural roots and routes. The routes of our displacement--from Africa to the "New World" should not be an excuse for ignoring our roots in the places where we are at present located: "Our culture need not be centered anywhere except where we are when we launch our inquiries into it" (305). For DuBois, though, the routes of cultural and racial displacement are crucial to understanding the roots of race[d] nations and peoples. Hence, routes and roots are necessarily and always already conflated. Most clearly, DuBois articulates this principle in his definition of the Negro as part of the American geographical family, but also part of the African race

family, the conflation of two seemingly disparate ethnic entities:

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world It is a peculiar thing this double consciousness One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (5)

DuBois's description of the Negro as two beings begs the question of what the two are--American and what else. I believe that to define this double consciousness as "American and Negro" is necessarily to implicate Africa, implicate an Other space, for the roots of the Negro in America are the consequence of routes out of Africa. It is this merging of roots and routes that makes an African American. This identity joins both, and the idea of a "double consciousness" is accounted for by historical origin and present day location of black Americans.

Such attempts, as we see in DuBois, to define oneself across time and space are extremely difficult. In fact, DuBois highlights this struggle not only in the previously cited and most recognized passage from his The Souls of Black Folk, but in the lines that follow that often quoted description of the Negro dilemma. The Negro, DuBois adds, wishes:

to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he

wishes neither of his older selves to be lost. (5)

In other words, the Negro should not strive toward Africa more than toward America. The Negro's space is equally both. The Negro should strive to be African[and]American, a recognition of duality and a confirmation of cultural routes and roots. Such an identity seeks to not only define but also connect peoples across time and space. This merging of the cultural past with the geographical, political, cultural and social present, Africa with America, is difficult because such connections seek affinities, whereas dissimilarities, some of which are profound, are ignored and elided.¹⁹

Kwame Anthony Appiah critiques DuBois's uses of and developments of the idea of race. He argues that DuBois reinforces biological notions in the struggle to name African American identity. However, underlying DuBois's preoccupations with the concept of race was a strong suggestion that race is culture, culture is race. The message each race strives to develop is grounded in its cultural traditions. In fact, DuBois tells us that the message is encoded in each race's "literature and art" ("Conservation" 24). Hence with DuBois we have ethnicity being made. Appiah ignores these underlying cultural implications for DuBois's race arguments and suggests that we abandon race altogether. I concur with Appiah, with respect to DuBois's arguments which support, or at least

depend on the biological notions of race (e.g. "the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races" ["Conservation" 21]). I disagree with Appiah's argument insofar that it does not address race defined by culture and reified as ethnicity. As I have previously stated, often when we speak of "race" we are actually speaking of ethnicity. Ethnicity refers to groups of people who may or may not share a geographical space, but share common ancestry and cultural patterns of behavior. Appiah suggests that in the West, the United States in particular, culture became associated with nationalities--countries of origin--and from nationalities we are inevitably led back to biological notions of race: "Nation comes more and more to be identified as a biological unit, defined by a shared essence that flows from common descent" (51). Thus, Appiah tells us, "there are no races," because there is nothing that can do for us what we ask race to do for us" (Appiah 45). He seems to suggest that the move from "nations" to "biological unit[s]" is inevitable, so that if we accept Appiah's position we can never talk about ethnicity or about the diaspora without assuming and accepting race biology.

In contrast to Appiah, I believe that because racial biology is refutable, but that we cannot dismiss ethnicity as a valid construct, which he does in his rejection of the focus on common descent. Furthermore, we must honestly

discuss ethnicity and its connections to discussions of race, as well as examine the effects of racialized ideology on those who are its subjects. It is my project here to focus most particularly on how ethnic identity effects these subjects when they read. Blackness names the synthesis of two cultural sensibilities, the African and the American. As Asante's work intimates, the diaspora was formed through the transference of Africanisms to America. In fact, later in his life, DuBois himself endeavored to explicate new ways to envision race as an all inclusive entity more explicitly akin to Marable's blackness. In 1933, he claimed that "race is psychology, not biology" (DuBois, 1973 100). DuBois characterized race as a mental characteristic; race is thinking, or a mental orientation--race thinking. DuBois's assertion that "race is psychology," established that race could function as a means for people to order their reality, as an ideology.

An ideology, Louis Althusser tells us, is defined in terms of the "lived" relation between individuals and their world. In For Marx, Althusser states that the concept of ideology "presupposes both a real and an '*imaginary*,' '*lived*' relation (between people and their worlds), and is the expression of the relation between social subjects and their world," (1969, 233-34). In this vein, Asante's Africentricity is a project grounded in race ideology. Consequently, Barbara J. Fields, in "Ideology and Race in

American History," uses Althusser's concept of ideology to trace the development of race as a tool for group identification, and "race" as "an ideological construct and an historical product" (149; emphasis mine). Moreover, in "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," Fields suggests that an ideology consists in "the descriptive vocabulary of day to day existence, through which people make sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day" (109). Race, then, like any ideology must be constantly created or verified or it dies. (112). Race continues to exist, not because we inherited it, but because we recreate it every day. I would argue that one way in which we remake it is through discourse. Hence Africentricity, as an ideological discourse--an African subject-centered discourse which claims to teach black people how to define their world from the position of social agents--reinforces racial division, the color line (Althusser 1970, 62).

Correspondingly, in dealing with "race," Fields continues, we are assigning a significant authority to it all the while thinking that we are devalorizing it. She suggests that our belief in its power causes us to need to refute this power. We at once endorse the thing we aim to refute. According to Fields, in order to refute racism, we must depend on race logic. Fields's discussion of "race" highlights the nature of tropological functioning.²⁰ A

trope exists adjacent to literal or conventional language use. A trope (re)creates meaning and (re)establishes realms of signification; it is simultaneously a movement from and a movement towards. Hayden White suggests that a trope "moves from one notion of the way things are related to another"

(2). A trope functions to generate alternative interpretations and to establish a relationship between these interpretations. Tropes explore the possibilities of meanings and the ways we can express or indicate them. Throughout the course of our discussion here, the term "race" has been transformed. Race has crossed disciplinary boundaries from biology to anthropology as culture, and DuBois moves it on to sociology as an ideology. In short, we have shown that the word "race" is a trope. The term once served to biologically classify people, name their relationship. Later, "race" functioned to identify the sociological and cultural connections between people. With Fields and later DuBois, we get "race" as an ideological construct. These alternate ways of viewing race generate varying ways to discuss its function and effects. I believe that looking at how race functions in interpretation is one avenue to explore in uncovering the connection between these varying expressions of "race".

Fields helps us a little, but I am quite troubled by the fact that she seems to dismiss the possibility that race has any critical value outside of that which leads to

undermining its power. She ignores the fact that moving from race to "race" has serious implications for a critical theory. Lucius Outlaw tells us that we should beware of those who, like Fields and Appiah, "move too fast" and neglect that "there is still to be explored the 'other side' of 'race': namely the lived experiences of those within racial groups (e.g., blacks)" (77). Outlaw offers us a point of departure for inquiry into how assumptions about "race" shape their believers' readings of the world. Specifically, his ideas help us formulate questions about how "race" influences understanding, action and interpretation, as well as questions about how "race" functions tropologically in texts created by "those within racial groups" (77). The caustic exchange between Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Joyce A. Joyce, and Houston A. Baker, Jr. from the pages of New Literary History provides an example of an attempt to isolate, define and critique a race[d] interpretive community.

In "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," Joyce argues that the role of the "Black American literary critic" is to act as "a point of consciousness for his or her people" (338). Using Gates's argument that texts can be explored by viewing the authors as writing "at the point of consciousness of [their] language," Joyce argues that analyses grounded in such premises eschew the racial grounding of black literature.

She suggests that the critic must take his or her "cues from the literary work itself as well as from the historical context of which that work is a part" (338). African American literary critics of black American literature, like the writers whose work they explicate, must serve "as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between black people and the forces that subdue them" (339). It is Joyce's position that black imaginative prose writers and black critics share the same community responsibility and allegiance(s). Just as the writer's text comes from his/her blackness, according to Joyce, so too should the critic's criticism/interpretation come from his/her blackness while explicating the blackness of the writer's fiction. While I agree with Joyce that critics and authors have commonalities, I think her comparison of their political or cultural responsibilities is weakened by the position she takes.

Joyce is arguing that applying poststructuralist and other non-indigenous theories to black literature separates the literature from "the people" for and by whom it was written. Accordingly, Joyce frames her arguments along Asante's Africentricity; as a consequence, what is at stake for her far exceeds the particular question of critical theory and the applicability of certain theories to certain texts. In fact, Joyce argues that in applying poststructuralist theories to black texts, black critics are

accepting not only "the linguistic system [but] an accompanying world view" (339). Underlying Joyce's anti-poststructuralist sentiments is the deeper conflict over the relationship among literature, culture, and the politics of representation.

Joyce insists that "[i]t is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or [...] negates his blackness" (341). By this logic, poststructuralist theories would be appropriate if they were not grounded in whiteness. Joyce's argument is based upon her belief that there is a "direct relationship between Black lives--Black realities--and Black literature" (338). It is such a belief that leads her to argue that opening up these connections, reading them, can best, if not only, be done through "traditional Black literary criticism" (339). Central to this argument is the attempt to articulate the relationship among identity, culture--as represented in and by the work of art--and criticism. For Joyce the work of art is not merely a representation of blackness, it reinforces constructions of blackness that already exist "out there." Joyce demonstrates a belief in the social construction of identity here. But, Roland Barthes reminds us that "literature is always unrealistic" and it is the very "unreality" of literature that permits it to question the world, "though indirectly" ("Authors" 187). It is because the writer loses all claims to truth and

reality that his/her work can stir inquiry into the world within which it exists--Joyce's "out there". The objections Joyce registers against the use of poststructuralism to explicate African American literature signal the need for a redefinition of the cultural politics of interpretation. A similar redefinition has already taken place with respect to feminist reading and this can be helpful to us.

Jonathan Culler discusses what it means to "read as a woman." In On Deconstruction, Culler suggests that asking "a woman to read as a woman is in fact a double or divided request. It appeals to the condition of being a woman as if it were a given and simultaneously urges that this condition be created or achieved" (49). Furthermore, the appeal to experience, Culler tells us, is problematic, because "'experience' always has [a] divided and duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced" (63). To talk about experience is to talk about things that have happened, but also to participate in the making of new happenings, other experiences. Experience is not fixed but always being made.

Joyce encourages Gates and Baker to explicate the black experience as it is found in literature, but also argues that their criticism defines that experience. In her argument against the use of poststructuralist theories by black literary scholars to explicate black texts, and in her association of such use with "selling out" and intellectual

or scholarly "passing," Joyce attempts to establish "race" based critical boundaries--much like the gender based theories Culler critiques above. I say to Joyce, as Toni Morrison's Pilate says to the black nationalistic Guitar:

You think dark is just one color but it
ain't There are five or six
kinds of black. Some silky, some wooly.
Some just empty. Some like fingers. And
it don't stay still. It moves and
changes from one kind of black to
another. (Song of Solomon 40-41)

Just as black is not fixed, "just one color," neither is black experience.

The potential result of Joyce's prescriptivism is intellectual nativism and essentialized notions of blackness. Cornel West maintains that "openness to others does not [necessarily] entail wholesale cooptation and group autonomy is not group insularity" (108). However, for Joyce A. Joyce there can be no openness when the other is one who has for centuries oppressed you. Akin to Asante arguing that the "Afrocentric study of a [sic] phenomena asks questions about location, place, orientation, and perspective," Joyce contends that it is imperative that "the Black literary critic" acknowledge and recognize that not only "what he or she says, but also how they say it will determine the values to be circulated and preserved over time" (Cultural Hero 3; "Black Canon" 340). In other words, it is not only what you represent, but the manner of representation that is important. Here, Joyce plays the

proverbial race card in an effort to argue for preservation --within self-contained sociopolitical and cultural borders--of the sanctity of black literature.

For Joyce, the text is so reflective of reality that to intimate we suspend the connection, or even to question it, suggests a denial of the reality. Again, Barthes offers helpful commentary, in suggesting that writing is "irreality," and hence cannot describe any authentic experience. Writing it can only "tell the truth on language, but not the truth on reality" ("Writers" 391). But, within Joyce's schema, the literary work of art is not merely an object of study. It is a cultural artifact, a symbol through which cultural messages--i.e. DuBois's race message--are contained, maintained, and promulgated. The text reveals facets of the black experience and presents these to the masses. Joyce suggests that we read black texts through blackness, and that only through blackness can these revelations be accurately interpreted. At this point, it is important to unravel certain (mis)conceptions about the literary text I see underlying Joyce's arguments. The primary (mis)conception with which I am concerned is that African American literary texts are the artists' locus for understanding black experience(s), that the essence of black American experience(s) is revealed in literary works of black American writers.

I find Jane Tompkins particularly useful as I attempt to make sense of the varying constructs of the literary text. She tells us that "when the literary work is conceived as an object of interpretation, response [to it] will be understood as a way at arriving at meaning and not [only] as a form of political or moral behavior" (207). It is my sense that Gates conceives of texts as objects of interpretation. However, while Joyce wants to limit interpretation to elucidating sociopolitical aspects of a text, Gates--and Tompkins as well--suggests that there exist other aspects that may (or may not) also be present. Hence it is neither natural nor self evident that black texts and their critics are always only engaged in some didactic or revelatory endeavor (related, of course, to explicating some facet of "the" black experience). Similarly, Iser informs us that the literary text cannot be "completely deduced from prevailing concepts of reality" because reality is a given and fiction a nongiven (180). While the text may "simulate" a reality, it is never "identical" to the reality it simulates or, for that matter, identical to the "disposition of the reader" (180). Moreover, the simulated reality functions "not merely to denote the desire to copy a familiar reality, [but] its function is to enable us to see that reality with new eyes" (181). Poststructuralism provides Gates with those new eyes. Though the connection between text and reality is suspended with Iser, he assures

us that it is precisely because the text is not identical to either the reader or reality that it is able to function as it is meant to, as communication. Iser defines two ways that the nonidentity element of the text is manifested. These are two types of indeterminacies--"blanks" and "negations"--which regulate the interaction between the text and the reader.

The text, for Iser, is "a whole system of processes," but within this system there is a place for the reader. Blanks, he says, are just one entryway for the reader into the text. Blanks are "designated vacancies in the overall system of the text" (182). In filling these blanks, the reader interacts with the textual patterns. There are several means of interaction the reader has at her disposal, i.e. gender and/or culture. The text for Barthes, however, "is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of An Author-God) but a multidimensional space," where multiple writings are merged, with the reader being the place where the multiplicity is focused (Image 146). Hence, the critic's focus on language is the key to illuminate the various structures within which a writer encodes literary and social commentary. Therefore, the reader ceases to function solely as a receptacle, as Joyce would have it. Instead the reader becomes a productive agent in text making. For example, the reader can project her own and/or others' previous readings and/or

interpretations and examine the spots where these readings break down. Here, a variety of readings are meshed in the process of interpretation which opens new possibilities for reading and understanding.

Negation deals with what happens in reading when a previous assumption has been changed, or refuted, and no new one has emerged in its place. Iser tells us that "negation situates the reader between 'no longer' and 'not yet'" (213). Though negation produces blanks in the text as well as in the reader's position, this is fruitful because new reader positions are being negotiated and the text is constantly being opened in a multiplicity of ways.

Following Iser, I find it helpful to think about what is gained by reading from the very different positions Joyce and Gates assume. In this vein, I find Norman Holland quite insightful. In "Unity Identity Text Self," Holland uses the four concepts of his title to explore the "openness and receptivity" of the literary text (119). What I find most revealing is Holland's discussion of Identity.

Interpretation, he says, "is a function of identity" (124). Furthermore, "all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves" (124).

Hence, all interpretations hint of how the readers not only position themselves in relation to the text, but also how they identify themselves in the world. Holland informs the Joyce-Gates exchange by suggesting that their respective

definitions of themselves as black critics determine how they read and respond to each other's readings. In her response to Gates's and Baker's responses, Joyce, in fact, observes that "the central issue here is identity" ("Who the Cap Fit'" 380). She clearly defines her boundaries and says, quite definitively, "my views on Black literary criticism are inextricably bound and unembarrassingly tied to my identity as a Black person" ("Who the Cap Fit'" 381). Joyce demonstrates how her construction of her identity as a black American affects her interpretation of black American fictional works.

Furthermore, Joyce confirms the importance of identity in reading, and Gates and Baker defend the critic's prerogative to question the text through language. Critical here is the language of identity and how this language is negotiated through fictional and critical discourse. Joyce, Baker and Gates each explore (or their exchange demonstrates an exploration of) "the impress of black identity upon the imagination" (Irele 52) and how this impress is represented and explicated. Just as Barthes suggests that literature is the "body of the projects and decisions which lead [writers] to fulfill [themselves] (that is, in a sense to essentialize [themselves]) in language alone," I intend to examine this process with respect to African American writers and their relationship to Africa ("Authors" 189).

As we attempt to explore how race functions in the act of African American interpretation of African texts, Uzo Esonwanne is quite helpful. In "'Race' and Hermeneutics," Esonwanne argues that in racialized nations, like the United States, to talk of 'race' is to speak of "private investments" as well as "past and ongoing grievances" (565). The notion of private investments is key to understanding why it was and is so important, first of all, to essentialize race--as DuBois did--and then dismiss it as a valid identity construct--as Appiah and Fields do. Though Esonwanne does not define "private investments," I conclude that he means these are the estimates of what is to be gained through endorsing a particular definition of "race." For DuBois, the private investment was reclaiming a group's humanity, naming black people in the United States as other than the despised, degraded Negro. Of particular significance, Esonwanne suggests that "race" is one of many "communities of meaning" existing "out there in the world" and thus it belongs in the "province of hermeneutic understanding" (565).²¹ Esonwanne positions "race" within Heidegger's concept of "the hermeneutic circle".²² The hermeneutical circle is a reference to the complex process of understanding itself whereby the parts of anything cannot be understood without some sense of the whole to which they belong. Conversely, we cannot comprehend the whole to which things belong without first grasping the parts that form it.

In essence, we are constantly obliged to move back and forth between the whole and its parts in our attempts to arrive at an understanding. With respect to "race," we must explore what is invested in furthering beliefs concerning "race" if we are to understand how it relates to interpretation. The private investments are some of the parts that constitute "race" as a whole. "Race" functions to order the reality of those who live within its confines (e.g., blacks and other consciously aware racial groups), and as such it affords meaning to certain aspects of their experience. What Esonwanne is suggesting is that there exists, or can exist, an interpretive community defined by and constructed by "race".²³ But he is skeptical of readings which emerge from such an interpretive community because of their mythic center: "race". Ironically--considering the Joyce-Baker-Gates exchange--to argue his case Esonwanne offers a critique of Henry Louis Gates's The Signifyin(g) Monkey.

In arguing that the trip through the Middle Passage did not erase all traces of Africanisms, Gates compares Yoruba Èsù Elegbarà to the African American signifyin(g) monkey. In this comparison, Esonwanne argues, Gates elides significant differences between the two figures of his comparison. Primarily, Gates ascribes blackness to the Yoruba divinity so as to "prove" that it is the African American signifyin(g) monkey's "myth of origin" (577). This

inscription, Esonwanne claims, result from Gates' preoccupation with race: "what is at stake is not so much cultural kinship as it is racial identity" (577). For Esonwanne, Gates's reading of Èsù Elegbarà is grounded in "theology and metaphysics and not history" (Esonwanne 575). He suggests that because Gates belongs to an African American interpretive community which reads through cultural connections, his interpretation is skewed by his conception of "race," and blackness in particular. While for Gates, and [other] African Americans, having a divinity figure who is black is important, for the Yoruba this is of little consequence and outside of their theological ontology. Esonwanne believes that "it is unlikely that Èsù, as a divinity straddling the abyss separating humans from deity is necessarily black" (576). It is clear Gates is abreast of evidence documenting continuities between "Old World Africans" and "New World Africans" (Esonwanne 578). However, it is this knowledge that leads him to elide Africa's "multiethnicity" and make unsupported claims about Èsù Elegbarà's racial identity (578).

Gates's attempt to connect these two figures is only successful if we overlook the significant functional differences that Esonwanne points out. Esonwanne suggests that to privilege Gates's interpretation is to redefine Èsù Elegbarà outside of Yoruba culture. The idea of race-based interpretive communities, then, becomes dysfunctional if

their primary aim is demonstrating real connections instead of struggling for an understanding, a comparative functioning of the Yoruba Èsù Elegbarà and the African American Signifying monkey. Gates, the self named "race man," undertakes another Africentric project (Clarke and Tifte 16).

The Africentric scholar is always concerned, Asante tells us, with "discovering the centered place of the African" (Cultural Hero 2). Molefi Asante, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Joyce A. Joyce all attempt Africentric projects. The difference is that while Asante claims blackness as a one and only ideology, a religion of sorts, and Joyce A. Joyce preserves it as the literary theory for reading black texts, Gates sees blackness as one ideological lens among many at his disposal. Nevertheless, their results are quite similar. Each in his or her own way struggled to name a center for African American culture/literature. Gates and Joyce have managed to write in this centered place, and in the process they have illustrated the politics that occasion the writing of cultural fictions. More directly related to reading African texts, though, neither Asante nor Gates acknowledges the power of their Africentric visioning, and how that vision "shades" or colors the cross-cultural reading they both undertake.

Cross-Cultural Readings, or Sailing the "Black Atlantic"²⁴

Wilson Harris suggests that cross-cultural reading inserts a "ceaseless dialogue between hardened conventions and eclipsed and half eclipsed otherness within an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs, or bridges of community" (xviii). Literary texts provide a forum wherein the African Americans' dialogue between their "eclipsed and [their] half eclipsed otherness" takes place (Harris xviii). As we have seen, this dialogue with the African past has been quite ceaseless, involving the building a bridge between the past and present. Though the dialogue has been entered from various vantage points, the ambition in each case has been to announce that while African American social systems have responded to the conditions of life in the United States, many contemporary forms of African American culture establish, and/or represent, direct continuities from Africa, the homeland of black diasporans.

As the discussion of DuBois above has demonstrated, the group calling itself "African American" represents what Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to as "tension between strangeness and familiarity" (295): the modifier "African" symbolizes the African cultural heritage of the geographical "Americans."²⁵ Furthermore, because "cultural identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in the narratives of

the past," it could be argued that the African text does not really afford a cross-cultural reading experience (Hall, 77). In fact, Ron Walters suggests that African Americans "sought to recreate African culture" in the construction of their communities (32). The development of the African Methodist Episcopal Church provides the clearest example of this "recreation." For an African American reader of an African text, certain readings afford an African American the opportunity to (re)represent herself as having a history and culture beyond that gained in America. Recently, some scholars have begun to challenge the discourse that proposes all similarities between African American cultural phenomena and African cultural phenomena represent continuity. Specifically, these projects have ushered in an analytical framework which suggests that African American cultural manifestations should first be studied within the immediate context they occur and not as a preserved form from the past.²⁶ These new directions do not deny outright the existence of retentions, survivals, Africanisms. They do suggest, however, that an analysis of these features that begins with an investigation of their function and development on this continent would more adequately facilitate our understanding of American cultural phenomena, African American culture.²⁷ If we accept this view, as I do, the reading of Africa[n texts] by an African American then is a cross-cultural reading event.

Along these lines, I rename cross-cultural reading as reading across sociohistorical horizons, reading across traditions. Further, it is my position that interpretation, or cross-cultural understanding, is always a circular activity, a moving between not only the text and the reader, but also the situations that have produced them. Or, as Said says, "the closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration" as they read (39). This epitomizes the functioning of the hermeneutic circle.

Within the hermeneutic circle, reading texts from different traditions involves two levels of interaction. The first level involves a construction of the reader's tradition. Tradition, as Gadamer discusses it in Truth and Method, "does not stand over and against us," but is something in which we stand and through which we exist (278). Tradition is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us, yet it furnishes the stream of conceptions that constitute our present. This notion of tradition is akin to Althusser's conception of ideology. Like Althusserian ideology, Gadamer's tradition is both "real" and "imaginary," springing from the relation between people and their world. In tradition, there is always an element of history--that stream of past and present to which we belong and in which we swim toward understanding. Understanding, then, involves social agents--readers--

immersing themselves in an overdetermined field of meaning where these agents can act and react to in an open-ended manner.

For African Americans, much of their tradition is embodied in the legacy of Africentric and "race" thinkers and "race(d)" critics. What this legacy leaves us, though, is a narrative of African historicity that begins and ends with prosperity: an edenic Africa characterized by greatness and an African America best seen as a descendant of that tradition rather than as a product of that tradition and the "aberration" of slavery (Gilroy, 1993 189). What it assumes is that Africa is a static space upon which black peoples can inscribe their heritage. It becomes the authentic homeland to a racial subject who has discovered within Africa's history her "true self, [and has] pinpoint[ed her] centre," has discovered the essence of her blackness (Asante, 1990 15). This essence lies in the African values "created, recreated and reconstructed and derived" from the tradition of Africanity within which she exists (Asante, 1990 15). When this authentic racial subject reads, she carries this essence, or at least the sense of it to the text. That is the sense that she is an "African in America [connected to] thousands of years of history and tradition" (Asante, 1990 15). Hence, as she engages in the second interpretive act involved in cross-cultural understanding, constructing the tradition of the other with help from the

text, which "represents" aspects of that tradition, often there can be an imposition of a "unity that actually subsists on the suppression" of other versions of African reality (Harris xviii).²⁸

As Gadamer argues, the past is not like a pile of facts which can be made an object of consciousness, but a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding (360-62). Attempting to understand a text, which may invoke our previous constructions of our past requires that the reader be "sensitive to the text's alterity," and this sensitivity involves "the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices" (Truth and Method 269). These fore-meanings and prejudices constitute our historical consciousness--our "historical reality of being" (Truth 277). Hence, Gadamer does not suggest that we eliminate--as if we could--these prejudices, for they make interpretation possible. These presuppositions come to us from the tradition in which we stand. However, I read Gadamer's notion of tradition to suggest that we can know it, that we can consciously know our own tradition, and know in such a way that when we encounter the other's tradition we can distinguish the two and reach the pinnacle of understanding he calls the "fusion of horizons" (306-07). He tells us that distinguishing the enabling prejudices from the hindering ones is crucial to self understanding as well as understanding Others.

Furthermore, this act of distinguishing is not separate from understanding itself (Truth 295-6). In order to conceptualize how this separation happens, we must foreground "temporal distance and its significance for understanding" (Truth 296).

Though African Americans are not African, Eddy Harris suggests they are more than "hybrid." Harris's quick dismissal of the idea of the African American as hybrid is telling. Primarily, I think Harris's position echoes a belief that being of "mixed breed" is disturbing because it implies "not whole." However, from a critical perspective, I think the notion of the African American as hybrid is a fruitful way of exploring the problematics of identity and cross-cultural reading. In terms of positionality, as I have discussed it thus far, the African American reader of African texts phrases the identity question not in terms of "Am I African or American?". Instead, the question is phrased "How do I show that I am both African and American?" The African text reflects the African American reader and thus this reader's interrogation of it implicates her. African American literary texts which construct an Africa operate within what M. M. Bakhtin refers to as hybridization (359).

Bakhtin tells us there are basically three linguistic "devices" employed in the novel, one of which is hybridization.²⁹ He defines hybridization as "the mixture

of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance" (358). With an African American reader/writer who is engaged in reading (and thus representing) Africa, this notion of hybridization is quite informative, for the texts they create are hybrid constructions. There are at once two social voices, the African American's own authorial voice and the African voice spoken by the characters, and the latter voice is always filtered through that of the author. A hybrid construction, Bakhtin suggests, is an utterance that on the surface appears to belong "to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two . . . semantic . . . belief systems" (304). The term African American is itself a hybrid construction. It is meant to indicate a single population, black people in America. But it also implicates another population, Africans from the continent. The latter has been subsumed beneath the former, or the former has been inscribed upon the latter. Either way, the African American speaks with two cultural voices, and is named to reflect this "twoness." Just as African American is a hybrid construction, so are the voices in the texts of Africa produced by some African Americans. It is this hybridization that complicates the cross-cultural reading endeavor, and allows for not only misreading, Reading and misrepresentation, but paradoxically could also permit successful readings.

Bakhtin argues that literary texts themselves are utterances. In Bakhtin's system of "dialogism," literature is another form of communication, another form of knowledge.³⁰ Literary texts, like any other kind of utterance, depend not only on the activity of their authors³¹, but the sociohistorical forces in effect when the text is produced and consumed. Hence, the text can communicate simultaneously on several levels. The guiding principle governing meaning in the literary text is heteroglossia, and "the novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it by means of [heteroglossia]" (263). Heteroglossia is characterized by "a multiplicity of social voices" and connections between them (263). All of our utterances are heteroglossic, and in reading cross-culturally, our own modes of discourse as critics are sedimented in a cultural matrix from which we can never extricate ourselves. Furthermore, these discursive modes are determined by a set of linguistic protocols whose range and governance far exceed our conscious control. This revises Gadamer, and nicely so. Nonetheless, Gadamer offers an ideal, in my view, toward which we should strive. An utterance, a text, is a border phenomena; it takes place between speakers--readers and writers--and is embedded in social factors. It exists on the border of the tradition(s) that produces it and the larger tradition(s) within which

its producer and consumer exist. Hence we must explore not only the large body of the texts, but the grammars of discourse that delimit and constitute cultural experience: the sites of our cultural memory.

Toni Morrison attempts, through her literature, to connect people of the diaspora to the "motherland," through remembrance--remembrance, recalling, of things not lost--and (re)membrance, constructing, of things never known.³² In "The Site of Memory," Morrison tells us that "all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that, remembering where we were . . . and forever trying to get back to where it was" (305). Morrison's memory allows her to create out of the various cultural texts she has read, a spiritual and mythic fiction of Africa. This mythic fiction exists in the realm of the "imaginative and creative" and provides the difference between Morrison's representation of Africa in Beloved and Alex Haley's in Roots, and more directly Walker's in Possessing the Secret of Joy. The middle passage is that water source within which African Americans are constantly diving for the sunken treasure of their past; it is the "hyphen" of their existence. Toni Morrison has tapped a reservoir of tradition that allows her the freedom to explore that past but demonstrates her integrity not to (re)member through essentialism. She has refused to create cultural fiction.

Cultural fictions--fictional texts that read and Read other cultural texts--are created because of certain predispositions toward Africa(n texts) that operate unchallenged. I do not suggest that it is possible to read without prejudice. Since we understand always from within our own horizon, there can be no nonpositional understanding of anything, because understanding involves lived experiences. We always understand by reference to our experience. Overunderstanding begins when readers do not question when/if their version of cultural reality is being placed over and above the experience of cultural reality encountered in the text. In other words, hermeneutical understanding requires the acknowledgement of the two traditions, two experiences confronting each other in the interpretive act and requires the African American separation of roots and routes (see Gilroy 1992).

Maya Angelou provides an example of an African American reading of Africa that seems to function within the hermeneutic circle. Ron Walters tell us that many African Americans embarked on "the return" and searched for "an authentic expression of their 'African roots'" (103). Maya Angelou is one of the many authors who did so. However, unlike that of Alex Haley, her Africa is not Edenic. But, even so, unlike those in Countee Cullen, there are few negative images of Africa in her description. In her All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes, she discusses her trek

to Ghana in 1962. This novel demonstrates the African American's familiarity and strangeness in relation to Africa. Angelou states:

I doubted if I, or any Black from the diaspora, could return to Africa. We wore skeletons of old despair like necklaces, heralding our arrival, and we were branded with cynicism. (76)

Angelou is ever conscious of the differences between black Americans and Africans, but she is also conscious of her historical links to Africa.

For Gadamer, the play between the text's strangeness and familiarity and the tension between the past and present that characterizes tradition are central for hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, he says, is based on "the polarity of familiarity and sameness" (295). As such, the African American reading an African text is a perfect "test case" for hermeneutical inquiry. By analyzing the discourse produced when an African American reads an African text, the hermeneutic endeavor, as outlined by Gadamer, will be challenged as it equally challenges these readings.

In arguing against a method, Gadamer tells us that it is not the task of hermeneutics "to develop a procedure for understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Truth 295). Having a clear conception of what constitutes a tradition is important if we are to engage in hermeneutical understanding. I leave Gadamer wanting more "clarification" of what is a tradition,

in practical terms. Because I believe that inherent in the notion of tradition is the concept of culture, I find Geertz's work useful as an attempt to identify kinds of traditional Otherness which a reader can encounter.

In "From the Native's Point of View," Geertz argues that the outsider can never see what the natives see, only what they see with. In attempting to grasp the customs the Other uses to see, Geertz says that we must utilize "experience-near" concepts as well as "experience-distant" ones. Experience-near concepts, he tells us, are those we use to define what we see, feel, think and so on--we use these concepts "effortlessly and naturally" while experience distant concepts are those that an observer/outsider/critic, employs to follow the "native's" philosophical or practical aims (220). According to Geertz, our aim is to determine how the natives "define themselves as persons" and, if possible, to ascertain their conceptualization of what it means to be a self. To do this, we must seek out the "symbolic forms in terms of which people actually represent themselves to one another" (228).³³ We must attempt not to enter their horizon--in Gadamer's sense of the word--but to grasp how they have constructed it and maintain themselves within it. In terms of reading cross-culturally, then, the critic must attempt to ascertain what symbols and discourses the text uses to construct the tradition within which the text exists.

For example, in reading Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price, understanding the concept of marriage is critical to interpreting the story. "The most important people who should benefit from [the] marriage were her [Aku-nna's] brother and her mother" (149). If the bride price provides this benefit, then is the custom "selling a bride"? If marriage is seen as the union of two individuals, then one could argue that the woman is being sold. If marriage is seen as the union of families, then the bride price could be seen as a means of maintaining equity in the relationship between the two families. The novel provides insight into how tradition dictates the function of marriage and the bride price, and though we carry with us our conceptualizations of what marriage means, in the Western sense, our criticism of the practice, the paying of a bride price, should be visibly informed by an understanding its construction and functioning within its cultural milieu.

Gina Dent asks, and answers, a question that I think is critical to the issue of cultural identification and cross-cultural communication with respect to black peoples: "Do we, peoples of the African diaspora, any longer have the right to invent Africa?" (7). She answers that "we have the right to attend creatively to any of the domains we find within our view" (7). She warns that though we should never "police the areas over which our gaze may trespass," we must responsibly "make it clear that what we reveal are the

effects of that gaze" (7).³⁴ It is crucial that we address this gaze and its literary effects. Dent cogently sets out the parameters of a discourse that emerges when African Americans read African cultural texts through their dual identity.

African Americans obtain a certain power in naming their cultural selves, and as a consequence, their gaze upon the Africa of their cultural roots/routes is represented in ways that reinforce that continuity. Yet, clearly, not all African Americans who discourse on Africa do so in negative ways. For example, Gloria Naylor's Bailey's Cafe delves into the lives of women who gather at the magical mystical tavern. Like Walker's text, the stories are told by the characters--one of whom is Miriam, an Ethiopian Jew who has been infibulated. The circumcision is described metaphorically as the cutting of a succulent plum: "Eve plunged the knife quickly into the middle of the split fruit. With one twist of her wrist, she cut out the large pit The plum was cleaned of everything but its delicate outer skin" (151). Also, this story is told out of the ear shot of men: "And there wasn't a man in the place, not a man to be found. This was women's business" (145). The chapters that follow present two women who are taking care of that business from their respective geographical, cultural, sociopolitical and literary positions.

NOTES

¹ This title is a play on the Zora Neale Hurston essay "How it feels to be Colored Me," I Love Myself When I am Laughing and Then Again When I'm Looking Mean and Impressive, Ed. Alice Walker, (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist P, 1979) 152-55.

² Though Gates seems to include African and African American texts in his "black literature," I use it without hesitancy because of the comparative nature of his usage. This idea of comparative black literature is one that should be pursued not as a search for similarities but as a means of defamiliarizing blackness as it is seen in African America today. It is in the latter sense that I explore the issues that I confront in this project.

³ For example, one race, Caucasian, may have several ethnicities represented within its ranks: Italian, French, or Celtic for example. Similarly, blackness, like other ethnicities, is an invented or constructed identity. Within the larger construct of "black," we have several ethnic affiliations: American, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Caribbean or Brazilian.

⁴ Though this is not explicitly stated or argued in Moorings and Metaphors, it is my sense that Holloway uses race as a means of representing what Marable has identified as Blackness.

⁵ See bell hooks and Cornel West's Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life (Boston, MA: South End, 1992).

⁶ See Ngugi's Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature and Achebe's ideas as well in Charles Rowell, "An Interview with Chinua Achebe."

⁷ In chapter three of this work, I offer another frame for examining this work, and I explicate particular sections of it within that paradigm.

⁸ At this very writing, I am having difficulty with the language of naming. In using race and blackness, I seem to be at once reinforcing ideas that I am challenging and questioning. I can only confess that I lack the appropriate

explain my representations of these ideas. I use race to identify the word itself. However I will use the unmarked word race to indicate biological ideas and "race" to suggest socially constructed notions of identity and tropological usage.

⁹ Gates has an article entitled "What's in a Name?" in his Loose Canons: Notes on the Cultural War (New York: Oxford UP, 1993). Also, Smitherman's "'What is Africa to Me?': Language, Ideology and African American" offers a detailed historical discussion of the semantics of and ideological reasoning for the changes in black American racial naming.

¹⁰ This is a reference to Christopher Miller's work on Africanist discourse and my argument that certain texts by African American writers are similar to those Miller discusses. I develop this point later in this chapter.

¹¹ Gates further develops his theory of Signification as it relates to African American literature in the later work The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. I have selected his description from Figures in Black because of its brevity. Furthermore, my purpose in recalling Gates's idea of Signifyin/signifying is mainly to identify the paradigm within which I am situating my working notions of Reading/reading.

¹² In fact, Ama Ata Aidoo as well claims this "universal" concern for women, but her concern is grounded in gender and emanates from her concern and struggle for the rights and safety of African women. She is first and foremost an African woman and involved in their struggles.

¹³ In his works, Asante terms his inquiry "Afrocentricity." However I have elected to use Afri- to provide a more accurate semantic representation of his arguments and his grounding of them.

¹⁴ While no one would argue that this statement is incorrect, some have suggested that Asante, instead of being known as the "Father of the Afrocentric movement," should be known as "co-founder" sharing the honors with Maulana "Ron" Karenga. In fact, Asante himself credits Karenga. However, my review of the literature indicates that while Asante's aims are indeed akin to Maulana's "cultural nationalism," the Africentric polemic as it is recognized, and criticized, today was indeed spearheaded by Asante and brought to the forefront in his first work, The Afrocentric Idea. See Harold Cruse, "Negro Nationalism's New Wave," Current (May 1962) 45-7.

¹⁵ Asante develops this thesis further in Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge. See also Martin Bernal's Black Athena which is an in-depth study of Egyptology. Bernal documents very specific lineal connections between Egypt and Greece. While Asante tends to rely heavily on speculation and polemics, Bernal's study offers a detailed analysis of Egypt's influence on Greece, and indicates some of the logic behind previous historians' refusal to acknowledge this connection. Also, Frank N. Snowden, Jr.'s Blacks in Antiquity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970) is an earlier study of the Ethiopian and Egyptian influences on the Greco-Roman tradition(s).

¹⁶ Particularly, Miller traces the development of Africa from its first being named "Africa" to its representation in European religious, philosophical and anthropological writings. It is these very writings that created not only Africa but Africans. What is significant about this, though, is that he poses the idea that writing can create or define reality. A fiction can be called into reality, thus blurring the line between what is real and what is fiction. What allows this blurring, and what I think Miller is hinting at, are representations in discourse. This will become very important to my discussion of Alice Walker's novel, because I maintain that she is writing within and attempting to reaffirm a kind of representational discourse. See chapter one of Miller's Blank Darkness, especially pages 1-29.

¹⁷ It is important to note that contemporaneous to Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany was also writing and speaking on similar issues. However, Delany's objectives were quite different. Interestingly enough, the differences between Delany and Douglass resurfaced in the 1960's in the split between Martin Luther King, Jr., his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the more revolutionary organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers. For more on Delany, see Victor Ullman's Martin R. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism (Boston: Beacon, 1971) and Nell Painter's "Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism," Black Leaders in the Nineteenth Century. Eds. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Chicago: U Illinois P, 1987) 149-72.

¹⁸ In fact, David Walker, in his Appeal, advocated the notion of the geographically extensive Black family. He argued that individual Black achievement, happiness, "shall never be consummated but with the entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world" (93). Hence, the Black American suffering was seen as connected to the suffering of Africans under the emerging European colonizing

ventures. See David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to those in the United States of America (New York: Hill & Wang, 1965).

¹⁹ I believe that Molefi Asante's work, as discussed in this project and as collected in the body of literature he has produced, confirms my point.

²⁰ The notion of race as a trope is heavily indebted to Henry Louis Gates's discussion in "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes". Intro. 'Race,' Writing and Difference. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1986) 1-20.

²¹ What is interesting is that Esonwanne is quoting Appiah, here. However, when Appiah revised his article, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," to chapter two of his book, he reorganized the information which changed the meaning entirely.

²² This reference to Dilthey as first defining or "naming" the hermeneutical circle is taken from my reading of Gadamer's Truth and Method, see page 265..

²³ Here, I use interpretive communities in the sense that Stanley Fish uses the term. See "What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable." Is There a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980) 338-355.

²⁴ This is a direct reference to Paul Gilroy's book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.

²⁵ In his discussion of the "tension between familiarity and strangeness" Gadamer is referring to the tension between the present and the past, between "the historically intended, distanced objectivity of the heritage and our belongingness to a tradition. In this 'between' is the true place of hermeneutics" (295). I appropriate his ideas here because of the distance between the African past and American present of African Americans, and I find his discussion of "temporal distance" informative in that vein.

²⁶ See Joseph Holloway's collection Africanisms in American Culture (Bloomington: U Indiana P, 1990). Particularly see Holloway's article "The Origins of African-American Culture," ix-xxi. Also, as a counterpoint, see Robert F. Thompson's "From Africa," Yale Magazine 34 (1970) 16-21. Thompson argues, counter to Asante, that though there are apparent similarities in African and African American art, some of the characteristics examined are, in

fact, recent innovations in West African art (18). Robert F. Thompson has produced a large body of work exploring and documenting cultural continuities within the African diaspora, this particular work, however, warns that not all similarities can be explained as demonstrating a linear transference from Africa to the United States.

²⁷ I find this directly related to Paul Gilroy's argument that black sociopolitical and cultural inquiry should be centered in wherever black people are at the time of inquiry. African American phenomena should be examined with African America as its center, not Africa as Asante suggests.

²⁸ See also Paul Gilroy's "Living Memory and the Sublime," chapter six of The Black Atlantic, particularly pages 191-196.

²⁹ I recognize that Bakhtin confines his discussion of the notions of hybridization and hybrid construction to dialogue in the novel and the creation of dialogue. However, I find these ideas relevant and applicable to my argument of African American being an identity construct that linguistically merges two social worlds.

³⁰ Though Bakhtin himself does not use this term, Todorov does in describing Bakhtin's system for analyzing literature and language connections. See Tzvetan Todorov's Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle.

³¹ For me, at this analytical moment, these authors are both the readers of the texts and those who pen the text. It is crucial to the success of my work that I convey the importance of seeing the writer as a reader--Alice Walker is a reader of an African text--and the reader as writer. Scholars and critics represent an Africa in the texts they produce to explicate literary texts they have encountered. At times, I realize the reader may find this flip-flopping of positions unnerving. But I think this flip-flopping shows the fluidity of the boundaries between readers/writers and critics/writers.

³² See Karla Holloway's discussion of (re)membrance in African and African American women's writing. Moorings and Metaphors, chapter 2.

³³ I return to these concepts by Geertz in chapter 2, and I discuss their use in Walker's text to read the cultural text of ritual female circumcision.

³⁴ Though it is not stated by Dent, I sense that her use of the gaze parallels that illustrated in the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his Discipline and Punish. As I examine the functioning of this discourse, I will heavily rely on Foucault's explication of discourse as constructed by the gaze. The gaze, he tells us, is that most coercive of disciplines; it establishes and maintains power through observation (Discipline and Punish 186-89).

CHAPTER TWO
"COM YA C'AIN'T 'NO MORE THAN BEEN YA"¹ OR
KNOWING AFRICAN WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S
POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

Possessing the Secret of Joy is the greatest contemporary example of a cultural fiction. Indeed, Walker finds herself justified in taking the "storyteller's prerogative" and creating an Africa (283). However, this creative representation serves a nonfictional purpose, as it is fiction only on its most surface level. Beneath the fiction of Possessing is its politics, its cultural evaluation, if you will. The novel is a journey into the life and world of Tashi, an Olinkan woman recently come to the United States. The narrative details the emotional, psychological, spiritual and sexual trauma she experiences as a result of complying with traditions that sanction ritual female circumcision.² The primary focus of my analysis will not be on ritual female circumcision, but on how this ritual becomes a vehicle for the crafting of Walker's women characters--Tashi and M'Lissa.

Using Foucault's assertion that bodies are susceptible to power relations, Karla Holloway suggests that in a world where bodies are identified in terms of ethnicity and gender, "blackwoman can be conceived of as a category in the same way that 'black' and 'woman' are social categories"

(4). I partially center my discussion of Walker's text around Holloway's idea of "blackwoman." The question of what is "a woman" is a crucial one and has mustered much debate.³ However, I am focusing on how definitions of "black" participate in the creation, definition and reading of Walker's blackwoman. As Valerie Smith tells us, "the meaning of Blackness [in the United States] profoundly shapes the experience of gender just as the experience of gender ineluctably affects the experience of race" (47). I also wish to entertain such questions as Who is this blackwoman? How do we know her? And, most importantly, How do we read her? Walker uses her own blackness, and the connection blackness effects among all people of African descent, to justify her voicing of Tashi's story. In Possessing we see "blackwoman" functioning (or becoming encoded) as a means to connect women of African descent. Because these identity terms, blackness and blackwoman, both embody culture, a cultural text is the focal point around which Walker centers her tale.

Unquestionably, if Walker had her way, ritual female circumcision would be all that I would see as deserving of critical attention, all that every critic of the text would see. However, because Walker has exerted so much effort to direct her readers, I resist her direction. Going against her direction sends me to the representations of blackwomen in her narrative and provides a way of discussing the

fiction within, and that guides, the fiction that constitutes Possessing the Secret of Joy. Possessing the Secret of Joy is about blackwomen and culture. It is about Alice Walker and her readings of both. Indeed, Possessing is equally Tashi's, M'Lissa's, and Alice Walker's stories. The novel becomes less the tale of one woman (or two or three women) than an attempt to decipher and read a cultural tapestry woven into/upon the black female body. The narrative becomes equally a R/reading of blackwomen. Just as the novel details how the woman's body is not her own, so, too, is Tashi's story not her own.

Reading Possessing the Secret of Joy is a dual exercise in reading culture. First, the creator of the fictional world within which the novel's African protagonist lives is an African American woman. Furthermore, the protagonist is an African recently emigrated to the United States with her American husband. The latter offers the ideal African American, embodying the culture of Africa and inhabiting the geographical space of the United States. Tashi's body serves as the stage upon which the opera of African American cultural/ethnic identity can be performed. Secondly, the novel's actions focus on the cultural rite of female circumcision. Both African American women's voices (those of the author and her heroine) are present in the text and confront the cultural text of female circumcision from their various culturally and ethnic embodied spaces. Tashi is an

African and an American. She seems fully aware of the consequences inherent in pledging full allegiance to both, but is also aware that the two are different--connected but separate. Her experiences with ritual female circumcision are examined from both perspectives.

In the novel we get this sense of Tashi's biculturalism from the varying references to her as "Tashi, renamed in America 'Evelyn', Evelyn Johnson, and Tashi-Evelyn." Clearly the latter represents the "twoness," the idea of "two souls, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (DuBois 1989, 5). Alice Walker examines the African soul of her protagonist, and ritual female circumcision is the vehicle for this examination. Walker views the practice as a means through which African women are rendered joyless and spiritually dead, and she struggles to reconcile the two warring cultural consciousnesses. Clearly, this is a novel by a woman, about women, and which argues for the rights of women. The particular right that Walker champions, struggles to protect/defend/encode is that which insures that African women will continue to "possess the secret of joy."⁴ For Walker, this possession and the joy are both linked to the "literal destruction of the most crucial external sign of her womanhood: her vulva itself" (1993, 21).

Possessing the Secret of Joy is the story of two kinds of women: those who are forbidden this possession, the right

to own their bodies, and those who forbid others this right. Walker constructs both archetypes: "the mother who betrays" and "the daughter so betrayed" (Walker, 1993 21). Through these constructions, Walker places the "proverbial feminist personal is political" into direct conflict with "that notorious black manifesto--we will not have our business put into the streets" (Dent 3). The conflict is embodied in the relationship between Tashi and M'Lissa. Particularly, these two women destroy themselves and each other by their beliefs in and questionings of ritual female circumcision. Vicariously, they also destroy Africa. Alice Walker sees her novel as an attempt to mend the bodies torn asunder and to reunite those separated by time and space.

In the collection of essays In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker casts herself as a healer. Athena Vrettos tells us that "by reclaiming the history of black women, those 'creatures so mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain,' and redefining their scars as 'the springs of creativity'" Walker attempts "to forge spiritual bonds with the past" (455-56). Possessing is that attempt. As a cultural fiction, the novel explores how we read others, understand them, and proceed to tell their stories. But, it is also about how we--in our understandings of ourselves--are intertwined with the stories that we tell. Walker's text explores ethnicity and what it means to possess an ethnic identity. Importantly, ethnicity is

examined as not wholly inherited; rather, it is exposed as "something that is reinvented and reinterpreted" by successive generations (Fischer 195).⁵ Ethnicity, then, becomes a fictional space crucial to our understanding of Possessing. Through Tashi, Walker is interpreting her ethnicity and demonstrating the importance of its reinvention, redefinition.

As Gina Dent tells us in "Black Pleasure, Black Joy," Possessing "forces us to confront not the history of female circumcision, but the mythical use of this particularity as a point of entry into the analysis of our ever elusive connections to Africa" (3). Walker reads Tashi and M'Lissa through a lens similar to that which an anthropologist might read an Other. Possessing the Secret of Joy offers an attack upon myths of culture that sanction and sustain "mutilation" and attempts to recreate for its women subjects a tradition that is liberating and conducive to building strong gendered selves. This mission is made obvious in the text's final scene. Women gathered to witness Tashi's execution have been "warned they must not sing," but these women allow their bare bottomed female babies to be their voices. As the little women are lifted onto their mothers' shoulders, the sounds of the babies' voices represent the women's collective protest against a male authority--embodied by the armed male guards. The presence of these voiced gendered bodies challenges the authority that would

silence them and dictate their behavior. This act is followed by the revelation, to Tashi as well as to the reader, that RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (281).

The characters in this novel are Walker's political mouthpieces; their voices highlight what she considers to be violations of "the blameless vulva" (dedication). Undoubtedly, the novel demythicizes female circumcision as well as the life of women who undergo it. Tashi is (re)created, allowed to flourish, if only in her final minutes. Africa is (re)created as well, but its fate is less kind. Just as Tashi represents the approximately 80 million women who undergo circumcision each year, the village of Olinka stands for the continent of Africa. Possessing constructs an Africa where the woman's body serves as the backdrop against which patriarchy is played out. It is this essentializing, totalizing representation that some have found at once objectionable and irresponsible (Wilentz 1993).

Though I respect Alice Walker's right to cast her creative eye upon whatever she chooses, her intrusion into the fictional text of Possessing the Secret of Joy suggests that the novel is more than fiction. I contend that this text exists somewhere on the boundaries of cultural criticism (a Reading) and fiction (a reading). In Claiming the Heritage, Missy Kubitschek provides a discussion relevant to my reading of Alice Walker and her novel.

Kubitschek suggests that the black woman writer explores the "necessity of knowing and coming to terms with tribal history to construct tenable black female identities" (7). Furthermore, she adds, this interest appears in two forms. "First, the characters' relationships to the history of Blacks in the New World" are examined, and then "the author's relationships to the literary tradition" (7). The understanding of "tribal history" is central to the writer, and to the female character's becoming and remaining a functioning black woman presence. Walker excavates Tashi's history and in the process discovers her own connection to Tashi, blackwoman to blackwoman. With respect to literary tradition[s], Alice Walker is involved in one and tries to enter another: the African American and the African, respectively. In her Mooring and Metaphors, Karla Holloway discusses the intersection of these two traditions in the texts of the women writers within each tradition. Of particular significance here, she argues that blackwomen writers use myth as a "metaphorical revisioning of experiential knowledge" (86). These myths are represented through "patterns of memory and telling" (88). Walker speaks from within the African American women's literary tradition, but she speaks to the tradition of African women's writing. Though there are similarities between these women, and Holloway notes many, Walker elides

significant differences and complicates the problematic of speaking about and for others.⁶

On the Meridian: Walker's Move from Black Women to Blackwomen

Alice Walker uses the writing of Possessing as a means of anthropologizing her cultural duality. This excavation of her cultural self is a constant in her fiction: she is always in search of her political, social, and cultural gendered self. Using Walker's first novel with a female protagonist as a point of departure and comparison, it becomes easier to see Tashi as existing on a continuum.⁷ While this positioning does not free Walker from essentialist criticism, it offers us another way to look at this writer and her work.⁸

Barbara Christian aptly points out that Alice Walker's fiction is "black women-centered" and as such it focuses on the pain and struggles of black women (39). With Meridian this is certainly the case, but what we see in Possessing is a concern for blackwomen.⁹ Walker's relationship to Africa does not begin with Tashi and Possessing. In fact, in her first volume of poetry, Once, we find "Karamojans," a poem about an African population "Never civilized" (23). The poem describes an idyllic Africa represented by "A tall man/Without clothes/ Beautiful/Like a statue"(20). But later, this beauty is contradicted once we get "close up" and see that "His eyes/Are running/Sores" (21). Walker

describes the beautiful man as "The Noble Savage" and describes the women as their bodies: "Bare breasts loose/In the Sun/The skin Cracked/The nipples covered/With flies" (22). Her description here is heavily reminiscent of Conrad's "dark woman" roaming freely in "the heart of darkness." As well, this National Geographic-like depiction further demonstrates Walker's indebtedness to the Western anthropological tradition.

Alice Walker is no idealist when it comes to Africa. Her agenda is to figure out how she can "take the bitter with the sweet." Though Africa can exist as an integral part of African American awareness of self, Walker reminds us that Africa is distant, and we must always question how we identify with things we see and know from a distance. Walker's cautioning is best summed up by Robert Stepto's assertion that while the identity term "African American" bestows two equal cultural and geographical spaces for locating identity, "it is also a term that cannot help but painfully remind black people in the New World that while they can configure 'America' in increasingly specific, personal terms," the same cannot be designated for "Africa" (xiv). Clearly, the "African" names a space, but "it also teasingly asks us to find it in a haystack as big as a continent" (xiv). Hence, Walker cannot specify Tashi, for though Tashi is her link, Walker has no specific place to which she can attach herself: "I do not know from what part

of Africa my African ancestors came, I claim the entire continent. I suppose that I have created Olinka as my village and the Olinkans as my ancestral tribal peoples" (285).

Elsewhere, Walker has spoken to this longing for a grounding place, a cultural mooring place. Holloway defines a mooring place as a "deliberately fixed" place whose "center is where behavior, art, philosophy and language unite as a cultural expression" (1). A mooring place is revealed through specified discourse. In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker speaks of her creative genesis, and states that in attempting to know ourselves through our history it is important to seek our foremothers and know their works. She posits that:

[O]ur mothers and grandmothers, ourselves have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase from our minds, just exactly who and of what, we black American women are. (235)

Walker continues:

Therefore we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know. (237)

It is this searching that we see in Meridian, a black American woman, and that we see extending to Africa with Tashi. Also, in both novels we are presented with women-- Meridian and Tashi as well as the women who "control" their

female becoming--who seem unaware of individual gendered freedom. Walker establishes in this essay the mooring place for her search, the gardens of black[]women's¹⁰ creative and everyday genius and survival.

In "Everyday Use," we find the metaphor for Walker's identity search--that of quilting.¹¹ This short story explores "heritage," and how it is realized by two black American women, sisters--Dee and Maggie--through their respective relationships with their mother and grandmother. Dee has developed a fashionable attraction to her Southern roots and her African past--she has renamed herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. When asked by her mother, "What happened to 'Dee'?" she replies, "She's dead. I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" (418). Ironically, Dee's attempt at connection entails disconnection, since she was named after her grandmother. Dee's cosmetic ancestral connection--and affected disconnection--is juxtaposed with Maggie who is quite fond of her grandmother and close to her. In the discussion about who should get the quilts, Maggie proclaims: "She can have them Mama, I can remember Grandma Dee without the quilts" (421). Dee's interest in her past is represented by her coveting of ancestral artifacts, namely those quilts made by the woman whose name she bears. Proclaiming her educated awareness of their cultural, familial and historical significance:

these [quilts] are all pieces of dresses
grandma used to wear. She did all this
stitching by hand (420).

she tells her mother:

Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!
She'd probably be backward enough to put
them to everyday use (421).

Her mother responds: "She can always make some more. Maggie knows how to quilt" (421; emphasis added). The quilts symbolize heritage--something of the past to be passed on--but they also symbolize the making of a heritage--the process of quilting is a process. As Gates would have it, quilting represents for Walker "a reassembling of the fragments of [local and] diasporic experience" (1989 xxiv). Though Dee may be a part of the history, in possession of its whole, Maggie can continue the traditions embodied in that whole through repetition--the making of quilts, the repeating of the historical linking.

Alice Walker as a novelist is quilting--putting together the bits and pieces of black[]women's lives and creating a whole which connects them and tells their stories.¹² Though her main emphasis in the essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," and this short story is black women, it was only a matter of time before she branched out, plowed deeper. As Gates states more clearly, "[t]o reassemble the fragments of course . . . is to attempt to weave a fiction of origins" (1989 xxiv). So, Walker

weaves. Her fictions are patches in an unfinished quilt; Tashi and Meridian supply significant and related patches.

Walker tells us that the black woman's literary tradition is grounded in the belief that "escape for the body and freedom for the soul [go] together" (Search 5). Clearly this is as obvious in Meridian as in Possessing. As Keith Byerman aptly suggests, Meridian is Alice Walker's best "effort to incorporate history, folk forms, and the conditions of women into fiction" (146). Furthermore, Meridian is the cloth from which Tashi is shaped.

Meridian is a novel about revolution--individual and collective gendered protest.¹³ The narrative catalogs the problematics of being black and particularly of being a black woman in the United States. We hear of several women who die and/or suffer from societal restrictions. We hear of Louvinie, a West African woman who was a slave on Saxon Plantation. Louvinie's "tongue was clipped out at the root" because her stories frightened a white child to death (44). There is Fast Mary of the Tower who murdered her illegitimate child, for fear that she would be named by her society as immoral. Her deed discovered, Mary confined herself to her room, one with no window, and hanged herself. Both of these women are silenced and excluded. Like so many of Walker's black foremothers these women are also denied the opportunities to tell their own stories. Also, we meet Mrs. Hill who suffers under the "double yokes" of Wife and

Mother.¹⁴ Obviously, these women have not yet learned "the secret joy".¹⁵ The primary focus of the novel, though, is Meridian's experiences during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Meridian's story is told from within her mind; a series of flashbacks inform her present experiences.

Primarily, Meridian is a revolutionary; she confronts and challenges traditions--gendered and national. This course of behavior forces her to address the two seminal questions confronting any revolutionary: (1) Will you die for the revolution? (2) Will you kill for the revolution? The revolution is about national change, but brings about a change in Meridian.

Realizing her death at the novel's beginning--"I must look like death eating a soda cracker" (25)--Meridian decides to live; she reveals this to Truman Held:

[I]f somebody has to go it might as well
be the person who's ready

And are you ready?

Now? No. What you see before you is a
woman in the process of changing her
mind. (25)

Her (re)birth involves conquering the things that have affected her death--various traditions. The first traditions, racial separation and female disembodiment, are confronted at the circus when Meridian faces the tanks.

In the separate-but-equal South, she has gathered a group of black children for a trip to the circus; however, the day of the visit is not one designated for blacks. The

trip to the circus centers around viewing "the mummy woman," Marilene O'Shay, who is carted around by her husband and displayed for a fee. The bright banner on the side of the trailer which entombs Mrs. O'Shay announces "she is one of 12 Human Wonders"; while four stars define her as an "Obedient Daughter, Devoted Wife, Adoring Mother, Gone Wrong" (19). The flier promises "The True Story of Marilene O'Shay" and informs us that she:

had been an ideal woman, a "goddess,"
 who had been given everything she
thought she wanted All she had
 to do was lay back and be pleased.
 (20)

For Meridian, this woman represents the shell all women are forced to live within. Just as the mummy woman is "[p]reserved in Life-Like Condition," women who fail to become active in revolution(s), in bringing about change, exist only in a state that resembles life. The Mummy woman is a symbol of certain fates experienced by women in general, and by black women in particular. She becomes an embodiment of black womanhood. Mrs. O'Shay darkens over the course of her exhibition, and attempts by her husband to "paint her original color" fail (20). The Mummy woman affects and embodies change, she changes.

Meridian defines her struggle as residing in her resistance to social systems and her search for the inner capacity to change them. This struggle is negotiated through her relationship with her mother. Mrs. Hill is much like

the mummy woman, "rigid, static and stifled" (McDowell 266) because she adheres strictly to confining traditions: religion, marriage and motherhood. Meridian defines her mother as "not a woman who should have children. She was capable of thought and growth only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands of a husband" (49). Hence, her asking Meridian, "Have you stolen anything?" signals her belief that Meridian stole her freedom, her choices, her spirit, her chances at revolution. The social definition of motherhood for black women equals sacrifice of the spirit, and a subsequent squashing of their (female) children's spirits as well. Mrs. Hill, after living within the confines of society's conscription, laments that "the mysterious inner life she had imagined gave [married women and mothers] the secret joy was simply a full knowledge that they were dead, living just enough for their children" (51). For Meridian, it is Christianity and its learned submissiveness that blinds her mother to choices outside of wife and mother roles, and forbids her access to the "secret joy." But Meridian explores her choices and as a result is alienated, forever, from her mother. Ironically, she does not fully escape the chains that bind her mother.

Saxon College presents Meridian with a new set of gendered restrictions. The school song declares, "We are as chaste and pure as/the driven snow./We watch our manners, speech/ and dress just so" (93). Meridian breaks these

rules and we witness this rebellion in her response to the body of the "Wile Chile," orphaned, pregnant and unmarried, whom Meridian rescues and brings to the College. The tension between tradition and change is deepened when the Dean runs the child away and causes her to be struck by a car and killed. The death of the child, and the President's refusal to allow Meridian to have her funeral in the school's chapel, confirms Meridian's belief that revolution is inevitable--and, that only through revolution can she (re)claim the secret joy lost to her mother forever.

In preparation for her revolutionary role, Meridian returns to the South. Here she (re)connects with her past and gains a new sense of herself through the church. This was not her mother's church, however, but--metaphorically speaking--Martin Luther King, Jr's church, a church where social and political struggle was linked to the worship of God. Meridian discovers:

that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created [for black people] one life (200).

Here Meridian decides that dying for revolution may be required and it is a sacrifice she would make, though she would rather not. However, though killing for the revolution may be equally necessary, she is ambivalent as to

whether she herself can kill. Instead, "perhaps it will be [her] part to walk behind the real revolutionaries--those who know they must spill blood" (201).

At the novel's end, Meridian receives a letter from her friend Anne-Marion, who writes, "Who would be happier than you that the Sojourner did not die?" (217). The note informs Meridian of the tree's regrowth from the stump left after the original tree was destroyed by rioting students at Saxon College: "the new past had regrown from the old" (219). It is no doubt that Sojourner serves two functions. It represents travel, Meridian's travel back to the South, a mooring place of sorts. Also, the tree represents Sojourner Truth, whose "Ain't I a Woman" speech has been noted as a benchmark for black women's suffrage.

As such, the tree embodies Meridian's history. It is all that remains of the plantation that once stood where Saxon College was built; Louvinie, the silenced West African woman, planted this tree. The survival of the tree indicates the sustaining of Meridian's history, her heritage. Meridian is also an extension of that tree (McDowell 275).¹⁶ Equally significant, Meridian realizes that her history "extends beyond those around her," beyond the "one life" of black people [women] in the United States. Conjured in the image of the Mummy woman and revolutionized in the body of Meridian, Tashi is born. As Alice Walker explores the branches of the tree, the regrown Sojourner,

she finds another leaf, wilted and dying. The tree metaphor carries over into Possessing and frames our reading of the novel, but it also connects Alice Walker's fictions-- continues her quilting.

The Writer as Quilt Maker; Alice Walker as Ethnographer

Possessing the Secret of Joy revisits a dilemma in anthropology: separation between ethnography and literature. The fundamental problem for the ethnographer and/or anthropologist is how to describe a culture. This is quite similar to the literary concern of representation. Ethnographers help "shape the life history" that they record (Prell 241). They interpret their data, recordings, and compile a representation. Though anthropologists have debated the interpretive strain, the ficitonal quality, as it were, of their writings, rarely has literature about the Other been examined in terms of (or based upon a model of) ethnography.¹⁷ From an anthropological point of view, the dichotomy was once clearly established. Ethnography equals fact, tells the truth and is science presented by scientists. On the other hand, literature is fiction, relays fantasy, and is art written by an artist (Benson 18).¹⁸

Possessing challenges this age old dichotomy for it takes on an ethnographic style and content. Stephen Tyler suggests that the "once heralded" scientific nature of

ethnography (123) is no longer revered. Furthermore, he argues that there exists a postmodern ethnography. This ethnography is a "cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of common-sense reality" (125). Postmodern ethnography is literary, mythical and creative. Possessing is partially a postmodern ethnography, its "break with everyday reality" is a journey apart into strange lands with occult practices--into the heart of darkness--"where fragments of the fantastic whirl about in the vortex of the quester's disoriented consciousness" (Tyler 126). For the quester, Walker, the fantastic is real, true, and her fiction is informed by fact. She has journeyed into Africa to (re)orient her double consciousness.

In her epistle "To the Reader," Walker tells us that Tashi is flesh, represented by the African woman who plays her in the film version of The Color Purple. This Tashi also embodies the "little girls [who] were being forced under the shards of unwashed glass, tin-can tops, rusty razors, and dull knives of traditional circumcisors" (284). This whisper into the readers' ears suggests Walker's postmodern ethnographic tendency. The novel becomes a dialogue "emphasizing the cooperative and collective nature of the ethnographic situation" and rejects the "ideology of observer-observed, [for] there is nothing being observed and

no one who is observing" (Tyler 126). The reader is called into the text's story and participates in its telling, for the "real" story does not end when the cover of the book is closed--there are the other girls who may still face the knife. Walker tells us that Tashi, embodied and fleshed, warrants a "book of her own". However, I question: Is this book Tashi's own?

Possessing is an ethnography of blackwomen's bodies, grounded in the African American literary tradition and its discourse about Africa. Ethnography, Clifford tells us, can be fiction "in the sense of something made up or fashioned" and existing within the boundaries of "the partiality of cultural and historical truths" (6). There are at least six characteristics that constitute ethnographic fiction, and Alice Walker frames her novel within all of these. These frame my discussion of Walker. Ethnographic writing, Clifford says, is determined:

(1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieux); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive convention); (3) institutionally (one writes within and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all of the above conventions and constraints are changing). (6)

These six "govern the inscription of ethnographic fiction," and are manifested in Possessing.

This inscription upon Possessing is demonstrated firstly by the "bumper sticker" cited in the novel's opening epigraph: "When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us." This bumper sticker casts the cultural frame, the context, within which Walker positions her story. The forest, the wilderness, the dark continent, are at once Africa and blackwomen's bodies.¹⁹ Also, though, this political statement serves as a rhetorical device, speaking to collectives being torn asunder from within. The idea is that the easiest way to deplete the forest is through the manipulation of the trees. The handle (em)bodies the trees just as it wields the forces that will disembody them. The blade represents patriarchy, and though it actually cuts--severs--the trees' bodies, much like those blades which remove women's clitorises, the hands that hold it, that maintain it, are themselves trees, women. The novel is about trees and bodies, blades and patriarchy, women and women, embodiment and dismemberment, a body's remembering and [re]membrance.

"[Re]membrance," according to Holloway acknowledges that "memory is culturally inscribed" within the "genre of myth" (25). "[Re]membrance" also "emphasizes the body and the restorative aspect of (re)" (13). Hence, Walker's selection of an epigraph foreshadows her grounding of

culture in the body--Tashi cannot be remembered, but Walker tells us what that body remembers. Walker introduces herself as part of the narrative, and hence becomes vital to Tashi's story as she draws Tashi into her own. Walker's fiction, then, is undergirded by a greater fiction: Female Solidarity, particularly, blackwomen's suffrage, and Tashi is Walker's "universal woman" ("Appeal" Essence JL 92 102).

Walker, through Tashi, speaks for 80 million African women while also [re]membering her "great-great-great-great-grandmother who came here with all that pain in her body" ("Appeal" 60). As Gay Wilentz tells us, Walker's political approach to Tashi and her story "tends to efface difference and is problematic for readers acquainted with African culture and history" (1993, 4). Institutionally, then, Walker "writes against [this] specific audience" with whom Wilentz is concerned (see Clifford above). While Wilentz's reading is certainly valid with respect to the novel's discussion of ritual female circumcision and the accompanying casting of Africa(ns), I suspect that this effacement can be mediated, if we consider that the novel is Alice Walker's story. She tells it, and she decided where it begins and ends and what to use to fill its middle. Alice Walker is the heroine and protagonist of this text. Reading Possessing then becomes a journey into the political, social and gendered consciousness of Alice Walker. Possessing the Secret of Joy is about Alice Walker

and her politics more than, or at least equally as much as, it is about Tashi and her trauma.²⁰

Much like an anthropologist's transcribed tape-recorded interviews, Tashi's (hi)story is detailed in several voices, and the reminiscences of Tashi, as well as the people who share and shape her life, take us down the road to Tashi's recovery of her soul. Generically, Walker disguises the fictional, novel, quality of her text.

Significant to my suggestion that Alice Walker acts as ethnographer, is the narrative presence of Raye. Raye is a "middle-aged African American woman" psychologist who treats Tashi after her male psychologist dies (115). In a session with Raye, Tashi discusses their "leader, like Nelson Mandela and Jomo Kenyatta," who was "Jesus Christ to them" (115; 117). This Leader instructed the Olinkans that they "must not neglect [their] ancient customs" (117). One of these ancient customs is "the female initiation . . . into womanhood . . . Circumcision" (119). Raye takes the opportunity to ask questions that would elicit what Geertz calls experience-near concepts. These concepts are those which subjects "might naturally and effortlessly use" to name their reality ("Native's Point" 227). Tashi names her reality by using the words initiation and circumcision, and in response Raye requests specifics: "What exactly is this procedure? I am ignorant about this practice, though, and would like to learn about it from you. Is the same thing

done to every woman. Or is there a variation?" (119-120). Tashi responds by informing the therapist of the "three forms of circumcision" (120). Tashi explains only two of them as she tells Raye that while "[s]ome cultures demanded excision of only the clitoris, others insisted on a thorough scraping away of the entire genital area" (120).

At this point the anthropological taint of Walker's text is uncovered as an experience-distant concept that is presented as experience-near. Tashi's description begins quite "effortlessly"--as "initiation"--and progresses to the medicotechnical-- as "circumcision". This progression is from that which is local to that which is distant. Experience-distant concepts are those "which various specialists employ to forward their scientific, philosophical or practical aims" (Geertz, "Native's Point" 227). In this instance, Walker has Tashi describe her thoughts about her body, thus revealing Walker's role/presence in the text:

It was only after I came to America, I said, that I ever knew what was supposed to be down there.

Down there?

Yes. My own body was a mystery to me, as was the female body, beyond the function of the breasts, to almost everyone I knew. From prison Our Leader said we must keep ourselves clean and pure as we had been since time immemorial;--by cutting out unclean parts of our bodies. Everyone knew that if a woman was not circumcised her unclean parts would grow so long they'd touch her thighs; she'd

become masculine and arouse herself. No man could enter her because her own erection would be in his way. (121)

You believed this?

Everyone believed it, even though no one had ever seen it. No one living in our village anyway. And yet the elders, particularly, acted as if everyone had witnessed this evil, and not nearly a long enough time ago. (121)

Here we see Walker's attempt to reveal, explore and erase a myth of repression. Raye questions Tashi's belief in this myth though she, Tashi, had not witnessed its manifestations, to which Tashi responds that her parts may have grown as the myth suggests because her friends "jeered at [her] for having a tail. I think that meant my labia majora" (121). This reveals not only the power of myth, but an individual's potential to rewrite the myths that control and define a culture. Though African women have described other versions of this myth,²¹ I define Tashi's description as an "experience-distant" one because it embodies the "Hottentot" stereotype of the late nineteenth-century.

Later in the novel, this stereotype is reinforced by Pierre, the child of Tashi's husband and his French lover. Tashi lauds Pierre as the one who "continues to untangle the threads of mystery that kept [her] enmeshed" (277). One such untangling comes when Pierre tells her that in a book "by a European anthropologist," he sees pictures of "early uncircumcised women" and that these "bushwomen, small, gentle, completely at one with their environment, liked

elongated genitals" (277). Furthermore, "by the time they reached puberty, well, they had acquired what was to become known . . . as 'the Hottentot apron'" (278). Clearly, this is the way Tashi should have remained, at one with her environment, the environment that is her sexuality. This very characteristic that Alice Walker cites and reinforces was once used by anthropologists as evidence serving to "distinguish these parts [the female genitals] at once from those of any of the ordinary vanities of the human species" (Gilman 235; emphasis mine).²² Wilentz suggests that Walker's use of this stereotype to promote a "positive aspect of female sexuality" (1993; 5) may be more harmful than helpful. That this description comes from Tashi during a session with her psychoanalyst strengthens Sander Gilman's claim that "the line from the secrets possessed by the 'Hottentot Venus' to twentieth-century psychoanalysis runs reasonably straight" (257).

Walker's manipulation of the Western anthropological tradition is highly relevant in light of a recent segment on ABC's newsmagazine Day One entitled "Scarred for Life." In this discussion, Forrest Sawyer and Sheila MacVicar attempted to shed some light on female circumcision. Sawyer describes circumcision as "a brutal ritual so tied to culture and tradition that for thousands of years women have been powerless to stop it" (Transcript #129, 1). In fact, Sawyer continues, "taboos are so strong that women subjected

to it will rarely talk about it at all. But now a handful of them are breaking the silence." The language used by Sawyer is highly significant as we read Walker's text. Walker's American citizenship provides her the distance to use such language, but her assumption of an African culture problematizes the validity of such terms.

Phrases like "brutal ritual," "culture and tradition" and verbs like "subjected" introduce us to the conception Westerners have with respect to female circumcision, a conception of ritual female circumcision that documents the female body politic. The practice is not conceived as one that a woman would defend or participate in willingly. Though such inquiries pretend to be interested in "uncovering" how these traditions function in societies that have such practices, the language of their reports suggests otherwise. In terms of tradition, and the political characteristic of ethnographic fiction, female circumcision not only provides women with a protected status, but is itself protected.

As El Dareer tells us, "tradition [is] the primary reason for retention of the circumcision of women," and "it does not occur to anyone to question [traditions because they] are firmly woven into the social fabric" (67-8). It is Adam, Tashi's American husband, who addresses this question for Walker: "When they say the word 'taboo'. . . [a]re they saying something is 'sacred' and therefore not to

be publicly examined for fear of disturbing the mystery; or are they saying that it is so profane it must not be exposed, for fear of corrupting the young?" (165). Indeed this is Alice Walker's dilemma. Why is it that all African women--African women writers in particular--are not speaking out against a tradition that so maims them and their sisters? In addressing this question, Walker contests African women's authority to represent their own cultural realities (Clifford 6).

Linda Alcoff tells us what is said changes depending on who is speaking and to whom the story is being told (12). Importantly, she tells us that the "work of privileged authors who speak on the behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing and reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (7). Alice Walker presumes to have her Tashi speak for the silenced African women who undergo circumcision each year. But, just as Alcoff tells us that when we speak for ourselves, we construct possible selves, "ways to be in [our] world," I suggest that Alice Walker's Tashi speaks for Walker herself, her African American self (21). Tashi is embedded in the traditions that constitute her maker and hence cannot be taken, as Walker designed her, as "a universal generalization" (Alcoff, 1991 21).

The Voice of Tradition; Or, Walker's Literary Heritage

Tashi and M'Lissa are characters clearly cast in the African American literary tradition. As Hazel Carby tells us, African American women writers:

foreground [themselves within] their active tales as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects, acting upon their own visions they make decisions over their own lives. They do also document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of resistance (22; emphasis mine).

Possessing is a story of resistance, Alice Walker's resistance to silence and Tashi's resistance to tradition. Furthermore, M'Lissa's indictment epitomizes these resistances. Laurent Jenny tells us that "we can grasp the meaning and structure of a literary work only through its relation to archetypes which are themselves abstracted from a long series of texts" (34). Alice Walker's text is embedded within such a long series, and in order to address this intertextuality, it is necessary that we, as is said in the African American oral tradition, "go to the source."

With Possessing Walker engages several literary traditions. A significant source for reading Walker is Zora Neale Hurston whose Their Eyes Were Watching God is the ur-text of contemporary black American women's writing, and for Alice Walker's in particular. While searching for her mothers' gardens, Walker made a trek through the "Garden of the Heavenly Rest" ("Looking for Zora" 304). Among the

weeds, Walker discovers what she believes to be Hurston's unmarked grave. She describes this discovery, and forecasts her literary frame:

There are times--and finding Zora Hurston's grave was one of them--when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on, do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels. . . . It is only later, when the pain is not so direct a threat to one's own existence that what was learned in that moment is understood. Such moments rob us of both youth and vanity. But perhaps they are also the times when greater disciples are born. ("Looking" 313; emphasis mine)

Walker fashions herself as one such disciple. An anthropologist by training, Hurston serves as a model for Walker, and one of Hurston's least critically attended works serves as a model for Possessing, that is Mules and Men.

Mules is an artfully constructed collection of fictive folktales. The "collection," like Possessing, is complete with explanatory notes and appendices.²³ Folklore frames Mules, and folklore is important to how Tashi's tale is told. A centralizing folk parable for Walker's text is the brief conversation in the wilderness she identifies as a "bumper sticker." Just as Hurston's Mules opens with a tale which frames the story that follows, so, too, does Possessing. When we are introduced to Tashi for the first time, she tells us that she is dead, and this realization "reminds [her] of a story" (3). The story is about "a panther who had a co-wife and a husband" (3). As Howard

Faulkner tells us, such frames "purport to assure the [reader] that the fiction is not fictive, not 'parasitic,' but true, or at least based on truth" (333). We are told that "Tashi expressed herself" through stories (6). Like Mules, Possessing is a collection of "tales," stories about Tashi and from Tashi herself. The story of Tashi's life is surrounded and grounded in folklore and myth. In fact, Tashi herself becomes an embodiment of folklore. While visiting M'Lissa, Tashi learns "that it [is] only the murder of the tsunga, the circumciser, by one of those whom she has circumcised that proves her (the circumciser's) value to the tribe. Her own death, [M'Lissa] declared, had been ordained" (208). When Tashi kills M'Lissa, she reinforces the power she intended to silence and to exterminate. Folklore also structures Possessing for it is folklore that sustains women's acquiescence to traditions that, in Walker's view, oppress and repress them.

In terms of the African literary tradition, Walker engages Flora Nwapa's mild portrayal of circumcision in Efuru. Nwapa refers to the operation as a "bath" and for Efuru, this bathing occurs after she is married. Buchi Emecheta, considered by many to be the most Western of African women writers, allows circumcision only one line in her Double Yoke. For Walker, these mild addresses are inconsequential at best. However, this is also where Alice Walker enters an African literary tradition, to use

Kubitschek. Though the women, in their fiction, have been virtually silent on this subject, their silence speaks loudly to the cultural and gendered sense of delicacy attached to this subject. However, Walker does engage the male tradition, as it were, of representing ritual female circumcision. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o discusses circumcision in his novel The River Between as does Ahmadou Kouromma in his The Suns of Independence.

In the former novel, the rite is discussed within the context of the Christian missionaries' arrival and their desire to ban the practice; hence, the community is divided over the continuation of this "sin." In the cultures and societies that practice female circumcision, the practice functions akin to Jewish circumcision which served, once, to separate Jews from nonJews. For the cultures that support, sustain and practice ritual female circumcision, the practice is quasireligious.²⁶ Jomo Kenyatta, first post-colonial president of Kenya and leader of the Gikuyu, tells us that "irua"--female circumcision--is a "tribal symbol that identifies age-groups" and allows the Gikuyu to maintain and "perpetuat[e] that spirit of collectivism and national solidarity" (134).

Consequently, Muthoni, Ngugi's female protagonist in The River Between, feels ethnically obligated to undergo the rite. Though Muthoni does not physically survive it, she does live long enough to aver that she is a "true" Gikuyu

"woman." Walker's Dura--Tashi's sister who bleeds to death after her operation--is Muthoni. Kenyatta, as well as Ngugi, can be read as questioning the Western idea that maleness equals culture while femaleness equals body. The female body is linked by these two African, Gikuyu, men directly to culture and its maintenance.²⁵ Both see ritual female circumcision as a tradition whose eradication has the potential to destroy the beauty of Gikuyu tradition and life. Gayle Rubin suggests that "we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it" (277). Tashi's presence in America causes Tashi to recognize a new body construction wherein her pleasure and joy have been annihilated. Secondly, Tashi's confusion introduces us--Western women and black women alike--to the idea that forms of sexuality, as they are defined and experienced, are cultural, that is, constituted by the cultural spaces we inhabit. Hence, a change of cultural space affects a (re)construction of sexuality.

Possessing negotiates African and American visions of sexuality. Female sexuality for Olinkans is, in part, marked by excision of the clitoris. The women being initiated into that particular cultural nexus are also informed of the sexual boundaries, those involving pleasure and danger: the pleasures of belonging and being defined as Olinkan, the dangers of sociocultural ostracism and physical death (represented in the text by Dura). Circumcision,

then, entails socializing into culture and into sexuality. Walker is trapped in this seemingly inmediate space: Can Tashi survive as an alien as Salimata does, between two worlds? Walker's clear response is "no." This is evidenced by Tashi's death. Tashi must die after murdering M'lissa for her cultural consciousness cannot be split, or at least Walker cannot reconcile them. As Griffin tells us, the attempt to separate "self from self is quite simply to choose death" (231). Walker positions Tashi in a struggle to make sense of the physical and cultural gap between African women and black women in America, and Tashi's attempts to reconcile her split identity--Tashi-Evelyn--results in her death. The murder of M'Lissa signals her choosing of one of her selves over the other.

Female circumcision for Kenyatta, Ngugi Tashi and Walker then, is about women, but for the former two, it is primarily about the larger issues of national, ethnic, cultural distinction. Tashi/Evelyn reinforces this view. She responds to questions about her reasons for wanting to be circumcised by averring that it entails "accept[ance] as a real woman by the Olinka people," for "we must keep all of our old ways and no Olinka man--in this [Our leader] echoed the great liberator Kenyatta--would even think of marrying a woman who was not circumcised" (122). As the voice from the gallery tells us, women--circumcisors and circumcised--

hold the primary responsibility for maintaining and perpetuating cultural traditions and mores.

In Kourouma's The Suns of Independence, we encounter a representation different from Ngugi's, but reminiscent of Walker's. The principal female protagonist in this novel is Salimata, and she has been prepared for initiation by her mother, who tells her that "initiation is the turning point, a break with the years of equivocal impure girlhood" (21). Salimata, however, does not complete initiation, she faints. Hence, she is caught at a confluence of development, not quite woman but no longer child. Though Ngugi demonstrates an affection for the practice as culturally significant, Kourouma seems to indict its status as ritual. Kourouma likens the ritual to the activities of colonialism that destroyed Africa. Kourouma uses Salimata and her body to allegorize post-Independence Africa, for just as Salimata is stuck between two worlds, Africa is "between two seasons" (5;38). Walker "borrows" this allegorical approach and uses Tashi--and her body--to represent the inscription of pain on women of the world and the pain such inscription imposes on women, Africa and the world.

Walker attempts, nevertheless, to fill the female voiced voids, and revise the male portrayal of circumcision as culturally bound. Instead, she suggests that the ritual is an excision of feminine spirituality. To demonstrate "the sexual blinding" enacted by ritual female circumcision,

Walker compares it to her own "visual mutilation." As a child, Walker was shot in the eye by one of her brothers with a pellet gun he had received for Christmas. Walker surmises that it was her brother's dislike for her female presence that precipitated this attack. Likewise, or so she argues, it is African men's dislike of African women's female sexual power that precipitated the ritualization of female circumcision ("Warrior Marks"). Accordingly, Walker demonstrates an inability to penetrate the cultural system which supports circumcision and thus render its premises illogical to functioning members within it. Therefore, Walker's Tashi views herself as dead or sexually wounded because of her circumcision.

Subsequent to writing and publishing Possessing, Walker endeavored to make a documentary film about female circumcision. As a companion to the film, Walker published a book cataloging her journey into Africa to make her documentary. In the book, Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women, Walker tells us that because she wrote Possessing "there is at least one girl born on the planet today who will not know the pain of genital mutilation," because "the pen will prove mightier than the circumcisor's knife" (25; both emphases are mine). She functions as the Western eye that sees and corrects.

Just as Walker has declared that she has found her "mother's garden"--the continent of Africa--she has

undertaken to sow the seeds therein. Walker tells us in her collection In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens that she is a "womanist" and as such is "committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (xi). Is Possessing an instance of that "periodi[city]"? Chikweyne Okonjo Ogunyemi offers us an important reading of Walker's womanism. She tells us that "Black womanism celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom" (240). She further suggests that the "ideal" for womanism is "black unity" and that "its aim is the dynamism of the wholeness and self-healing" (240). Walker "certainly recognize[s] Tashi as [her] sister" (285), but ironically Walker loses this focus.

Though aware of the cultural premises that sustain female circumcision, Walker counters that there is no cultural argument strong enough to justify the "hazardous effects of genital mutilation, not only on health and happiness of individuals, but on the whole society in which it is practiced, and the world."²⁶ This position acknowledges the dilemma between her womanist consciousness and its concern for community and her feminist consciousness. Without a doubt, African women have written and spoken out against female circumcision--Walker presents several of them in Warrior Marks--but Walker's condemnation hinges on cultural imperialism, not female solidarity.

Pratibha Parmar, Walker's co-producer and co-author for the film and book, addresses cultural imperialism. She suggests that while the ritual "involves questions of cultural and national identities, the fear of being labeled cultural imperialists . . . is not an excuse to sit by and do nothing" (94-5).

However, is the Walker who authored Possessing and who speaks out for the individual collective woman, the same womanist Walker of fictions past? For me, there is a difference between "doing something" and being a cultural imperialist. I support the position advocated by Efua Dorkenoo:

ED: Women [who support circumcision] must feel that we [those who oppose it] are working for them and with them, as opposed to against.

AW: Or condescendingly telling them how they should do it [define themselves as women]

ED: That's it, that's it. (Warrior Marks 254)

She and Parmar cannot find this medial space--between working with the women and working against circumcision--because they are too heavily indebted to imperialistic tradition. In fact, Walker's own imperialism is unexpectedly questioned by/in the narrative itself.

Tashi is, like Alice Walker, an African American woman. Yet, Tashi's voice clearly speaks contemptuously of ideas that describe her as a blackwoman, like other black women:

"I felt negated by the realization that even my psychiatrist could not see I was African. That to him all black people were Negroes" (18). Furthermore, hearing of her decision to return to Africa to undergo the rite of female circumcision, Tashi's describes Olivia's response in a way that makes Walker's awareness of her own culturally imperialist tendencies clear. Tashi says, "Olivia begged me not to go. But she did not understand. . . . The foreigners were so much more dramatic than Africans dared to be. It made one feel contempt for them" (21). Evelyn, however, is asked about her sense of African self-righteousness and her attitude that conveys the idea that she is "the only African woman to come to America." Evelyn responds to this charge admitting, "I did think this. Black American women seemed so different to me from Olinkan women, I rarely thought of their African great-great-grandmothers" (188). That the African American voice speaks these words is significant in light of Bakhtin's ideas about double voicedness in the novel.

Like the words chosen by the journalists for Day One, the language Alice Walker gives her characters reveals her positionality. Bakhtin tells us that "any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it is directed already . . . overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value . . . entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments"

(276). Through Evelyn, Walker attempts to affect a nonalien positionality for herself, to connect her voice with those of the African women's collective for whom she speaks through her novel. Tashi, on the other hand, speaks "the word [broken] through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and various evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements . . . [while] striking dissonance with others" (Bakhtin 277). Walker speaks through Evelyn and confronts her connection to Africa as engendered by Tashi's resistance to American influence. Evelyn tells us that African women resent black women because of their brutal honesty: "I was reminded of the quality in African-Americans that I did not like at all. A bluntness. A going to the heart of the matter even if it gave everyone a heart attack" (119). It is this "going to the heart of the matter" that Alice Walker affects with her exploration of ritual female circumcision, and the "heart attack" is embodied in some Africans' responses to her depiction.

In "The Cutting Edge," Eichman recalls two African panelists' responses to Walker's text. The panelists reminded Eichman, and Walker, that "where the practice is routine it is often desired . . . [T]o go uncircumcised in some African cultures is to forego an essential rite of passage" (49). Furthermore, they charged the West--Alice Walker--with "insensitivity and arrogance," and of affecting

a "Desert Storm approach" to practices indigenous to Africa (49). That Walker allows Pierre to uncover Tashi's secret, and allows Evelyn to utter these questionings speaks to her Western position.

In a chapter headed "Evelyn" we find the woman on trial for the murder of her circumcisor. A voice from the court gallery shouts to Adam, who is in the witness box discussing the ritual, "[t]his is our business you would put into the streets! We cannot publicly discuss this taboo Your wife has murdered a monument. The Grandmother of the race!" (163). Here intrudes Walker's awareness of the secrecy surrounding the ritual and the political duality involved in discussions of it. Sassia Singateh, a Gambian woman who spoke with Day One correspondent Sheila MacVicar, reinforces the social significance attached to female circumcision. Singateh tells us that girls are "given the impression that [they're] going into some glorious experience, relating to womanhood . . . and [they] look forward to that glory" (Transcript #129). The practice is shrouded in secrecy, silence and tradition. "It's a secret society. Everything is meant to be done in secrecy and it's hidden behind traditions" (Singateh, Transcript #129).

Indeed Lightfoot-Klein tells us that "Pharaonic circumcision in the Nile Valley is as old as recorded history" and it serves to "distinguish 'decent' and respectable women" and affords women a "protected status"

(375). Moreover, circumcision functions in some communities to "confer full social acceptability and integration," and the uncircumcised are "estranged from their own kith and kin" and may lose their rights as citizens to participate in the politics, social and otherwise, of their communities (Koso-Thomas 8). With the publication of Possessing in 1992, female circumcision became a topic of ethical, medical and political significance in the United States as well as in other Western countries. The pressing questions for most United Statesers are: Why is female circumcision ritually practiced? Why do women participate in a ritual that mutilates them? Is the voice from the gallery representative of those women, those who will not put their business in the streets? The dilemma is further presented when M'Lissa tells us that she does what she does "[i]n service to tradition, to what makes [Olinkans a] people. In service to the country and what makes [Olinkans] who [they] are" (226).

The ritual separates ethnic groups and divides women into those who are and are not marriageable. As Muriel Dimen suggests, sexual experience "entails lots of self/other boundaries, the endless opening of doors to more unknown inner spaces, confusions about . . . where one person begins and another ends" (140). Walker, however, suggests that ritual female circumcision functions not to create boundaries within which women can exist and

function, but to create bound invisible women--disembodied flesh without subjectivity, autonomy, or the ability to perceive themselves as selves. This is revealed by separating Tashi from her knowledge of herself as a body. Tashi is made invisible by her compliance with traditions that are supposed to inscribe her, and M'Lissa affects this erasure by performing the operation. Like Kenyatta, M'Lissa sees the ritual as linked to Olinkan identity. Walker herself provides us evidence that a circumcisor would not utter the words "who are we, but the torturers of children" (187). In Warrior Marks Walker presents several interviews she conducted with circumcisers in which these women rejected Walker's notions of circumcision as torture and as a tradition that should be destroyed:

Q [by Walker]: Do you think it is a good tradition, and why?

A [Circumciser 1]: She says they're doing it because it is tradition. She says normally during the healing period, and during the coming-out ceremony there's a lot of food, and lot of festivity and they like it. (Warrior Marks 304)

Similarly, another circumciser, after attending a workshop conducted by women campaigning against circumcision, provided this information:

Q [by Pratibha Parmar]: Following the discussions during the meeting today, do you have new ideas and would you abandon this practice?

A [by Circumciser 2]: No. I have only one idea. I want to carry on practicing

circumcision . . . [it] is considered
amongst the public as something
beneficial to our society.

(Warrior Marks 314)

Hence, Walker's voice is clear in the final words spoken by
M'Lissa: "But who are we but torturers of children?" (226)
Alice Walker's tongue is definitely in M'Lissa's mouth.

In the West, male circumcision is recognized and common
not only among the Jewish, for whom it is matter of
religion, but the nonJewish as well. However, female
circumcision is neither recognized or practiced--that is,
legitimated. It is not my contention that it should be,
however, some suggest that there is a legitimacy for it, a
nonWestern legitimacy but a legitimacy just the same. There
are at least four types of female circumcision: Pharonic or
Infibulation, Intermediate, Excision or Clitoridectomy and
Sunna (El Dareer 1; Walker, 1993 367). Pharaonic
circumcision, considered the most extensive, involves the
"removal of the clitoris, the labia minora, and much of the
labia majora;" the remaining sides of the vulva are sutured
leaving only a small opening for menstrual fluid and urine
to pass (Walker, 1993 367). Also, this is the one least
often performed (Wilentz, 1992 4). Nonetheless Walker
chooses this extreme form to "represent" her case.

The extreme form of circumcision has attracted
considerable critical attention with respect to the
cultural, historical, traditional, medical, gender and
ethical issues. Some have attacked female circumcision as

an instance of patriarchal control over female sexuality and freedom. Elizabeth Williams-Moen suggests that female circumcision is grounded in "sexual politics" (11). Awa Thiam tells us "every woman is, or ought to be, concerned about sexual mutilation practiced on the body of another, whoever she may be" (85). Here is Alice Walker's invitation. Her Evelyn tells us that Africa, the Africa of the novel, is full of stories about women's sexuality that license female circumcision. One such myth I have cited above. Walker suggests that the men sanction circumcision for their own sexual benefit; however, the Day One segment reveals that "women carry on the tradition, but it is to make the daughter acceptable to men. The men say it is women's business" (Transcript #129 2). Who holds the power to stop this practice? It is Alice Walker's clear position that women, all women, must shoulder this responsibility. The most compelling parts of the novel are the sections where Tashi and M'Lissa talk before Tashi kills her. Here, is revealed the ones whom Walker blames for female genital mutilation--Women.

In Warrior Marks, Walker tells us, "I am a great believer in solidarity," and I am certain it was this belief that precipitated the journey that began with her writing Possessing the Secret of Joy. Tashi's story begins much like Meridian's. Tashi tells us, "I did not realize for a long time that I was dead" (1). We go with Tashi on the

quest that gives her life--even in her actual death. We discover that tradition--embodied by women and disembodying women--has affected Tashi's death. This tradition is represented by M'Lissa, a mother of Tashi's people. But there are other traditions affecting Tashi as well. One is Christianity, against which she--like Meridian--rebels. When Tashi informs Olivia, her black American sister-in-law, that she intends to be circumcised, Olivia begs her, "[t]ell me to do anything, and I will do it . . . Only, don't do this to yourself, please, Tashi" (21). Tashi responds that her major concern is for the revolution "the struggle for [her] people" (21). She added, "[y]ou [Olivia] are a foreigner" (22). Olivia invokes the name of Jesus, to which Tashi responds smugly, "Also a foreigner" (22). She chides Olivia and her charges bring into the fore Walker's mission in this, defining blackwomen's struggle.

Like Meridian, Tashi is a revolutionary. She rejects the rigid God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and embraces a new God, the Olinka leader who is called Jesus Christ. But with this embrace she is engaged in another revolution, against another tradition. In order to fulfill her revolutionary mission, Tashi must return to Olinka land, to Africa, just as Meridian returns to the South to find herself, to emerge anew. Tashi must discover the tree from which she branches out. Tashi, "the grownup daughter," returns to receive "the only remaining stamp of Olinka

tradition" (64). "The operation [she wanted to have done to her] joined her, she felt, to [Olinkan] women, whom she envisioned as strong, invincible. Completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka" (64). The operation, the sewing of the quilt, inscribed Tashi into the history of her people. But it is this inscription that confines and restricts her life. Like the mummy woman, she is expected "to lay back and be pleased" (Meridian 20).²⁷

The relationship between Tashi and M'Lissa is that of mother and daughter. What informs Walker's manipulation of this relationship, as well as that between Meridian and Mrs. Hill, is the function of women, mothers, in cultural transmission and maintenance. Wilentz tells us that the process of transmitting cultural values and customs falls within the women's domain (xix). It is from the women that the girls learn how to identify themselves as women. Meridian rejects her model. Tashi fights to embrace hers, but later acquiesces to a new one. Tashi invokes a new female tradition. Nonetheless, M'Lissa, as "custodian of tradition," is key to understanding Tashi's struggle. In order for Alice Walker to complete her quilting of the life and struggles of black[]women, the bond between these two women must be explored and eventually destroyed. As Filomena Steady argues, women "represent the ultimate value" for African lives, "the continuation of the group" (32).

Hence it is necessary that modelling behaviors strive toward holistic sustenance.

In "Our Own Freedom," Buchi Emecheta declares that "mothers [hand] down the future to their daughters (47). Alice Walker questions the tradition that Emecheta's mothers pass on, and posits the daughter's right to refuse those traditions that physically and spiritually scar her. We have seen with *Meridian* that black women's daughters can choose and these choices come at a high cost, their own alienation. But do blackwomen have choices? Alice Walker wants us to believe that they do, that everywoman has choices. The Mothers of black[]women have the freedom to choose the traditions to which they will adhere and ultimately transmit to their daughters. Because the establishment of this freedom is central to Walker's mission, she has created an alternate tradition for her "black sisters."

Reading African Women While Writing Herself: Walker's Web

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that Possessing was not really about ritual female circumcision. Consequently, I have spent very little space discussing Walker's presentation of it. Instead, I have labored to show that Possessing is Walker's story. As a cultural fiction, Possessing engages the cultural reality wherein the "'black' psyche in America" (Killens 28) meets the African

psyche and endeavors to join them, to unite their struggles toward freedom. Walker engages the gendered psyche of an African woman, and attempts to (re)write a tradition. There are strong prejudices in Walker's reading of Africa and the particulars of ritual female circumcision. Walker clearly recognizes those that are enabling, but she fails to engage those that hinder. For this, she will undoubtedly always be criticized. Remarkably, though, Walker has managed, in spite of herself, to write a journey novel--a journey into the black gendered self. In endeavoring to give voice to Tashi, she has "uncovered" a significant point of contention in black American identity politics. Walker masks her personal struggle in the garb of an African woman's fight for sexual and spiritual freedom. I have firm objections to Walker's position. However, I recognize that as an author, she can function as a vehicle for "characteriz[ing] the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses in society" (Foucault, 1977 124). The discourse she has informed and in many ways perpetuated and questioned is that of African American ethnicity.

Rachel DuPlessis tells us that "one of the great moments of ideological negotiation in any work occurs in the choice of resolution" (3). The spiritual bond that Walker has forged with Tashi ends when Tashi dies. This is indeed a most problematic portion of the text. Why does Tashi have to physically die, just when she is spiritually reborn? In

telling the "untold tale" of an African woman's trauma, Walker designs a story that cannot help but outrage the most cursory reader. Yet, Walker has woven a web of conflict. She is at once speaking as a person of African descent while maintaining a Western imperialist position, which requires that the Other change. Possessing the Secret of Joy is political: Tashi is not woman but symbol, a symbol of the old, acquiescent victim of patriarchy. However, she is both victim and victimizer. Her decision to comply with traditions that debase women renders her guilty, an accomplice who must suffer for not knowing, on her own, that ritual female circumcision is mutilation. But, I wonder if there can be no "safe haven" for women who suffer as Walker's Tashi has? I suspect that there is, but the culture of Alice Walker cannot access the discourse that licenses such "safe havens," and for Walker such a life, post circumcision, is a death. Walker can only write her self, and writes Tashi as that self. If Tashi were to survive, then she would transmit another tradition of resistance/resilience: ritual female circumcision does not scar the human will to survive. This is not Walker's message; this is not the ideological choice Walker has made. Walker replaces the Olinka myths and archetypes with a new prototype: the bare bottomed screaming [girl] babies. These new voices cry for their physical, spiritual and sexual freedoms. Unlike Tashi, their cause will be their own

survival. These bodies are conceived of as Western, "bounded unique more or less integrated" individuals (Geertz 229). Tashi becomes the sacrificial lamb, as it were, because her death is necessary. She must die so that Walker can kill a tradition, a tradition Tashi embodies.

The voice that Walker assumes in this novel affects a cultural passing: Walker is passing as an African woman. If this passing were for purely fictional purposes, the mask of an author, I do not contest. However, Walker's fictional mask is adorned with a non-fictional, political purpose. Tashi and M'Lissa both, before their deaths, decry a tradition to which they had previously steadfastly held. We owe their awareness to Westernization acquired through the relationships Tashi has with Pierre and Lisette. Tashi's relationship with these characters influences hers with M'Lissa. These two manipulated and pitiful women deserve no fate smaller than death. The illusion that Walker creates, though, is that we should care for them, that her concern is for Tashi. My objection to Walker's posturing is that in the novel Tashi is cast as second to Walker's political agenda, and the message that is sent about African women is inconsequential. Walker realizes that Tashi, and M'Lissa to a lesser degree, have their own voices, but she silences them and pontificates in that absence. Her conversation is with herself.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha avers when an "us" "them" conversation takes place, "us" being the West, the conversation becomes "rather intimate: a chatty talk, which, under cover of cross cultural communication, simply superposes one system of signs over another" (68). The raising of the crying babies clearly replaces the silent pangs and nightmares of Tashi. Tashi could not speak her pain; she dreamed her suffering and endured in silence. She tried and tried to speak her pain, but Walker filled in the blanks on Tashi's behalf and Tashi was said (Minh-ha 80). Walker created a fiction grounded in discourses of cultural and gendered connectedness. She writes herself an African woman, a *sista*, who can speak her thoughts, legitimize her politics and ingratiate herself with those to whom she is historically connected. The interesting thing, though, is that in her attempt to speak for female solidarity and to raise world consciousness about crimes against women, Walker forgets to listen to those Other voices and hear their direction. She remains firmly on the Western side of the bridge.

NOTES

¹ The title of this chapter is taken from a Gullah proverb my Great-grandmother often used to calm the many womanish moments of my life, the times when I thought I knew the answer. Put as simply as possible, the proverb advises: A new arrival, in a specific place or in the world, cannot know more about that place or that world than one who has been there for quite some time. This is my charge of Alice Walker.

² As I have said earlier in this text, I struggle with the language of naming and the representations given in the names we choose. I am fully aware that for many ritual female circumcision may appear euphemistic, however, I have elected to use it in my discussions of the practice. Though, Walker and many Western (and nonWestern) critics of the practice use the more graphic phrase female genital mutilation, it is not my position to argue whether the operation is or is not "mutilation." My phrase of choice represents an acknowledgement of its "validity" for those who adhere to, and struggle to defend and maintain, the practice.

³ The discussion of what constitutes "woman" or the gendered subject has been waging in feminist criticism for some time. For specific discussions of this issue, I suggest Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity and Diana Fuss's Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference. For discussions on the implications of monolithic constructs of "woman" as it relates to Black women, see bell hooks Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism; Deborah McDowell's "New Directions in Black Feminist Criticism," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, Ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 186-99. While these are only a few of the texts that discuss and explicate these issues, I believe these set out the parameters of the discussion most cogently. See also Hazel Carby's Reconstructing Womanhood, chapter 1.

⁴ The title of Walker's novel is taken from Africa Saga, the memoir of an Italian woman raised in Kenya: "I had always got on well with the Africans and enjoyed their company, but commanding the people on the farm, many of whom had watched [me] grow up. With the added experience of my

people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them. They are alive physically and emotionally, which makes them easy to live with. What I had not yet learned to deal with was their cunning and their natural instinct for self-preservation." Interestingly, Walker paraphrases this excerpt for the paperback edition of Possessing. That excerpt reads "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". The incredulity inherent in Ricciardi's novel is shared by Walker and guides her construction of Tashi, who emerges at the novel's end spiritually intact despite the "physical devastation" of her circumcision. Further, it is her "cunning" that permits her to return to Olinka and without suspicion gain access to and kill M'Lissa.

⁵ Fischer does not suppose that ethnicity is created by individuals; instead he suggests that individuals have the power to influence, and alter, collective understandings of what it means to have an ethnicity. Hence, ethnicity can undergo successive redefinitions. The call for a switch from "Black" to "African American" represents such an altering call. Dr. Ramona Edelin, later echoed by Reverend Jesse Jackson, called for an identity name which recognizes the cultural, and geographical, origin of the peoples once called Black. Correspondingly, African American became the name of choice for many in the population. See Smitherman's "'What is Africa to Me?': Language, Ideology and 'African American'" for a historical overview of ethnic identity naming and the ideological consequences.

⁶ As a point of fact, Holloway's book develops a continuous tradition in blackwomen's literature. Her work analyzes the gendered and cultural linguistic community established in the women's literatures of black America, Africa and the Caribbean. However, she notes discontinuities as well. I respect the level of cultural and critical integrity observed in her study and have in many ways tried to model that here. That is, African and black American women's texts can be discussed under the rubric of blackwomen's literature without conflating their experiences and voices into diasporic experiences and voices.

⁷ I have selected Meridian because, though The Third Life of Grange Copeland is equally about women as it is about Grange, the woman are discussed in relation to him. Also, I recognize that Walker's other works equally fit into my paradigm and I will discuss them as required. But it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss all of Walker's relevant fiction in detail. Hence, I limit my discussion by

tracing a line from Walker's first novel named for a woman and focusing on her growth in relation to men and community, to her latest novel which does the same but from an expanded cultural vantage point.

⁸ Particularly, I am referring to Gay Wilentz's criticism that Walker universalizes Africa and essentializes African womanhood by refusing to ground Tashi in a specific geographical and/or ethnic space. See her "Mutilations of the Self." See also "Alice Walker's Appeal."

⁹ The distinction that I am making between the references "black women" and "blackwomen" is one of representation. Black women refers to women of African descent in the United States, while blackwomen refers to women of African descent throughout the world, including but not limited to, the United States. Barbara Christian discusses the development of Alice Walker's writing from The Third Life of Grange Copeland to Meridian in Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976. This discussion focuses on Grange's concentration on his lives and Ruth's in contrast to Meridian's focus on self discovery. Christian suggests that these novels show Walker's change in focus from private experiences to community and community maintenance. It is this focus in Meridian that guided my choice to compare it with "Tashi's story" in Possessing. See my discussion below.

¹⁰ I am here bracketing a "space," the gulf that represents Stepto's needle in a continental haystack and Alice Walker's link and separation from her gendered history. This configuration signifies Walker's attempt to move from the one position--black woman (two words)--to an Other--blackwoman--one word. The span across these spaces, however, remains. Hence her bridge is vacuous and wide like "the Middle Passage;" it is always already absent and present.

¹¹ For an extended example of quilting as a metaphor for fiction, see Whitney Otto's How to Make an American Quilt: A Novel. Also, see Houston A. Baker and Charlotte Pierce Baker's "Patches: Quilts & Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'," Southern Review 21 (1985): 706-20. Baker and Baker discuss the quilt maker as a woman novelist who uses bits and pieces from her life on the margins as material for her art. Also, they discuss the quilt as loss and potential, an emblem of difference, a crafting of identity which joins people into one group while separating them from other groups, collectives, of people.

¹² For detail discussion of Walker's envisioning of her relationship to this foremother of Black American women's literature see her "Looking for Zora." See also Marjorie Pryse's "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the Ancient Power of Black Women" in Pryse and Spillers's Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and the Literary Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 1-24.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of Meridian within the context of revolution, see Karen Stein's "Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution." This text primarily focuses on the Civil Right's Movement and discusses the novel within the context of Walker's essay, "The Civil Right's Movement: What Good Was It," found in Walker, Search 119-29.

¹⁴ This is an obvious play on the title of Buchi Emecheta's novel Double Yoke.

¹⁵ This is both a play on the novel Possessing and a reference to the passage in Meridian. That this concept of "secret joy" is first presented in the latter novel, reinforces my argument that Meridian is a precursor to Tashi, for it is her mother who speaks (see below). Furthermore, this illustrates that contrary to Ricciardi's ideas, not all black people can withstand "devastation."

¹⁶ It is significant to note that Walker's foremother, Hurston, opens her story of Janie Starks with a tree metaphor: "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (20). See "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text" in Gates, Signifying Monkey 170-217. The usage of this metaphor by Walker in grounding her first female protagonist is symbolic of Walker's recognition of her indebtedness to roots in Southern [slave history and] culture as well as to Zora Neale Hurston's literary precedence. Again, see "Looking for Zora."

¹⁷ It is worth noting that African literature has for some time been read through anthropology. Most recently, Christopher Miller has tried to revive this approach to reading African texts. See his Theories of Africans.

¹⁸ For a more elaborated discussion of ethnography and writing, the relationship between authors and ethnographer and the problematics therein, see Clifford Geertz's Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988) 1-25, 129-52.

¹⁹ Marianna Torgovnick suggests that tropes for primitives and primitivism become tropes for women in literature about and centered around Africa (17). Particularly, she addresses how African women's bodies are cast in images of exotic and primal being with respect to their sexuality. See Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives 3-42, 141-158.

²⁰ In fact, Kenneth Wylie and Dennis Hickey give a reading of Possessing wherein they suggest that Walker's Africa is "the heart of the narrative" and is not "consciously based on the historical" regarding her connections to Africans. Further, they seem impressed by Walker's gendered universalist approach to Reading Tashi: "Walker's thematic focus in [the novel] is sharp and unyielding . . . Whatever one may think of the novel as literature or social commentary, it stands out [as one] which took considerable moral courage to write." See An Enchanting Darkness: The American Vision of Africa in the Twentieth Century (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 1994) 207-210.

²¹ Ama Ata Aidoo, for example, in "Ghana: To be a Woman," informs us that she was made aware of the dirtiness associated with women's genitalia and to have an intact clitoris indicated a woman's uncleanness. Similarly, Elizabeth Williams-Moen in "Genital Mutilation: Everywoman's Problem," discusses the use of circumcision as a means to establish sexuality and that an intact clitoris represents "maleness" in the female (5). Awa Thiam concurs, and Sue Armstrong provides us with a discussion of the strongest form of this myth: "Unless [female genitalia are] cut, the clitoris and the labia will grow until they hang down between a woman's knees" (44). Interestingly, the removal of the genitals symbolizes a disconnection of the woman's appendage.

²² For a more detailed discussion of the "icon of the Hottentot" as related to Black female sexuality, see Sander Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies."

²³ For a discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's use of folklore in her fiction, see Howard J Faulkner, "Mules and Men: Fiction as Folklore," CLA Journal 23 (1991): 331-39.

²⁴ I say "quasireligious," because though it is taught that circumcision is ordered by Islam, and one form of ritual female circumcision is called sunna which means--sanctioned by the prophet--there are no references to it in the Holy Qur'an as a requirement for women (Williams-Moen 5). Circumcision as an Islamic requirement is enforced through the use of a myth which purports that "a mother,"

envious of the male rite of passage, witnessed a male circumcision--"removal of the foreskin of the penis"--and "went home and did something similar to her daughters" (Fluid Meanings 11). Such fold belief is not supported by a search of scripture. I have confirmed that the Holy Qur'an does not sanction circumcision through personal communication with Elam Muhammad, Imam at Masjid Wali Mahmoud in Lansing, Michigan. Imam Muhammad informs me that the Qur'an does not sanction circumcision and hence "to refer to it as [any form of] sunna is misleading."

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of women as maintainers and transmitters of cultural knowledge and practices see the "Introduction" to Gay Wilentz's Binding Cultures. Later, I will discuss this cultural functioning of women as it is embodied by Mother(s) in two of Walker's novels Meridian and Possessing.

²⁶ Though the cultural "justifications" are presented in the novel through various character voices, Walker uses Bakhtinian hybrid constructions to undermine these representations. I discuss some of these instances more directly below.

²⁷ I make this comparison based on arguments that women who have been circumcised do not experience pleasure from sex, in contrast to the men who prefer the smaller openings. See for example, Olayinka Koso-Thomas' The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication. Also, Walker makes this point in the novel: Tashi tell us that sex, after her circumcision, "was very hard" because she had been sewn so tight, and M'Lissa retorts "the men like it tight" (245). Tashi then confesses that she has never received pleasure from sex (246).

Also, the image of the mummy woman in Meridian is brought about by one of the parables which informs Tashi's understanding of her "Life Like Condition". Pierre relays the story of Torabe and his promiscuous wife, whose body was "dragged from the river and left to rot, her body food for vultures and rodents" (139). Marilene O'Shay was thrown into the Great Salt Lake by her husband because "she was so generous with sharing herself," and she resurfaces at the circus preyed upon by vulturous spectators (9).

A BRIDGE:
Reading (in) Contested Spaces¹

bridge 1 a: structure carrying a
 pathway or roadway over a
 depression or obstacle
 b: a time, place or means of
 connection or transition;

 3 a: a musical passage
 linking two sections of a
 song Webster's Ninth New
 Collegiate Dictionary

This project reads/Reads discourses of African American identity and is thus itself such a discourse. Hence, I have attempted to define my discourse as one attentive to the boundaries between African and black America. I have used the concept "black America," in fact, to denote the separation that I attend to and that others have tried to elide. I have designated this section "a Bridge," because it functions in all the ways identified above. The term bridge is a chronotope. That is, bridge is temporal and spatial and provides "an optic for reading [Alice Walker's and Ama Ata Aidoo's] texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the cultural system from which they spring" (Bakhtin 425).² One such force is the discourse of blackness discussed in chapter one. The reading I have given of Alice Walker demonstrates her inheritance of that vision. Ama Ata Aidoo, as we will see in the following chapter, questions

constructs such as those crystallized in Asante's Africentric project.

My project is an/other Africentric project, struggling for a minimal level of diaspora literacy.³ Diaspora literacy "defines the reader's ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective" (Clark 42). Akin to seeing "from the native's point of view," diaspora literacy requires a grasping of the other's terms of definition, modes of meaning making; and it also requires that the act of reading an/other acknowledge these operating systems (Geertz, 1999). The quest for diaspora literacy, with respect to literature, was initiated by the incursion of black literary movements into the academy, and the discourses these movements engendered. Negritude in Africa and the Caribbean, New Negro Renaissance in the United States and Indigenist in the Caribbean gave voice to those who were once only spoken about. The writings produced during these periods gave form and body to the, until then, invisible--or at best unseen. Each of these literary movements produced a new discourse of identity and self definition, as diasporan peoples sought through the arts to redefine themselves and create their own images. Each of these movements sought to write agency and subjectivity upon the slate of passive objectivity upon which Black people

were inscribed. Maryse Conde explains that sense of absent or invisible agency:

It was not so much the conversation that amazed and revolted me as their way of going about it. You would think that I wasn't standing at the threshold of the room. They were talking about me yet ignoring me I was a nonbeing. Invisible. (24).

As black people stare across the gulf of time and space, their vision appears blurred. Memories fade, and vestiges of past selves dissolve. Yet, the notion of the diaspora reminds them that they must know each other, remember the past and retain traces of it. Hence it becomes necessary to erect structures which make the possibility of cultural traverse conceivable. An even better option would be constructions that make the gulf appear less wide.

Alice Walker and Ama Ata Aidoo are staring across the watery space and their erected structures offer quite different visions of the diaspora. Walker's Possessing offers a virtually absent African woman center/subject. Tashi is written but does not really speak even when she does. In her work, Aidoo implicitly questions Tashi's imposed silence and disassembles Walker's universal construct of African women. Entering an ongoing literary conversation, Walker and Aidoo show us how populations from both sides of the abyss must have their say, be seen.

Africans and African Americans each have their discourses of identity and truth, their regimes of truth,

the normative territory they alone own. These "sacred discourses" construct "boundar[ies] to be maintained [rather than] a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject" (Clifford, 1988 3). This project aims to demonstrate that, contrary to the politics of writing cultural identities, such delineations are not "fully fixed, complete and unnegotiable" (Olaniyan 536). Furthermore, to end the "identity crisis" that African Americans find themselves in does not require essentialist discourse. Culture is a "complicated politic" articulating "mutually contradictory and often antagonistic elements" (Olaniyan 536). There does not have to be some holistic entity, diaspora, to which Africans and African Americans must belong before they can communicate with each other, share things and be kin. There are other ways to span this distance without collapsing it, disavowing its existence. Moreover, African Americans must be careful that they do not, in their attempts at diasporization, inadvertently revise the "pet Negro system":

And every [African American] shall be allowed to pet himself a[n African]. Yea, he shall take a[n African] unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same [African] shall be perfect in his sight. . . . usually in the capacity of "representing the [African]". . . . The appointer has his reasons personal or political. (Hurstons 156, 160, 161).

Zora Neale Hurston in describing this "pet" Negro system conveys a most powerful message.⁴ There is no authentic,

pure insider that speaks to outsider [in]authenticity.

There is no essential Insider or essential Outsider. For if there were, what would the African American be? To the contrary, Zora Neale Hurston situates the identity negotiation in the nondirectional passageway between both of these positions. There is more going on here than self-reflection, self-criticism, a questioning of pet-owning and pet-being. The quest for authenticity, or authentic representation, must cease to be a predominant inquiry. As such, African American subjects must be seen as neither belonging fully to nor completely rejecting either place or time (Africa or America; past or present). Bridges must be built, but they must be recognized as spanning two times and places.

Texts function like bridges. By texts I am not referring only to the bound pages housed in libraries. We are texts. We read like pages bound, but in the words of En Vogue, "[b]efore you can read me, you got to learn how to see me" ("Free Your Mind"). My text is a medley of at least two other social texts--ethnicity and gender. I am black and woman. But, as bell hooks tells us, things are not simply so. She argues that blackness is seen as male and woman(ness) refers almost exclusively to white women. So where are those who are black and woman, somehow white and some how male.⁵ The black woman identity question is yet to be asked, yet to be fully addressed. Are we

"race(d)" first and then gender(ed)? Or, are we gender(ed) and then "race(d)"? Abena Busia tells us that [blackwomen's] reality is that we are 'neither white nor male,' [but] both black and female" (1). We are always already and equally both, doubled and then some. That is, DuBois's double consciousness is intensified for black women.

The Negro American split does not account for, or address the black woman's hybrid being. The texts of ethnicity and gender collide in me, forming the text of my self. Holloway suggests that naming my self blackwoman responds to the pertinence of gender and ethnicity in my identity. Or, is it better represented as black[]woman? This [question] is our business and Walker and Aidoo attend to it, arguing quite decisively for the acknowledgement of black[]women's voices. If identity defines "who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside," then identity crises denote transitions, a moving toward that place where differences come face to face with each other, struggle, negotiate, struggle yet some more and rest only to struggle again (Anzaldua 2).⁶ Identity, then, is not an ending; it is a point of departure.

Textual bridges link the voices and bodies of the [African] written and the [African American] writers. This middle passage separates African American and African readings of African gendered identity, but also connects

them. These two writers' voices are not always found in the words on the pages. Accordingly, if we read texts as telling themselves and as well as Reading us, then we may encounter these subverted voices, those which speak what cannot be said. Finding, reading and being read by these unspoken voices can prove to be powerful reading moments. The silences always speak to us, but whether or not we choose to (1) hear them and (2) acknowledge them are different questions and perhaps equally important ones.

I focus critical attentions on the relationships between representors, represented and uses of representations. We should give equal attention to how interpretation is representation. We cannot escape that we know our Self, by naming another thing that is not us, an Other, and one such way we name these Others is through reading and interpretation. Once we have determined the representational leanings of our interpretations and readings, and how these readings are sometimes influenced by forces outside of our control (e.g. institutional racism and/or sexism), we might begin to develop other interpretive strategies and forge new hybrid grounds from which to read. No doubt, these new strategies will also be influenced by and coinciding with those of [O]ther interpretive communities, and we always bring their readings into our own, sometimes without our awareness.

This passage, my bridge, r/Reads, [un]writes some of the written and allows the written to write. However, our writings of ourselves are not the focus of inquiry any more than someone else's writing of us. It is not a matter of which picture is closer to the "truth," or even who can tell my story, your story or someone else's story but a questioning all the stories that are told for us, told about and that implicate us. The question should not be "how it feels to read colored me/you", (or even "how it feels to write noncolored you/me"), but "how do I/you Read when I/you read and/or write a self". After all, reading and writing selves--somebody else's or our own--are what we are about.

NOTES

¹ The notion of reading in and talking about contested space(s) truly summarizes what this work is about. However, framing that discussion in those exact terms is Professor Stephen Rachman's contribution to my work. Nonetheless, the development of this bridge under that rubric is entirely my own doing, as well as the shortcomings thereof.

² Using "a bridge" to frame and comment upon this project is much like Paul Gilroy's use of "ships" in his work The Black Atlantic. Though I had this idea prior to reading Gilroy's work, I credit his project for drawing to scale the condensed model I had in my mind.

³ My project, because it questions the narrowing cultural space between Africa and black America, by design focuses on only two of these cultural lands.

⁴ Though Hurston's discussion was of the black-white relationship, I contend that often the oppressed become oppressor in some of the same ways that they themselves are/were oppressed. Especially, considering that black Americans have participated in and been, in many respects, integrated in Americanism, her idea becomes applicable to my analysis as well. In the case of Alice Walker, her feminism allows her to R/r African women as she does and feel quite righteous in doing so, and this R/r represses African women's agency. Walker has indeed found an African to pet, the image of the resistant African woman Tashi has not been allowed to become.

⁵ Specifically, hooks notes the "bind" in which black[]women find themselves with respect to feminism--defined by the poet Haki Madhubuti as political "infighting" between white men and women--and racism--defined with emphasis on black male struggles and needs. See the first chapter of Ain't I a Woman: Black Woman and Feminism.

⁶ The identity crises to which I am referring is exemplified by the regular shifts in identity labels for black people in the United States. The name has changed from African in the seventeenth century to Emancipation; Colored in the nineteenth century; Negro at the turn of the twentieth century; Black in the mid sixties to late seventies; Afro-American and Black coexisted until the call

for African American in the late eighties. For a detailed discussion of this process see Smitherman's "'What is African to me?': Language, Ideology and African American".

CHAPTER THREE:
"GOING THROUGH CHANGES" WITH AMA ATA AIDOO:
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND AFRICA, THE CONVERSATION HISTORY
THWARTED¹

As I have demonstrated in chapter one, the relationship between Africans and African Americans has been a theme in African American literature for centuries. This connection to the past has been a recurrent theme for both black American male and female writers. In the main, however, African writers have not shown much interest in exploring this historical connection.² One notable exception to this pattern of indifference, though, is Ama Ata Aidoo. In her crafting of African women and in discussion of their status in Africa, she has found it useful to investigate how African Americans fit into an analysis of the African woman's condition.

Aidoo defines her literary commitment as an extension of her social vision. This vision includes black people all over the world, and her concern for women is equally global. Aidoo tells us she is certain that the socioeconomic, political and cultural survival and development of Africa "[hinge] on the woman question. It might be the catalyst for development" (James 26). Furthermore, she holds that the silence of history regarding why and how Africans came to be displaced and dispersed across the globe must also be

overcome if Africa is to come to terms with its past and move toward the future. Aidoo recalls that "go[ing] to places where there are concentrations of other black peoples" aided her resolution to "face the question," in her literature and by other means available to her, to explain just why "so many [African peoples] are in Harlem and so many in the West Indies" (Vincent 35). Aidoo chose to explore this avoided issue, the hidden history of African dispersal, in her first play Dilemma of a Ghost.

Furthermore, in all of her longer works, there is an allusion to the diasporic relationship, particularly as it relates to Africans and African Americans. Read alongside Alice Walker's construction of an African woman, Aidoo's gendered identity narrative, Changes, signals a distant closeness between these two women, one that can neither be taken for granted nor overlooked.³

Most of Aidoo's work can be characterized as resembling dilemma tales. Roger Abrahams identifies the dilemma tale as a tale which "throw[s] the floor open to debate, demonstrating yet again that in the African context the function of storytelling is to initiate" (16-17). Changes [re]initiates issues raised in Aidoo's previous work.⁴ Particularly, I propose that Aidoo Reads Western readers with respect to their [re]creations of African women. The specific creative readers of interest for my analysis are African Americans--particularly, Alice Walker. Aidoo's

Anowa and Dilemma of a Ghost help us begin to examine this relationship. Though they are not explored in depth in Changes, the issues highlighted by Eulalie's presence in Africa strongly relate to Alice Walker's reading of African women and her participation in the proliferation of some of the stereotypes and misconceptions about these women.

Of Sisterhood and Oppression: Aidoo and the Critical Tradition of Reading African Women[*'s Fiction*]

In Anowa, Aidoo briefly tells the tale of the slave trade and the dissemination of Africans across the globe. In fact, Aidoo's dramatization offers insight into why other writers may have elected to avoid this subject. Anowa is set in the late nineteenth century, approximately 1870, and focuses on Anowa, a beautiful woman who rejects societal authority and expectation in order to marry a man she has chosen, Kofi Afo. They gain wealth in trading, but soon Kofi expands their trading to include human cargo: "[Kofi] is buying men and women as though they were only worth each a handful of sands on the shore" (39). Anowa refuses any of the benefits from her husband's business in stocking and selling slaves, for she finds it an immoral as well as inhumane enterprise. For Anowa, there was "something unwholesome about making slaves of men" (39). Importantly, though, Anowa recounts to the reader a story told to her by her grandmother, Nana, wherein the "truth" is revealed as to how "the pale men" came to own Africans.

Nana tells of her travels to lands far and away from Africa, a land across a "sea that is bigger than any river and boils without being hot" (44). In these new lands she sees "houses whose foundations are wider than the biggest roads" in Africa (44). These house were built large, she tells Anowa, to house the slaves--"[those] who are bought and sold" (45). Anowa questions Nana:

Did the men of the land sell other men of the land, and women and children to pale men from beyond the horizon who looked like you or me peeled, like lobsters boiled or roasted?

Nana: I don't know, child. . . . I was not there! . . . No one talks of these things anymore. . . . They have forgotten! (46)

When Anowa goes to sleep that night she dreams that she like Africa gave birth to the men and women who were captured into slavery:

I dreamt that I was a big, big woman. And from my insides were huge holes out of which poured men, women and children. And the sea was boiling hot and steaming. And as it boiled, it threw many, many giant lobsters, boiled lobsters, each of whom as it fell turned into a man or woman, but keeping its lobster head and claws. And they rushed to where I sat and seized the men and women as they poured out of me, and they tore them apart, and dashed them to the ground and stamped upon them. (46)

In Dilemma of a Ghost, one of the children returns.

Dilemma of a Ghost deals with the problematic marriage between a Ghanaian man, Ato Yawson who is a been-to, and Eulalie Rush, an African American woman. Ato is a Ghanaian

student studying in the United States; he meets and falls in love with Eulalie, a black American student. They marry and return to his village. The obvious dilemma to which the play's title refers is Ato's inability to reconcile his American education and its ideas and values with the values and expectations of his family (Berrian 156). However, on another level the dilemma of the play can be defined as the reconciling of historical dissonance. The ghost of the title is an explicit reference to a children's folk song about a ghost lingering at the crossroads between Cape Coast and Elmina, pondering to which city it should travel. Unable to decide, it simply repeats, "I don't know, I can't tell" (23). This ghost returns to Ato in a dream, from which he awakens exclaiming "Damn this ghost at the junction . . . I used to wonder what the ghost was doing there. . . . But why should I dream about all these things now?" (24) The ghost has been read as reminiscent of Ato's own dilemma, balancing his Western acquired ideas with the traditional expectations he meets when he returns to Ghana. In other words, it is the dilemma of the been-to (Wilentz, 1992 45). The ghost clearly revisits Ato because he has invoked the ghost of hidden history, personified in the person of Eulalie, an African American woman. In fact, Cape Coast and Elmina were very active ports during the slave trade (Busia 35). In this respect, the ghost in the play's title refers to the haunting and silent history of African involvement in

the slave trade. The ghost read this way initiates a conversation which hopefully can expose the lack of information and understanding that Africans and African Americans have of each other. Ato can serve as a potential bridge spanning the Middle Passage, for he is the only character who has made a life on both sides of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, Ato fails in this respect, because even though Eulalie "returns" to Africa, she has yet to establish her life there, a life amongst Ato and his people. As a result, the necessary dialogue across the silence and the distance is deferred.

When Ato informs his family that he will marry an American, they fear that she is white. Upon hearing that Eulalie is black, but belongs to no tribe, Nana, Ato's grandmother responds, "[s]ince I was born, I have not heard of a human being born out of the womb of a woman who has no tribe. Are there trees which never have any roots?" (11). Ato explains that Eulalie's family was amongst the Africans taken to America as slaves. Hence, Ato awakens the African dilemma of how to deal with their past:

Nana: My spirit Mother ought to have come for me earlier. Now what shall I tell them who are gone? The daughter of slaves who came from the white man's land. Someone should advise me on how to tell my story. (14)

Because Nana serves as the link between her living relatives and their ancestors who have passed on, it is her responsibility to narrate her family's history to account

for their actions. Eulalie's presence complicates her narration because to include Eulalie in the story she must speak, or write, what has yet to be acknowledged. Like *Beloved's* story, this was not one to be passed on (Morrison 193). However, Ato has forced Africa to confront this past, or at least include it in the telling of its present.

While Ato's family initially rejects Eulalie, Aidoo does not cast Eulalie as totally responsible for the bad communications and poor relations she has with her in-laws. Ato as well must bear that responsibility for not having "dealt well with" his family and his wife. Ato had not clearly explained to Eulalie what would be expected of her in Ghana as his wife and a member of his tribe. In part, Ato's silence is due to Africans' failure to acknowledge their historical implication in the slave trade, which bore upon Eulalie's predicament. Secondly, Eulalie's conflicting emotions toward Africa represent the African American end of the dilemma. Her expectations are akin to those described by Alex Haley in *Roots*. She tells Ato that she will relax among the "palm trees, the azure sea, the sun and golden beaches" (36). She describes Africa in terms of story-book myths, and, as Ato tells her, "a tourist brochure" (36). More directly, she speaks to her dead mother's spirit and tells her, "I've come to the very source. I've come to Africa and I hope that where'er you are, you sort of know and approve" (19). Eulalie has married Ato with as much

information about Africa as Ato has of African Americans. Importantly, Eulalie attempts not only to address her double consciousness but to reconcile the two parts of herself. Instead of existing as a "native stranger" in Ato's land, Eulalie yearned to be simply native, to annihilate her strangeness; for once she was going to be at home.

Though Eulalie's desire had been to find peace and harmony in her new marriage, in her new home with her new family, their ignorance of each other brings only chaos. However, having brought Eulalie to Africa, Ato perpetuates her ignorance by not providing her with adequate information; he has not taken the time to educate his new wife to his family's ways. For instance Eulalie agrees with Ato's proposition that they should not have children. Ato tells her that he would be jealous of the children taking up so much time, and furthermore, that they "shall be free to love each other. . . . and that is all [Eulalie] should understand about Africa" (37). However, the tradition amongst Ato's people is clearly that marriage is not a two person affair, but involves families. Hence, Nana confronts Ato with his and Eulalie's secrecy surrounding the issue of having children, over her desire to become a great-grandmother. Ato refuses to admit that they are using birth control, but instead, leaves Eulalie to explain and bear the responsibility as well as the scorn. Eulalie's reaction is to pose the question, "Ato, who married me, you or your

goddamn people?" (87) The climax of the play comes when Eulalie and Ato battle over their crumbling marriage and his failure to communicate to her what his people expected of her as a wife. Eulalie accuses Ato's people of only understanding "their own savage customs and standards," to which Ato responds, "Shut up! How much does the American Negro know?" (87) Eulalie storms out, and Ato goes to his mother to complain about Eulalie's insult:

Ato: She said that my people have no understanding, that they are uncivilized

Esi: Is that It? My child, and why should your wife say this about us?

Ato: I don't know. (90)

Esi scolds Ato for he "never seems to know anything" in spite of all that they have sacrificed for his schooling. Ato attempts to explain, retorting "in these days of civilization," but Esi Kom interrupts him and admonishes him:

Esi: In these days of civilization, what? Now I know that you have been teaching your wife to insult us. No stranger ever breaks the law . . . my son. You have not dealt well with your wife in this. (90-91)

At this point, Eulalie enters, stumbling, and Esi Kom embraces her reminding Ato that "[her] mother is dead [and] if she had any tenderness, [h]er ghost must be keeping watch over [a]ll that happens to her" (92). Because Eulalie has married a family instead of an individual she is saved. However, dilemma tales very seldom end with an instructional

moral and when they do the moral is often so "divisive and open-ended" further discussion is always necessary (Abrahams 17). This tale ends with Ato alone and the ghost repeating, "I don't know. I can't tell". Though Esi Kom embraces Eulalie and says "come my child," it is not clear that her embrace is one of acceptance as some critics have claimed (Berrian 158; Wilentz, 1992 56). I believe the embrace signifies an embrace of the responsibility to tackle the issue, to discuss the silent history.

Aidoo investigates the lack of knowledge in her later work as well. Here, the inquiry is launched from an exchange between an African American student who questions a visiting African Professor about African history. At the end of Our Sister Killjoy, just before Sissie's long letter addressing the behavior of her fellow Africans abroad, the exchange occurs:

Sir, please tell me: is Egypt in Africa?
 I mean Sir, I don't mean to
 harass you or anything, pressed the
 student, but did the Egyptians who built
 the pyramids, you know, the Pharaohs and
 all, were they African? (111)

The Professor responds quite exasperatedly:

My dear young man . . . to give you the
 decent answer that your anxiety demands,
 I would have to tell you a detailed
 history of the African continent. And to
 do that, I shall have to speak every
 day, twenty-four hours a day, for at
 least three thousand years. and I don't
 mean to be rude to you or anything, but
 who has that kind of time? (111)

Though this only occupies about thirteen lines of the text, it serves to introduce Sissie's letter which voices her concerns over violation against Africa by nonAfricans and Africans alike. Particularly pertinent to my discussion here, Sissie questions "[her] Precious Something," about why they "were never able to discuss some of [the] matters relating to their group survival" (114). Among these is the "old story" and a "painful one" about how Africans were made slaves and exploited as free labor. This violence was committed, Sissie discloses:

with the help of the gun and some of our own relatives [and] we were made slaves because we are stronger, and can work longer hours in the sun and other such nonsenses . . . (114)

Without a doubt this passage speaks to the forced labor of Africans during the colonial period, but the literature of Africa also informs us that though this violence is a painful story, it has not been one untold.⁵ However, as evidenced by Anowa and her "dream," the role of Africans in the slave trade is an old, painful and untold story. The "love letter" demonstrates that Aidoo's gaze is definitely inward.

Moreover, Changes offers us an interesting opportunity to examine that inward gaze and how it is somewhat directed from without. It is a gaze directed in part by assumptions like those of African Americans like Eulalie and the unnamed student. To clarify, Changes is a novel about African

women, but its representations of these women result from the narrative willingness to engage the Other's gaze and to turn what the Other sees on its head. Like Possessing the Secret of Joy, Changes is a cultural fiction. It is a novel about gendered culture in Africa, and how it has been inscribed, described and transcribed from the outside.

In this novel, Ama Ata Aidoo tackles the challenge issued by Paul Rabinow in "Representations are Social Facts." Though Rabinow directs this challenges to Westerners, Aidoo's fiction allows us an opportunity to see the West anthropologized from the outside, the way it has anthropologized Others. In that essay, Rabinow argues that cross-cultural conversations are "only possible within contexts shaped and constrained by historical, cultural and political relations" and the "social practices that constitute them" (239). Furthermore, he suggests that in cross-cultural encounters we should be "attentive to our [own] historical practices of projecting our cultural practices onto the other" (240). The result of all this, then, would be that we would "anthropologize the West" and examine its perceived universals for their "historical peculiarities" (241). On a corresponding note, Rachel Blau DuPlessis tells us that narratives "produce representations by which we imagine the world as it is" (3). For Alice Walker, the world of African women is one organized around the bodily sexual politics of patriarchy; however, for Ama

Ata Aidoo, such categorizing is not always appropriate. Just as Walker crafts Tashi and M'Lissa within her literary and cultural tradition, so, too, does Ama Ata Aidoo cast the female characters in Changes within her particular traditions.

Changes is the story of Esi Sekyi, among others. On the surface, the novel is about love and Esi's experiences in search of love on acceptable terms. However, it is also a novel about traditions. Hortense Spillers tells us that "traditions are not born. They are made . . . they survive as *created social events*" (Spillers 153).⁶ In the story of Esi we find several traditions intersecting, being made and remade. First, Aidoo engages the representations of African women already out there and the Western peculiarities projected onto them. In addition, she manipulates these characterizations as she questions the stories that have been, can be, should be and/or/but may never be told. As well, the novel is a text of representational struggle and revision. Revision, Holloway tells us, is a restructuring of traditional modes of organization yielding not only a "(re)new(ed) structure, but a new lens through which to view the preexisting one(s)" (13). In this text Aidoo revises two modes of organizing African women's experience.

Until about ten years ago, African male writers were responsible for the depiction and representation of African women as they were generally disseminated worldwide. Within

male-authored texts, African women are often presented within what Roseanne P. Bell identifies as seven primary stereotypes of African women: "[t]he Earthmother, concubine, doormat of a wife, the sacrificial lamb, the high life floozy, the 'been-to', and the willing mechanism in a polygamous drama" (491). In the traditional African texts--male-authored--the use of these archetypes allowed for monolithic characterizations of African women's experiences. Furthermore, these characterizations allowed Western, mostly white middle-class, feminists to theorize and discourse on African women through sexual liberationist politics.⁷ In fact, Aidoo tells us that some of these feminists have gone so far as to declare that women like her are "bourgeois African women [who] are in no position to speak for ordinary African women in the village" ("Capacious" 153).

Despite the obvious differences between the women who developed and for whom these politics were developed, and the women for whom they desire to speak, this gender universalism ignored colonial influences. As Aidoo tells us, "many African women are convinced that much of the oppression of women that modern African men indulge in and claim as 'genuine' African culture is, in fact, a legacy of the European colonizers" ("Capacious" 153). Hence, reading Ama Ata Aidoo's women-centered stories, and those of other women writers as well, becomes problematic when taken alongside Western and African male "narratives of gender"

(de Lauretis 25). Chinua Achebe says that such representations have functioned to create, and reinforce "all kinds of myths that support the suppression of the [African] woman" (4). He further states that the time has come for this to change and that "the woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her new role is going to be" (4). It is my belief that Aidoo, even prior to Achebe's declaration, was doing just this kind of designing.

The critical colloquies like that of Achebe and the feminists provoked an interest in African women's fiction that was marked by the 1981 publication of Lloyd Brown's Women Writers in Black Africa, the 1985 Black Women Writers and the Diaspora Conference, followed by the 1986 publication of Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature and the 1987 special issue of African Literature Today dedicated to discussions of women's texts.⁸ These three critical events evidenced the dearth of attention previously paid to female novelists, and each of these works endeavored to analyze what African women had to say about (1) Africa; (2) women's experiences in Africa; (3) the place of women in Africa and (4) men's representation of women in their writing. Nonetheless the majority of the critical readings in these texts are Western feminist, against male readings, or both. In the latter two texts, for example, the pervasive concern was how feminist African women writers are. In the special issue Women in African Literature

Today, critic Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie lamented that "many African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists, as if it were a crime to be a feminist" (11). It is my sense that the politics of feminism are not objectionable to these writers, but the discourse engendered by use(s) of that particular term is what they find unacceptable. Ama Ata Aidoo stated that she would not "protest" if critics and readers of her work choose to call her "feminist," but she intimates that she is not a feminist solely because she writes about women ("Unwelcome Pals" 40; emphasis mine). For Aidoo, being a feminist is more than demonstrating a sincere regard for women and writing about women's experiences. Actually, the central characters in her novels are women, she says, "because [she] is a woman [...] and that is natural" (James 14). More caustically, Buchi Emecheta rejected the politico-cultural location of feminist discourse and the term "feminism" itself:

I will not be called a feminist here because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that. Otherwise, if you look at everything I do, it's what feminists do too; but it is just that [the term] comes from Europe, or European women, and I don't like being defined by them. (Grandquist and Stotesbury 19)

Clearly, these two writers would argue that not every woman who makes a political statement assessing and/or critiquing the social position of women is a feminist. For some African women writers, "feminist" may suggest "a profoundly

individualistic philosophy: [which] values the personal growth and individual fulfillment over any large communal needs or good" (Frank 45). Additionally, Aidoo and Emecheta link gender and location; they see the discourse of feminism as located outside of where they and their subjects experience gender. However, I would argue that Aidoo engages that same feminist discourse in fulfillment of her commitment "as a writer, as a woman, and as a third world [African] person" (Ogundipe-Leslie 11).

Changes illustrates how Aidoo works within and against discourses of Western feminist and male constructed, and some African women's, monoliths of African women's experiences. Aidoo's particular aim is to force us to question past representations of African women, to challenge our presumptions and assumptions about the African woman's condition, and in so doing to [re]write a discourse of feminism that treats the African woman on her own grounds. In particular, Aidoo's Esi is a woman struggling to adhere to Emecheta's pronouncement that:

[The African woman] must clarify her notions of home and family, of freedom and identity. She must finally, choose her own life, or at least her own master (Emecheta, 1975 179).

These lines from The Slave Girl aptly characterize the axis upon which Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes turns. Aidoo's text revolves around a concern with identity making and who the maker will and should be. Aidoo tells us that when gender

politics are discussed in "the African context, we quickly find that we must lay the blame for [the African woman's] present predicament squarely on the doorsteps of African men" ("Capacious" 153). However, it is not because these men are patriarchal by nature--this is implied in their references to "traditional African societies"--but that the colonial process has afforded them a convenient opportunity to forget the significance of women to Africa's sociopolitical struggles and its overall survival (Aidoo in James 24-25; Emecheta in James 38-39).⁹

Changes is a novel about personal and political shifts and struggles: the changes that colonialism promised, the changes women go through as they enter what was once man's domain--the work place--as well as the changes a society must go through in order to allow women financial and personal freedoms. Aidoo identifies two factions that clamor for authority in determining what the African woman needs for her liberation: Western white feminists and African men educated in the West and living outside of Africa ("Capacious" 153). Aidoo further charges that the former impose their brand of feminism while the latter aver that feminism of any kind is not what the African woman needs. Never once, she reminds us, did either of these groups recognize that African women can and do speak for themselves. Esi Sekyi, however, does indeed speak for herself.

Changes provides us with two strong female characters. Through these women, Aidoo evidences that "to be constituted by a discourse" is not necessarily "to be determined by discourse where determination forecloses the possibility of agency" (Butler, 1990 143). Aidoo as a writing subject, consciously writing through her multiplicity and against foreign and domestic essentialist transcriptions of her identity, constructs subjects [her characters] who serve to subvert, diffuse, and/or dislocate dominant forms of social discourse (Butler, 1990 141-3). Specifically, Aidoo writes as a womanist, and as such she creates women who confront their realities laboring not only to survive as individual gendered subjects, but also as contributing members of a society struggling to revolutionize itself. This dual task is not a bind for them, nor are the often conflicting requirements of these existences a dilemma they must resolve.¹⁰ Instead, it is their social consciousness, their lives, that is the goal toward which, in frustration sometimes and even in anguish, they steadily labor.

Esi Sekyi: I, Too am Africa[n], or The Complexity of Gender

When the novel opens, we are introduced to Esi first as a professional woman--"from the Department of Urban Statistics"--then as a wife and mother (4). Immediately, the novel forces us to confront a problematic feminist representation of women in Africa. In "Women Without Men:

The Feminist Novel in Africa," Katherine Frank asserts that the "paramount question that nearly all [African novels by women] ask is how can the contemporary African woman negotiate her way between the claims of tradition and modernization, how can she be rendered whole again?" (18) This commanding issue has been termed by Frank and others as "the African woman's bind," "the African woman's dilemma," and even borrowing from Buchi Emecheta's novel, "the double yoke" (Ngambika 178). Marie Umeh further suggests that this dilemma is created by the "inherent sexism of many traditional African societies" (175). Particularly, the bind is connected to the social institutions--i.e. family, community, economy--with which women choose to associate. Aidoo directly engages this presumption of an intrinsic choice African women must make between social and financial independence on the one hand and Africanness on the other.

Secondly, Aidoo addresses how female sexual presence is an important reality for the women in male-authored African fiction. For the most part, male writers see the women they create as appendages or tools in the hands of their central figure, often someone male (Ngambika v; Frank 16).

Katherine Frank attempts to define "the feminist novel in Africa" and one criterion for this novel is the interrogation of "traditional" African sexual politics. Analogously, Ann Ferguson sketches two of the primary positions under debate in feminist sexual politics, and her

discussion clarifies the grounding of Frank's ideas about "the feminist novel in Africa." In "Sex Wars: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists," Ferguson suggests that while radical feminists argue that "sexual freedom requires sexual equality of partners and their equal respect for one another as both subjects and body," libertarian feminists suggest "sexual freedom requires oppositional practices, that is, transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality" (108-9). The African woman's bind, then, is reflective of repressive social categories of sexuality which preclude "equal respect" for women as subjects and bodies. In fact, Frank tells us that the African woman writer is involved in a "repudiation of prevailing patriarchal roles and norms" in order to "delineate fully the new life of the African New Woman" (32). A primary "patriarchal role and norm" against which Frank sees African women writers struggling is to be found in the practices of polygamy--one of the most "glaringly sexist feature[s] of traditional African society" (Frank 18). Particularly, Frank is concerned with how this institution defines and conscripts female sexuality (18). Aidoo addresses this construction of polygamy in the narration of Changes, and Reads criticisms like Frank's.

Upon meeting Esi's husband, Oko, we discover that he is displeased that his wife "definitely puts her career well

above any duties she has as a wife" (8). Esi "was on those dreadful birth control things: pills, loops, or whatever," and she "complained endlessly anytime she had to enter the kitchen" (8). Though they have one child, Oko laments that his wife seems not to want more children: "he wanted other children, at least one more . . . a boy if possible. But another girl would have been welcome" (8). Upon reflection, Oko is quite confounded by these feelings and silently argues with the "loud male voice[,] . . . whose voice was that? His father's?" that tells him that Esi does not fit the mold. Hence, he questions, "is Esi [...] an African woman? She not only is, but there are plenty of them around these days. . . these days. . . these days" (8). This question reflects concerns much larger than those implied by the immediate context of its utterance, and to highlight it as such, Aidoo situates the "voice" and Oko's question within the narration and not in Oko's mouth as dialogue. The immediate question is "What is an African woman?" Throughout the novel, Esi endeavors to answer Oko's unspoken question by engaging several discourses that have attempted to define African women, namely Western feminist readers of African literature and male African writers. In fact, answering Oko's question provides the foundation for the second text of this novel.

The voices in Changes tell us a lot about how to read the characters. Particularly, the nonprosaic portions of

this novel represent a commenting, Reading, other voice. Aidoo uses this voice, the Reading voice, to signify directly on the reader who reads African women's fiction from perspectives like that of Frank and Umeh. Furthermore, this commentary signifies upon Alice Walker's crafting of Tashi and M'Lissa as helpless victims of patriarchy awaiting their Western saviours--feminist or otherwise.

Early in the novel, Esi is trying to come to terms with her feelings about what she describes as a "marital rape" and trying to decide her course of action. Esi imagines herself presenting a paper entitled "The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment" (10). Her presentation, she imagines, receives "boos from the men, and uncomfortable titters from the women" (11). The question answer period consists of only one, quite elaborate question:

Yes, we told you, didn't we? What is
burying us now are all these imported
feminist ideas . . . And dear lady
colleague, how would you describe
"marital rape" in Akan?

Igbo? . . . Yoruba

Wolof? . . . or Temne? (11)

The speaker contends, as most Western feminists also imply, that there is no feminism in Africa that was not brought to it from the outside.¹¹ Hence, the speaker charges that such imported ideas are of no consequence in explaining

behaviors in Africa. Significantly, Aidoo recasts this objection and presents it through the Reading voice:

She was caught in her own trap. Hadn't she some time ago said in an argument that

you cannot go around claiming an idea or an item was imported into a given society unless you could also conclude that to the best of your knowledge, there is not, and never was any word or phrase in that society's indigenous language which describes that idea or item?

By which and other proof, the claim that "plantain" "cassava" and other African staples came from Asia or the Americas could only be sustained by racist historians and lazy African academics? . . . African staples coming from America? Ha, ha, ha! . . . And incidentally, what did the slaves take there with them in the way of something to grow and eat? What a magnificent way to turn history on its head! (12)

The question that this excerpt raises is not only that of imported ideologies, but also the ideological assumption inherent in claiming that an idea is (or is not) imported. Particularly, when is it appropriate to assume that an idea is imported? And what does that assumption do to the validity of the idea itself? Though the narrator later asserts that "the society could not possible [sic] have an indigenous word for [marital rape]" because "sex is something a man claims from his wife as his right," (12-13) we are still left to ponder the "significance" of the previous discussion.

Bakhtin offers us a lens through which to view the Reading voice. In "Discourse in the Novel," he argues:

[the] novel can be described as a diversity of speech types (sometimes even a diversity of language) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. . . (262).

These "diverse speech types" contribute to the novel's "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 262; 332). The Reading voice functions in Changes as an instance of the polyphony of social and discursive forces. It allows us to hear what the characters are thinking, but also offers us a perspective different from what the characters have established, and even what we have come to expect from them. Directly related to Esi's contemplation, in fact, the Reading voice suggests that we cannot, nor can Esi for that matter, demonstrate that "never" in her language did such a concept exist. Though Aidoo is specific to the items of food, her comment that claims about Africa's historical significance can only be supported by "racist historians and lazy African academics" signals to me that she takes issue with more than food staples but a history that has been turned on its head and I suggest that aims to turn it over again. Just as African food items were once said to have come from elsewhere, it is possible that the pre-colonial existence of ideas like marital rape was equally ignored.

Esi's characterization of that sex act with her husband as "marital rape" in fact does conjure up debates about

gender politics, but Aidoo reminds us, ever so cautiously, that to critique Oko's behavior, we must understand how gender politics are negotiated in Africa. The commentary constructs a self-representation of the colonial body, an expression of its scars from history. Africa and Africans are not allowed to claim anything as their own, or as a contribution to the development of civilization; all that is African or in Africa comes from somewhere else. Aidoo turns that silent African history on its head, or at least she encourages us to examine assumptions that support thinking that all that is within Africa came from without.¹²

After the incident of marital rape, Esi leaves Oko and begins a relationship with Ali Kondey. Ali is the "managing director of Linga Hide Aways, the travel and tourist agency he established" (22). The narrator describes him as an extremely attractive man who was "able to pay for luxury" (23). Like his father--Musa Musa, a master trader along Africa's west coast--Ali is wealthy and quite a lady's man. The narrator makes it quite clear that Ali revered and admired his father, and he consequently tried hard to emulate him, professionally and personally; Ali "was very proud of the part of himself which resembled his father. Above all, he was aware that establishing Linga was just continuing the family trade" (24). Significantly, though, the arena of sexual politics was "the only way in which Ali was not like his father" (24). Whereas "Ali's father

preferred his women young and tender [who] had to be virgins of course" (23), "Ali liked his women mature, and he had no special use for virginity" (24). It is highly meaningful that Ali rejects the idea forged by Alice Walker that African men desire virgins, women whose sexuality has been regulated for the increased sexual pleasure of men.¹³

Indeed, Ali's attitude toward women convinces Esi that he would respect her in ways Oko did not and could not. Subsequently, we learn that Ali acquired both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Sociology and Economics from a university in England. Appropriately, through his thoughts we are allowed to confront the social forces of tradition that confound African women. His comments, however, also relate to Western feminists' discourse on the body, sexuality, and the connection between sexuality and identity. After recognizing, and admiring, the ease with which Esi shares her nakedness with him, Ali reflects upon the fact that:

. . . he knew very few women from his part of the world who even tried to be at ease with their own bodies. The combination of forces against them had been too overwhelming -
 traditional shyness and contempt for the biology of women;
 Islamic suppressive ideas about women;
 English Victorian prudery and French hypocrisy imported by the colonisers . . .
 All these had variously and together wreaked havoc on the mind of the modern African woman: especially about herself.
 (75)

These problematic characterizations, like Oko's earlier question, are presented in the narrative voice, not the character's voice. Ali's thoughts as expressed above are another example of double voicedness in this text. These descriptions overemphasize the legacy of victimization foisted upon the "modern African woman" and allow her only the role of a passive object in a male sexual discourse, following typical patterns of patriarchy. Moreover, they do not assign adequate analysis to the degree to which sexuality and understandings of sexuality can be simultaneously oppressive and liberatory--an arena for a liberatory political struggle. Furthermore, if we are to accept Ali's premise that these foreign and domestic factors have scripted African women's negative impulses toward their bodies, we must also accept, as Karen Rian argues, that "our sexuality has been constructed for the most part through social structures over which [women] have no control" (45; 49). In this view, male power, patriarchy, is totalistic. Rian's definition of a liberated sexual self requires that women totally control the social structures that shape their lives (38). This is the position Ali implies as he "thinks" these thoughts. He represents for us a social constructionist view of sexual identity formation. But Esi's ease with her body suggests that the relationship between the individual and society, or the social forces Ali describes, is probably not one of total social determination

nor socialization. To the contrary, Esi demonstrates that socialization is an ongoing theoretical endeavor never fully realized in practice. One is never fully socialized, but always in the process of socialization.

Foucault is quite accurate in proposing that "the real strength of [a liberatory] woman's movement is not that of having laid claim to the specificity of the sexuality . . . but that they have actually departed from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality"

(Power/Knowledge 219-20). Following Foucault, we can see that Esi does not concede that she should be ashamed of her body. Her resistance results not from her ignorance of the patriarchal operating forces, but instead, from her refusal to situate herself within the apparatuses they construct.¹⁴ With her body, Esi tells a new story, one breaking through to its "own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words" and alien constructs (Bakhtin 277). Ali's comments deny Esi, and African women generally, this power and this agency. Esi's behavior--"not shy about showing her body to the men she slept with" (75)--is demonstrative of her liberatory stance toward sexual identity in her society.¹⁵ However, unlike Rian, Esi does not see her liberation as attached to dismantling social structures. Instead she revises the structures whenever and wherever she can, and for her, this is liberating.

Additionally, Esi's attitude indicates that while hegemonic forces are indeed powerful, they are not all encompassing.¹⁶ Hence, negotiating her sexual identity involves mediating the conflicting and contradictory discourses, and the repressive, oppressive social forces.¹⁷ Thus the "bind" Frank and others have described becomes merely the means by which an individual, undergoing these struggles, emerges with a fragmented and dynamic self, the selves we all are, whether we acknowledge them or not. Hence, women in Africa emerge not always as victims of colonialism and/or patriarchy, but instead as members of a dynamic population. A significant dynamic in these women's lives is the practice of polygamy.

At the same moment that Esi has freed herself from her strangulating marriage--"if I had wanted someone's grown up son, I would've stayed with Oko" (88)--she contemplates a polygamous marriage. Because her "society does not permit single women to exist" since their "single state was an insult to the glorious manhood of [their] men" (47, 48), Esi decides that she will remarry and become Ali Kondé's second wife. This polygamous relationship provides a vital commentary on the issue of changes as well as epitomizing Aidoo's critiques of Western feminist and African male representations of African women. After agreeing that they would marry and that Esi would become Ali's second wife, Ali and Esi try to decide on a wedding date and on the day Ali

would travel to meet with her fathers. Eagerly, Ali decides that he should go the next day, Saturday. At this point, Esi introduces traditions among her people governing marriage. She explains to Ali that "her people didn't consider Saturdays as good days for betrothal and such" because it is a masculine day. "You see . . . days of the week are divided into those that are feminine and the rest which are masculine" (89). Aidoo defines Esi as a woman determined to abide by the traditions, but Ali is unaware of them, or at least uninterested in maintaining them. In fact, he is characterized as one "who frequently bruised tradition" (128).

Subsequently, Ali presents Esi with a ring and asks her to wear it, to which Esi asks, why? At this point, Esi questions Ali about the implications of the ring, inciting a discussion of the differences between polygamy and bigamy. Because Esi's skepticism confounds him, Ali questions her:

What do you mean, "but why?" I thought you had agreed to be my wife.

Are you saying that this is some kind of engagement ring?

Definitely.

But, Ali . . . I thought I was going to be your second wife.

So what difference should it make?

Ali, I mean Fusena already wears your ring. (89-90)

Esi bluntly asks Ali if what they are doing, what he is doing by having two women wear his rings, is not bigamy, to which Ali angrily responds:

When put like that, yes, we are committing a crime. Polygamy, bigamy. To the people who created the concepts, these are all crimes. Like homicide, rape and arson. Why have we got so used to describing our cultural dynamics with the condemnatory tone of our masters' voices? We have got marriage in Africa, Esi. In Muslim Africa. In non-Muslim Africa. And in our marriages a man has a choice--to have one or more wives . . . as long as he can look after them properly. (90)

Esi wrestles with the Western definition of bigamy versus what Islam understands as polygamy. The implications, though, are not that having two wives is bigamy, or that polygamy is unlawful, equal to bigamy. More significantly, Esi is concerned that the process by which they are entering into their marriage is contrary to the rules for establishing polygamous relationships. Though Ali's objections represent his rejection of Western critiques, Esi's objections come from an analysis of their situation within their own cultural tenets. Though she is not a Muslim, she recognizes that there are customs, Islamic and nonIslamic alike, that must be followed if their marriage is to be legitimate and honest. Clearly, she tells Ali, the idea of two women wearing one man's rings is a departure from the traditional "way of doing the two or more wives business" (90). Esi recognizes that in the polygamous

marriage the second wife is never to undermine the power and status of the first wife, and she recognizes that wearing Ali's ring would do just that to Fusena's station as "Mrs. Ali Kondey" (90).

The Qur'an, in fact, instructs the man considering taking another wife that "[i]f [you] cannot do justice, [then] marry only one or that which your right hand possesses if [he] cannot treat them with perfect equality in material things as in love and affection, then marry only one" (The Qur'an, S4:127). Ali obviously sees Esi's wearing his ring as "equality in material things," while Esi sees this as an injustice to Fusena. The decisive issue here is that women and men, collectively, have to negotiate how the polygamic enterprise is to be organized; the ambiguity of the terms as set out by the religious text must be reconciled with the social terms their societies require. Furthermore, the reconciliation must be directly addressed, and if possible resolved, with both men's and women's interests considered.

Ali knows that Fusena is due a certain level of respect, and he is conscious of the ambiguity in the holy text. Therefore he justifies his behavior with a tradition even older than Islam. He tells Esi that though his suggestion goes against "recent traditions," a betrothed, "first or fourth," has worn a ring since the time of "[their] Ancient Egyptian ancestors" (90-91). Esi

reluctantly agrees to wear Ali's ring, but not without first averring that Ali's behavior was that of a "severe lunatic and so 'contemporary Africa' that she would save her sanity by not trying to understand it" (91).

The debate over the rings takes us back to Spillers and Gadamer. While Gadamer suggests that we belong to a tradition before it belongs to us (282), Spillers reminds us that when we become a part of a tradition we participate in its remaking, reconstituting.¹⁸ Indeed, Ali's and Esi's conflicting approaches to the tradition of polygamy demonstrate that traditions are not necessarily fixed, but are "socially created" and recreated (Spillers 153).¹⁹

Aidoo allows her protagonist to enter into this institution fully recognizing and confronting the potential difficulties the reader will confront. Characters within the text are shocked that Esi and Ali would reinscribe old traditions. These characters, older villagers, read Esi and Ali's behavior. For example, Ali's elders are equally surprised that "a modern young man would want to have a second wife," for "they thought that such desires only lived in the breasts of people like them: old and with only a few years of Koranic education" (105). Furthermore, elder women lament "obviously how little had changed for their daughters--school and all!" (107). Aidoo prevents her readers from labelling, without question, Esi Sekyi and/or Fusena Kondey as feminist, modern, traditional or otherwise

since such terms eschew crucial factors relative to "the state of women and the nature of their expression in Africa today" (Oyekunle qtd. in Okonkwo 38).

Changes presents Esi's different voices and the different voices that she confronts. These confronted voices represent the different possibilities for African women. Esi is presented as a woman not willing to just sit and wait for things to happen. She makes things happen. Esi changes, goes through changes, is put through changes and changes things.²⁰ The other two major female characters in the novel--Fusena Kondey and Opokuya Dakwa--are affected by changes. Accordingly, this novel presents a variety of ways gender can be experienced in Africa. The voice of tradition that speaks to Ama Ata Aidoo, and through Esi, is not just one of gender politics, though it is influenced very heavily by it. Just as Alice Walker called upon Zora Neale Hurston and the literary heritage of African American women, so too does Ama Ata Aidoo's Changes revisit and revise readings of Mariama Bâ's representation of polygamy in So Long a Letter.

Speaking of Those That Came Before: Aidoo's Literary Heritage, the Issue of Polygamy

In So Long a Letter, Mariama Bâ offers two characters, Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye, who embody different directions followed by women. The novel is an epistle from Ramatoulaye to her oldest and dearest friend. The letter serves as an

occasion for Ramatoulaye to reflect upon her life, her development into a woman; it also offers the reader an opportunity to "hear" an African woman tell her story, the way most personal stories are told, into the ear of a friend. Though the narrator asks her friend pardon for "perhaps boring [her] by relating what [Aïssatou] already know[s]" (9), I imagine that it is for the benefit of the other implied readers--those to whom the letter is not addressed--that so much time is taken with specifics. The epistolary style allows the reader to eavesdrop on the narrator's account of her life. We hear the intimate details of Ramatoulaye's life as revealed through her thought, feelings and desires, all of which are shared with a friend. Similarly, as I have shown above, Aidoo uses the Reading voice in Changes to reveal the unspoken thoughts of the characters. According to bell hooks's discussion in Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, both of these women are "talking back" through their characters (5).

[B]ell hooks tells us that "within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist 'right speech of womanhood'--the sign of woman's repression," but non-WASP women, hooks suggests, have never been that silent (6). Though the latter group of women's voices may have been ignored, they spoke and often disguised their speech so that the tendency to "tune it out" would be lessened.²¹ It is my position that Changes talk backs to So Long a Letter,

just as both women writers talk back to their society. Under the guise of revelatory private thoughts and personal correspondence, these authors have constructed women "with sharp tongues" who would not deny themselves the "right to voice, to authorship" (hooks 6). Significantly though, while Bâ's protagonist views herself as a victim and moves from silence to speech, Esi is always an agent, speaking herself and seeking to further exercise her agency. In Changes, Bâ's colonized body--African [and] woman--speaks, utters its injury and negates its assigned muted condition.

Mbye Cham offers an interesting reading of Bâ's construction of Ramatoulaye. Cham argues that what I refer to as Ramatoulaye's move from silence to speech is actually an instance of her subverting tradition, in effect "talking back" without seeming to talk at all. Cham suggests that Bâ uses the Islamic concept of *mirasse* as an opportunity for a woman to speak the truth about her polygamous situation. He tells us that *mirasse* is "a juridical principle that defines and stipulates in precise mathematical terms the nature of inheritance in the Islamic family" (91). Furthermore, it also requires that secret possessions of the deceased be disclosed so that these possessions may be equally distributed between his/her heirs. However, Ramatoulaye uses this holy requirement to expose not only Moudou's finances, but his personal secrets as well. She tells us that:

the *mirasse* commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus is exposed to others what has been carefully hidden. These exposures crudely explain a man's life. With consternation, I measure the extent of Moudou's betrayal. (9)

After this explanation, Ramatoulaye begins her "stripping".

As Cham states, "*mirasse*, therefore, becomes the principle that legitimises and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation" (92). Cham would argue that in this sense Ramatoulaye was never silent in the way I have characterized her here. Instead, he would suggest that Ramatoulaye "invoke[s] canons of indigenous tradition" to justify her actions, her silence and seeming lack of agency. Ramatoulaye's voice is to be found in the words of the letter to her friend. As bell hooks says, "writing [is] a way to capture speech," and it allows the silenced to "express the intensity of [their] sorrow, the anguish of speech" (6-7). As such, Ramatoulaye writes what she could not speak. It is on this point that I see Esi as a revision of Ramatoulaye. Esi indeed invokes traditions indigenous to her people, but her acts of subversion and challenge are loudly spoken. Each character in the novel witnesses and comments upon her clear and constant voice. Esi has "made speech [her] birthright" (hooks 6).

Furthermore, Aidoo not only revisits Bâ but she also signifies upon So Long A Letter. Bâ has created a "speakerly text," one "which produces the illusion of oral

narration" (Gates, 1988 181; my emphasis), which is revisited and revised by Aidoo. As Gates tells us, [r]evision is an important rhetorical strategy and "[w]riters signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual traditions" (124).²² Bâ offers us Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye and their different responses to polygamy. Aidoo revises Ramatoulaye offering us Fusena Kondey and Esi Sekyi. These two women assume postures represented by the divided consciousness Ramatoulaye presents in her letter. Aidoo splits Ramatoulaye and develops two different women from Bâ's shell of a woman. At the novel's end, Ramatoulaye tells Aïssatou:

I warn you already, I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything--disappointments and humiliation--hope still lives within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me. (89)

We never know what becomes of Ramatoulaye in her struggle to "refashion" herself. However, Aidoo offers us a look not only into the choices available to women like these two, but she also allows us to witness the consequences of the choices they make.

So Long a Letter is a chronology of Ramatoulaye's life, a letter occasioned by the death of her husband, Moudou Fall. The passing of her husband places her in a contemplative mood which arouses in her remembrances of her past life and the circumstances through which she has

persevered. Most significantly, she recalls the polygamous relationship into which she was forced to enter. Both of the women in Bâ's novel are confronted with the news that their husbands have taken second wives without first consulting them. Aïssatou is made livid when she hears the news that her Mawdo Bâ had married again, and she writes him a scathing letter before leaving him. She makes a new life for herself as an interpreter in New York, declaring to her husband, her friend and her society that "[p]rinces master their feelings to fulfil their duties. 'Others' bend their hands, and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it" (31). In similar fashion, while Esi suggests that marital rape may not have existed prior to her experience, she manages to find a course of action that not only serves her best interests, but also puts Oko, and vicariously other men, on notice that such deeds by husbands toward their wives are neither acceptable or tolerable. Marital rape, now, definitely exists.

Unlike Esi, Aïssatou rejects her society's values when she decides that her society's support of Mawdo's behavior is unacceptable and pursues her determined course of action; she decides to abandon him and that society. In contrast, Esi does not ever consider leaving her world; she is determined to live within her society while negotiating a

space there for people like her, women like her. Aïssatou has no such conviction. Clearly, for Bâ, just as Western women may have the legal right and social "freedom" to reject polygamous behavior from their husbands, African women also have that option. However, for those who choose to function and exist within a society that sanctions and recognizes polygamy, there are other choices available to them. Aïdô demonstrates some of these choices and the consequences of them. Silence is one such choice, the one Ramatoulaye and Fusena elect, though even in their silences they give voice to very different possibilities.

Ramatoulaye stays with her husband Moudou all the while hoping that he will follow traditional Islam regarding polygamic relationships. Like Ali, Moudou ignores traditional practices in favor of satisfying his own desires. Ramatoulaye is informed by her brother-in-law, Aïssatou's husband, and the local Imam that she has a co-wife. As she sees the men approaching she fears that harm has come to her husband, and she questions them about his condition. The Imam responds that Moudou is alive and well, and that "[a]ll he has done is to marry a second wife today [and] . . . he praises you for the quarter of a century of marriage in which you gave him all the happiness a wife owes her husband" (37). While Ramatoulaye finds it objectionable that her husband has taken a new wife, one who is their own daughter's age, she is most disturbed by "[his] abandonment

of his first family [h]e rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account" (9). Ramatoulaye is referring here to her husband's extensive financial arrangements with his new family-in-law, and to his physical removal of himself from the family. He agrees to pay his new wife's tuition, provide her an allowance and present her family with expensive gifts, one of which is to supply her parents with the titles Alhaja and Alhaji.²³ All of this is done at the expense of Ramtoulaye and her children: Moudou mortgages their home without informing her.²⁴

Fusena Kondey is cast in the likeness of Ramatoulaye. Fusena, we are told, was a good friend to Ali before they were married. In fact, Fusena was quite resistant to the idea of marriage. She was once pursued by an alhaji who courted her family with expensive gifts and chased her male friends away. Unaffected, Fusena pursued her education and began a career as a school teacher. All the while, Ali--her best friend--was by her side pursuing his degree as well. Ali had never openly expressed any interest in Fusena beyond friendship, any more than she did in him, but when it became apparent that they would be separated for a long while, their feelings emerged. Ali was awarded a scholarship that required he go to England so he asks Fusena to marry him; she accepts. Their decision was made in haste and complicates the traditional negotiation between families.

However the families manage to negotiate and the union is blessed by both sides. For three years, Ali lives without Fusena in England and this troubles her family with whom she and their oldest son are living. Finally, Ali sends for her and she joins him in London.

Fusena's life in London was one for which she was not quite prepared. Though she had given up her formal studies and resigned her post as a teacher, she still required something to occupy her time, and her new life of "being pregnant, nursing the new baby, looking after Adam and Ali, and staring at London's bleak wet views" was not satisfying. She raised this with Ali after deciding that "life should offer more than marriage [and that] the life she was leading was in fact marriage" (66). This is where Aidoo begins her revision of *Ramatoulaye*. Both women are teachers who give up their careers to be wives, but while Fusena recognizes that being a wife is not much of a life, *Ramtoulaye* does not. Instead *Ramatoulaye* is convinced that she is "one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. . . . even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside of marriage" (56; emphasis added).

Ramatoulaye stresses, however, that "marriage is an act of faith, of love, and of total surrender to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you (I emphasize the word 'chosen')" (56).²⁵ Fusena reconciles herself to a similar

position. Though Ramatoulaye recognizes that the secret and second marriage changes her relationship with Moudou, she seems to accept him that he was "a good father and a good husband, a husband [who had] become a friend" (38). This acceptance was an option refused by Fusena; she dismissed long before Ali's second marriage the possibility that her one-time friend, now husband, could ever again be her friend. Fusena realizes that Ali is no longer a friend, but a husband. As Ali's wife:

there was nothing she could do about her situation. Leaving Ali was not only impossible but would also not be an answer to anything. . . .there would be no chance of getting her friend back if she left or divorced Ali the husband . . . she kept telling herself that given the position of women in her society, she would rather be married than not, and rather to Ali than anyone else. (67)

The signifyin[g] on Bâ's text is most clear when we look at Ramatoulaye and Fusena's responses to marriage and their roles as wife. Marriage for both of these women offers them a comfort that they value more than "independence," and each of them recognizes the trade-offs that they have made. But only Fusena analyzes the consequences of this trade-off: that of being only a wife. Ramatoulaye accepts her station as a wife and concentrates on developing that aspect of her life. She maintains a home and works outside, but her largest commitment is to her home and her husband. Though Ramtoulaye talks about the difficulty of working in and out of the home, her strongest dedication is to her role as wife

and mother. Fusena on the other hand chooses balance, dividing herself equally and faithfully to both of her two jobs: "When she was in the kiosk, she was there. And of course when she was at home, she was home" (99).

Fusena has fashioned a life for herself that is equal to her life as wife, and for that Ali respects her. Hence, when she discovers that her husband plans to take a second wife, she is angry not about the traditions he ignores, but that her co-wife "has a university degree" (99). Fusena is reminded of the time Ali persuaded her not to continue her education, tried to convince her that idleness was a wife's privilege. Luckily, she had reasoned that Ali's "wealth or ability to support her was a matter only of mild importance--just something that would make [her] life easier," and pursued selling in the marketplace (67). Interestingly, Ramatoulaye, like Esi, has a university degree. She was "among the first pioneers of the promotion of African women" (14). If it could be argued that she rejects polygamy because Western education has lifted her "out of the bog of traditional superstition and custom" (Bâ 15), then it could also be convincingly argued that this education equally had no effect on Esi's decision to willingly enter such a marriage. Furthermore, the influence and power of Western education is predicated upon how the subject locates herself in her society and positions herself vis à vis its operating discourses.

The notable divergence between Ramtoulaye's position and Fusena's has to do with how each of them defines herself and their choices. The former chooses to stay with her husband as a wife and maintain her home, while the latter pursues interests outside of her marriage. However, the key is that they both have choices, and Aidoo's revision of *Bâ* illuminates how a woman fashions herself when her dependence on her husband renders her unstable. Ramatoulaye and Fusena both choose the instability of dependence because their other choice, "liberation," as Ramatoulaye calls it, is too difficult. Ramatoulaye is dedicated to her society's notions of the sanctity of the family. She is "persuaded" of the necessary "complementarity of man and woman" (88). Further, she sees the "success of a nation" (93) as dependent on the success of the couple and the family they develop. However, Ramatoulaye's faith in the couple does not eradicate the legitimacy of polygamy. If tradition had been followed, her marriage would have survived. Traditionally, the decision to expand the family through a second or third marriage involved the couple. Ideally, both parties, man and woman, must agree that the second marriage will not disrupt the home they are in the process of forming. But, in both cases, Ali's and Moudou's, the first wife was not involved in either the decision to take a co-wife or the selection of the appropriate woman.

Aidoo challenges the silencing of woman's power in this domain. Ramtoulaye is silent when she is informed of her husband's new marriage; her feelings are neither solicited nor volunteered. In fact, her pain, obvious to Moudou, is tuned out. Likewise, Fusena is silent when the women in her village try to convince her that Ali's taking another wife was not the worst thing for their marriage. She reasons that "[i]t was a man's world [and] you only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman" (107). For Fusena, living as a woman meant being a wife and a mother, being silent about your pain. But, it also meant having something else, like her kiosk. For Esi, living as a woman was having what you wanted, including someone who respected you for wanting. By offering the contrasting models that Esi and Fusena are, Aidoo contests Walker's implication that Tashi's choices are either to live always under the repression of patriarchy or renounce her affiliation with the Olinkans. Walker, like libertarian feminists, sees the only freedom as that which comes from totally destroying the social systems that repress. Aidoo confesses that some women are confined to certain realities, there are some colonial bodies whose stories will never be rewritten; however, there are others who write. While M'Lissa and Tashi have no choices, Esi and Fusena do, and they live the consequences of those choices. Walker is right to suggest that "resistance is the secret of joy," (281) but there are various resistances: the one she

valorizes and the others she ignores. It is through not resisting limits that Ramatoulaye and Fusena allow for instable dependence.

That Ramatoulaye and Fusena become instable within the security of the family is chiefly the result of the modern African man's bind. Fusena has a home with Ali but recognizes that a woman with more education may take that away. Hence her security is not protected, for she does not accept that as a wife she

must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; [they] must not worry [themselves] about "betrayals of the flesh." The important thing is what there is in the heart; that what unites two beings inside. (Bâ 34)

She can lose her sanity as well as her cherished marriage. Fusena, like Ramatoulaye, reasons that her happiness is within the social norms of the family. She wants to be more than a wife, but without the concerns of Esi and Aïssatou. There is a certain security that Fusena finds in marriage, but that security is contingent on Ali behaving in appropriate ways and her accepting when he does not. As Esi tells us, there is much "insolence [in the person of] the modern African man" (91).

The pivotal issue is not so much insolence, but confusion about how he is to manage this whole affair with Esi, and with polygamous relationships in general. Aidoo demonstrates through Ali's thoughts that it is not just an African woman's bind to balance the "modern" and the

"traditional," but a conflict that arises for Africans regardless of gender.. As Ali contemplates with whom he will spend New Year's Eve, he thinks:

How did our fathers manage? He wondered to himself. He knew the answer. They, our fathers, lived in a world which was ordered to make such arrangements work. For instance, no man in the old days would be caught in his present predicament (119-20)

Ali takes a wife, but he does not treat her as a wife, for his heart is with Fusena. He felt a deep sense of guilt whenever he spent time with Esi, though "by all the precepts of his upbringing Esi was indeed his wife," but when he went "home, he [went] only one place, which was where Fusena and his children were" (119).

Hence, Ali and Esi were not in a polygamous marriage, for there was not "equality in material things as in love and affection" (Ali 173). Moreover, Fusena is not a "a loyal doormat of a wife," for she makes Ali fully aware that she is not a co-wife, but a woman who has children, a home to maintain, and a business to run (Bell 173). Though she could not prevent Ali from marrying Esi, she managed to preclude his reducing her to a convenience, a bodily object of his affection, which is what Bell's phrase--"loyal doormat of a wife"--implies and what Esi becomes to him.²⁶

There is no exact ending to Changes for there is no simple and/or uncomplicated answer to the question it attempts to answer. I believe that Aidoo's point is just

that. The status of African women is an issue that is yet to be resolved, as is the status of all women regardless of origin. Esi's story is not finished, for the silences of history have not yet been voiced for some colonial bodies. African women, all women, are some of those bodies. Aidoo offers a reading of African women which confirms Diana Fuss's assertion that identity is "historically contingent and constantly subject to change and redefinition" (20). Identity is a story, told, retold, revised and unwritten. In the telling of this story that constitutes Aidoo's work, African American women have not been absolved of their participation in constituting discourse antithetical to the revolutionizing of Africa. Though Western readings of African women are challenged in Changes, as is the influence of the West on the ideas of African men, this "West" is not limited to white middle class feminists, but includes African Americans.

Must My Tongue Always be in My Friend's Mouth? Or Can Aidoo and Walker Talk it Over Woman to Woman

Paul Gilroy tells us that the "telling and retelling" of the "narratives of loss, exile, journeying" serve to direct the attention of black peoples to some original "nodal point," a mythic place in their social history (1993, 198). These narratives have served to participate in the making of what Gilroy calls the black Atlantic, otherwise termed the diaspora. While we have accepted the diaspora as

a concept, there is still ambiguity about how to represent the relationship the concept represents. More important to this project, there is disagreement over what privileges membership in the diaspora grants us when it comes to creating new narratives, telling new tales. Ama Ata Aidoo has constructed one narrative strain, that of inquiry. Alice Walker has constructed a narrative wherein members of the diaspora, united in their struggle against oppression, speak with and for each other. It is Aidoo's position that there can be no "real" conversation amongst diaspora peoples until the hidden history of that relationship is explored in their respective and present geographical location.

When Tashi journeys back to Olinka, M'Lissa inquires as to what an American looks like. In response, Tashi tells her "an American looks like me" (Possessing 210). Eulalie too is an American, and she tells Ato, when he challenges her over the language she uses to refer to his family, "I speak the way I was born to speak, like an American" (Dilemma 87). Both of these women acknowledge that the African who comes to America, resides in United States of America--either in 1819, 1965 or 1993, either through slavery or immigration-- eventually becomes American. Though these bodies carry traces of Africa, inscriptions of Africa, they are American bodies. This is the reality that people of the black Atlantic must face. In pursuit of her political agenda, though, Alice Walker manipulates this

reality and in the process projects an image of Africa supporting its past reputation as the land of barbarity and bloody rituals. In fact, she proves how American the African in America has become. Her political imperialism is disguised as moral outrage and gendered camaraderie. Clearly, the reality of the Americanization process, this making of the doubled consciousness, the hybrid identity is more important for Walker than the image of Africa she has made.

On the other hand, Aidoo finds that the image of Africa is equal to the fictional reality she makes, especially the reality of our connection. Aidoo tells us she "write[s] about things that people will feel uncomfortable about"; things she hopes people will squint at (James 15).²⁷ As I read her *Esi* and her other women, I do indeed squint. My squint is affected by several things. First, as I read her works, I am quite frankly sure that I am being simultaneously Read by them. As a woman, I am drawn to her female subjects and as a black woman, I feel the pull to identify with their pains and pleasures. After going through the various perspectives offered me by the texts, I am left with my experiences as a black woman through which to interpret. This is a difficult and a problematic reader position for me. Hence, I squint.

Through my squint, I begin to see the limits of those experiences. I share a color (I presume) and a sex with

these subjects, but here is where the connections between us stop. Indeed the construction of reality in Aidoo's fiction challenges black[]woman-centered readings of texts, while at once speaking to that understanding. Because Aidoo explores issues of gender, a sociocultural and political construct, the squint is an adequate description of the approximate shared vision between Aidoo, Walker and myself. It is certain that Aidoo is concerned about African women, black[]women, all women, however, she is especially concerned about how the first of these is represented by others. Because of the varying ways womenness is constructed and experienced within different social systems, reading gendered behaviors across cultures can be a tricky business. Changes is a novel that questions the facility with which readings like those in Possessing are constructed.

Significantly, though, Aidoo's texts cause me to squint at Walker's Tashi. Sissie tells her "precious something" that whenever she encounters Western women "hotly debating the virtues of the African female," she thinks about her mother (Killjoy 117). Her mother, she tells us, was a villager with no schooling; furthermore, she, like Sissie's father, "had never lived anywhere near a modern town," and had never been to the West (117). Hence, she ponders, "if they did not know how I should have been brought up as an African woman, then who does?" (117). In Tashi's case,

Alice Walker thinks she does. But, as Changes shows us, there are many African women and Alice Walker's universal model does not begin to represent the majority of them. This section poses the question, of whether Walker and Aidoo can talk. I contend that they can and do, but across each other. Aidoo proposes a conversation, but before Walker can engage it she must acknowledge that her political agenda cannot supplant the power of those for whom she fights.²⁸ I have endeavored to construct a conversation between these women, the one who talks and the one who talks back, respectively. The womanist platform, a concern for communities, provided Walker with the stage upon which the drama within and of black[]women's discourse and connections should be acted out. Walker struggles to maintain a belief in that agenda; Aidoo struggles to perpetuate the aims of womanism. Abena Busia makes the valuable point, stressed throughout this work as well, that diasporization is a delicate process. In syncretic efforts, we must be careful not to design the melting pot, black style. She tells us, in discussing blackwomen's literary tradition, we need:

to hear words whispered over the void,
to learn what we must tell each other,
despite the vagaries of our respective
conditions, across the generations of
time and space. (2)

This Africentric project brings these women "face to face," confronting each other with their own words, uttering their

conditions and concern all in search of a blackwomen's literary tradition. Readers have read, have been Read by, and hopefully will read against these discourses--Aidoo's, Walker's, and mine. Not only do the fictional discourses illuminate black[]women's oppression and their struggle to mitigate the pains of that, but the critical discourses indicate, as well, black[]women's capacity to oppress each other.

There is always a danger in any kind of "diaspora" studies: The willingness to embrace a commonality might blind us to the uniqueness which distinguishes the separate peoples of the desired whole.
(Busia 2)

Just as Esi Kom embraces Eulalie at the end Dilemma of a Ghost, bridging the cultural distance between them by agreeing to listen and speak to each other, critics of black[]women's literature must listen to the voices of the literature, read and be Read by them.

NOTES

¹ This is a play on Aidoo's title as well as the expressions, "going through changes," and "put through changes," from the African American linguistic community. Clarence Major, in his historical dictionary Juba to Jive (New York: Penguin, 1994), defines the first phrase as "experiencing emotional or psychological problems," and the latter as "to make a person uncomfortable by doing or saying something that contradicts with their version of reality" (86). Likewise, Smitherman defines the first phrase as having "problems in one's personal life; unanticipated emotional experiences" (76-7). Aptly, we witness Aidoo's Esi going through and being put through "changes."

² Though some male writers have addressed the dispersal of Africans during the slave trade, their response has not as focal as Aidoo's. Wole Soyinka, for example, has an African American school artist, Joe Golder, in his Interpreters, and mentions Africans selling Africans during the slave trade in A Dance of the Forests. There is a mention of black Americans in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Devil on the Cross, and Ayi Kwei Armah explores the experiences of black Americans travelling to Africa in his Fragments and Two Thousand Seasons. And recently, Syl Cheney Coker's The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar centers around African Americans who have emigrated to Liberia. In film, Sembène Ousmane's Ceddo (1976) discusses the slave trade and his Camp de Thiaroye (1987) brings an African and an African American face to face. Nonetheless, compared to African American writings on the historical connections between these two peoples, African discussion has been limited. See Berth Lindfors "The Image of the Afro-American in African Literature" and Jacob Drachler's edited collection Black Homeland, Black Diaspora for further details.

³ With respect to African American women writers' constructs of African women, see also Maya Angelou's All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes. It is not my position to argue that Walker is the only African American woman to "write" an African, so Angelou offers another such writing. However, I have selected to focus Walker specifically because of the didactic and polemical nature of her construction and the representational problematics her/story engenders.

⁴ It is only fair to acknowledge that in an author's note to Changes, Aidoo writes: "[t]o the reader, a confession and to the critic, an apology . . . [Changes] is not meant to contribute to any debate however current." Like Alice Walker's readers' directive, though I take note of this disclaimer, I find it too restrictive.

⁵ See the Introduction to Ken Harrow's, Thresholds of Change (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

⁶ See also Susan Andrade's "Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion".

⁷ Katherine Fishburn's ms Reading Buchi Emecheta provides an extensive discussion of Western feminist politics as it relates to the reading of and critical response to African women's literature. Though Fishburn's discussion is specific to Emecheta's novel, her critiques of certain Western feminist readings of gender politics offer a larger scope and inform quite appropriately the issues I raise here.

⁸ These works are by no means the first critical responses to African women's literature. However, they mark a significant increase in attention to this literature and a certain mainstreaming of the discussion that I think is telling in critical ways to my discussion here.

⁹ It could very convincingly be argued that Aidoo and Emecheta's argument that African societies were not patriarchal is indicative of their own ideological approaches to reading gender in Africa. That is to say, I am in no way suggesting that their positions are reflective of all African women writers. Mariama Ba and Ellen Kuzwayo create literature that reflects an alternate analysis of gender and colonialism, for example.

¹⁰ The underscored terms are references to ideas discussed by feminist critics Katherine Frank and Marie Umeh and to Aidoo's play Dilemma of a Ghost, respectively. I discuss these in more detail below.

¹¹ See Adelai Murdoch's discussion of precolonial African "feminism" in "Severing the [M]other Connections," pp. 325-327.

¹² Though much of this colonialist "history" has been addressed by historians and others and, where there is evidence, corrected, Aidoo still finds it necessary to add this to her narrative. I believe that this addition demonstrates her preoccupation with outside influences, and her repeating of this past "history" is her attempt to

establish a continuum of such Western claims evidenced by naming African women.

¹³ See also Carol Boyce Davies' "Maidens, Mistresses and Matrons: Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka Works," Ngambika, pp. 75-88. Davies offers a discussion of this characterization of women in men's fiction, and particularly in Wole Soyinka's dramas.

¹⁴ Note, I am in no way proposing that Esi's actions negate the presence of patriarchal forces in her society, or that Aidoo would support such a denial. However, I do maintain that Esi actively engages her experiences and consciously chooses her responses to them.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the "positional definition" of subjectivity, see Linda Alcoff's "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory."

¹⁶ See also, Raymond Williams's "Hegemony."

¹⁷ Importantly, Linda Alcoff has expressed an objection to uses of Foucault such as I employ here. In the article noted above, "Cultural feminism versus Post-Structuralism," Alcoff argues that Foucault, in fact, offers no theory of resistance or any means for distinguishing the experiences of the truly subjugated from the experiences and behaviors of those actually resisting hegemony. I reject this argument, but not without acknowledging that such an ambiguity does exist in Foucault. Moreover, my argument hinges on that undefined theory whose absence Alcoff finds problematic. Aidoo's use of the Reading voice signifies that the traditional view of power, operating from the top down, can be turned on its head, and that the manifestations of such subversive acts are often subtle. For a related discussion of Foucault's usefulness to feminist inquiry see Judith Butler's "Variations on Sex and Gender."

¹⁸ I am referring to my discussion of Gadamer in chapter one of this work.

¹⁹ Particularly, Ali and Esi come from different regions, and each bring their different conceptions of relationships, and particularly, male-female relationships to bear on their relationship together. Hence, their constructions of relationships is also a tradition they remake and reshape as they negotiate their partnership.

²⁰ See endnote one, this chapter, for an explanation of these expressions and the distinctions between them.

²¹ In her work, hooks actually specifies the "feminist circle" as "WASP backgrounds in the United States," and where I have indicated in this text "nonWASP," she identifies "black communities (and diverse ethnic communities)" (6).

²² Also, see Karla Holloway's Moorings and Metaphors for another useful discussion of revision in African and African American women's literary traditions.

²³ These are titles indicating that one has made pilgrimage to the holy City of Mecca. The pilgrimage, or hegira is one of the five pillars of Islam and as such it is required that Muslims hajj at least once in their lifetime--if it is economically feasible. Once the hajj is completed the title is added to the person's name. (For example, Malcolm X became El hajj Malik Shabazz after his pilgrimage to Mecca.) While the title has primarily religious significance, it also indicates a high level of economic security. Often when a man wishes to demonstrate to his betrothed's family that he can provide for her and them as well, he contracts to provide them the money for hajj.

²⁴ Similarly, when Esi confesses to Opokuya that she has never met Fusena, Opokuya explains, "You see, first rule already broken . . . in the traditional setting it was not possible for a man to consider taking a second wife without the first wife's consent" (97). Furthermore, in Efuru the title character actively searches for her husband's second wife. Guided by the commonplace saying among her people that "it is only a bad woman who wants her husband all to herself" (53), Efuru decides that she must be an agent in forming her own destiny. If her husband, or his mother, should choose her co-wife, Efuru is sure to lose her power within the family.

²⁵ In fact, Ramtoulaye tells this to Aissatou's husband Mawdo who comes and asks for her hand after Moudou has died. She explains to him that she is not "an object to be passed from hand to hand," but a person with a heart and a mind. She, of course, rejects his proposal. These remarks allow us to see into the character's consciousness as she attempts to rationalize her reasons for staying with her husband after he treated her so disrespectfully. Additionally, her comments suggest that like Fusena, she loved her husband and that love binds her in the instability of dependence. See my discussion below.

²⁶ I wish to note, however, that for Esi, Ali is the same. It would be a great matter of inconvenience for her to divorce yet another husband, so she maintains her marriage with him. Yet, she is aware that he is having

affairs and troubles not to question him, for though she knew "he loved her in his own fashion," she was quite resolved that "his fashion of loving [was] quite inadequate for her" (165).

²⁷ In an interview Adeola James asks Aidoo what was the significance of the subtitle for her first novel, Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint, to which Aidoo gave the response I quoted, adding that Sissie looks at life through a squint and forces the people she confronts to do the same.

²⁸ See film "Warrior Marks," and the published account of her journey to Africa and the making of the film, Warrior Marks. In these two media, Walker makes it quite clear that she see herself as an advocate, a voice for these women.

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