

WHY "WOMANISM"?

The Genesis of a New Word and What It Means

Justine Tally

In her essays and short stories Alice Walker has consistently eschewed the word "feminist" in favor of a word rooted in Black culture which she herself has coined: "womanist". The present paper looks at this new term in light of the historical and cultural factors which have conditioned black women's response to (white) feminism and attempts to define it as Walker uses it throughout her work. With its new connotations more and more women writers have taken up its use as a word which incorporates into traditional feminist ideology those values seen to be inherent in a woman's view of life.

Alice Walker ha evitado constantemente tanto en sus ensayos como en sus cuentos la palabra 'feminist', prefiriendo una palabra enraizada en la cultura negra y que ella ha acuñado como 'womanist'. Este ensayo considera este nuevo término a la luz de factores históricos y culturales que han condicionado la respuesta de las mujeres negras al feminismo (blanco) e intenta definirlo tal como Walker lo utiliza en su obra. Cada vez más las escritoras la utilizan con las connotaciones adquiridas, como una palabra que incorpora a la ideología feminista tradicional aquellos valores inherentes a la visión que una mujer tiene de la vida.

One of the effects of Alice Walker's new-found popularity, fruit of her Pulitzer-prize winning novel and its recently filmed version, *The Color Purple*, has been a heightened interest not only in her other fiction and poetry but also in her non-fiction, much of which she has edited in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*¹. Perhaps not surprisingly her choice of the term "womanist"

¹ London, The Women's Press, Ltd., 1984.

instead of “feminist” has consequently been given a great deal of attention, for almost all of her recent interviewers are given to commenting on its meaning, thereby familiarizing the readers of popular magazines and newspapers with the expression. Paradoxically, however, the term is probably most effectively propagated by those who most wish to discredit it. George Stade, for example, specifically employs the term in an article intended to attack *The Color Purple* and other novels written by women entitled “Womanist Fiction and Male Characters”². Vindictive in intent, Stade purposefully distorts the connotations of the word, defining it negatively (as pernicious to men) and denying the positive emphasis on women’s values as a viable alternative to those in the dominant culture. Any serious student of Walker can immediately spot the flaws in this type of interpretation, yet some thought as to the meaning of the term “womanist” is clearly needed so as to avoid subsequent “misinterpretations”.

In an era in which even youngsters are well aware of “feminism”, why did Walker bother to coin a new word? What need was there to modify the concept of “feminist” and in what ways did Walker hope to change it? The answer lies in part in the history (both past and recent) of the Women’s Movement and in part in the evolving concept of “woman” in all fields. As a black woman Walker has been especially sensitive to developments on both these fronts.

Even with the obviousness of their inferior status within the black community as well as in society at large, black women have been slow in vocalizing their discontent. The reasons for this reluctance to embrace the feminist cause as their own have primarily been twofold. On the one hand, the women’s movement both recently and in the 19th century has been viewed as the “white women’s movement” almost from its inception. Whereas Sojourner Truth, most famous for her “Ain’t I a Woman” reply to a white man who doubted her sex, was at first used to further the women’s cause by her powerfully moving testimony as an ex-slave, the “indignity” of sharing the stage with a black woman was a recurrent problem among the suffragettes³, one which was only resolved when black women were unceremoniously dumped from the platform.

Rosalyn Terborg-Penn writes that from 1830 to 1920, key years in the history of feminism, racism was an unhealing sore on the suffrage and feminist movements... even the legendary. Susan B. Anthony... discriminated against black male and female reformers because it was expedient to put aside racial equality in order to win the support of southern white women⁴.

² *Partisan Review* 3, vol. XII, num. 3, 1985, pp. 265-271.

³ “When Sojourner Truth stood before the second annual convention of the women’s rights movement in Akron, Ohio, in 1852, white women who deemed it unfitting that a black woman should speak on a public platform in their presence screamed: ‘Don’t let her speak! Don’t let her speak!’” Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Boston, Massachusetts, South End Press, 1984, p. 159.

⁴ Gloria Wade-Gayles, *No Crystal Stair*, New York, The Pilgrim Press, 1984, p. 28.

In the 1960s Civil Rights movement, even while the seeds of female liberation were once again being planted and nurtured⁵, hostility between white and black women intensified: while black women and men marched shoulder to shoulder, endured beatings and insults together and were likewise equally likely to get thrown in jail, after hours black men went out with and bedded down with the newly liberated white women. Many of the foremost leaders and writers of the Black Power Movement took white women for their wives (the highest symbol of their newly asserted American manhood), leaving black women again ignored and devalued. Even when some black women put their personal hurt behind them and did actually enlist in the new women's movement, they found that racism was still the order of the day:

While the established definition of feminism is the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, white women liberationists used the power granted to them by virtue of their being members of the dominant race in American society to interpret feminism in such a way that it was no longer relevant to all women. And it seemed incredible to black women that they were being asked to support a movement whose majority participants were eager to maintain race and class hierarchies between women...

They were told that white women were in the majority and that they had the power to decide which issues would be considered "feminist" issues⁶.

The other major impediment to the whole-hearted entry of black women into the movement was their belief that of the two evils, racism and sexism, the former was much the greater. So long had the American society emasculated the black man that to focus upon sexism rather than racism as the cause of their plight was seen by most women as little less than treason⁷. So eager were these women to see their men adopt their rightful position that many not only eschewed the women's movement but also willingly adopted the creed of the Black Muslims even though "it was understood in the Muslim love relationship that the woman would defer to the man on all occasions"⁸. As if to add insult to injury, in 1965, Patrick Daniel Moynihan wrote his infamous report on the state of the black family in the United States⁹ in which he postulated the idea of the black "matriarchy" and

⁵ See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, New York, Random House, 1980; and Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo", *Liberation*, April, 1966, pp. 35-36.

⁶ Hooks, p. 149.

⁷ Even some organizations of black women who have been mistreated by their husbands refuse to admit any problem of sexism within the black community. The Battered Minority Women blame the white racist society for their plight and define battering as "the systematic deprivation inflicted upon third world men by society which, in turn, is inflicted upon third world women". They consider the only real issue to be racial liberation. See Beth Richie, "Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black Community", *The Black Scholar*, vol. XVI, num. 2, March/April, 1985, pp. 41-42.

⁸ Hooks, p. 109.

⁹ "The Negro Family: The Call for National Action", Washington, D. C.: Department of Labor, 1965.

made the black woman responsible for her man's defeat in American society—the myth of the “castrating bitch”. Though well-intentioned, Moynihan's report was repudiated by black sociologists¹⁰, and many black women were indignant:

...it is a gross distortion of fact to state that black women have oppressed black men. The capitalist system found it expedient to oppress them and proceeded to do so without consultation or the signing or any agreements with black women¹¹.

Though Lena Wright Myers found that the common black woman, sadly accustomed to being pronounced upon by self-appointed experts who had little understanding of her true situation, have been basically unperturbed by this type of stereotyping (“They tolerated the misinterpretation of their behavior because they understand that they are being interpreted by *insignificant* others rather than *significant* others”¹²) among intellectuals it just meant more fuel was added to the fire, smoking up the already overly-complex issues.

As late as 1973, Frances S. Foster wrote “Changing Concepts of the Black Woman” to “analyze the emerging philosophy behind the black woman's rejection of interracial sexual alignment and her option of racial unity instead and to show how these ideas are carried out using the writings of Black women as prime examples”¹³. She comes to the conclusion that

Black women, victims of double discrimination, are seeking liberation which begins with a psychological freedom and manifests itself then in a new life style. Black women as never before are aware of their Blackness with its historical influences upon their physical and psychological existence and of alternatives for the future. The comprehension and statement of this awareness varies from individual to individual, but in general is based upon the knowledge that the oppressive past and present do not have to mirror the future, that realization of themselves, their situation and the causes for this condition, is the first step toward liberation, but that positive steps, beginning with Black unification must be taken to change their situations¹⁴.

Robert Staples, in 1976, also exhorted Black unification and notes the valuable commitment black women have made to the movement, but basically his idea of women's contribution is that of “the breeders, the feeders, the follow-the-leaders”:¹⁵

¹⁰ See, for example, L. Alex Swan, “Moynihan: A Methodological Note”, *The Journal of Afro-American Issues*, vol. II. num. 1, February, 1974, pp. 11-20; and Robert Staples, “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy”, *The Black Scholar*, vol. 1, nums. 3 & 4, January/February, 1970, pp. 26-34.

¹¹ Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female”, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, ed., Robin Morgan, New York, Vintage Books, 1970, p. 343.

¹² “Black Women: Selectivity Among Roles and Reference Groups in the Maintenance of Self-Esteem”, *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 21, num. 1, Winter, 1975, p. 44.

¹³ In *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 3, num. 4, June, 1973, p. 435.

¹⁴ Foster, pp. 452-453.

¹⁵ Fay Gale, *We Are Bosses Ourselves: The Status and Role of Aboriginal Women Today*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983, reviewed by Lou Turner, in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 16, num. 1, January/February, 1985, pp. 55-56.

Black women cannot be free *qua* women until all blacks attain their liberation.

The role of the black woman in the black liberation is an important one and cannot be forgotten. From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time. The revolutionary vanguard has a male leadership but the black woman has stepped beside her man engaged in struggle and given him her total faith and committment (*sic*)¹⁶.

Yet Staples' sexism reaches the point of unnerving arrogance when he writes in a totally gratuitous footnote,

It is interesting to note that, despite unfounded rumors about the emasculation of the black male, the thrust of the black liberation struggle has been provided almost exclusively by a black male leadership. In selecting leaders of black organizations, Black females inevitably defer to some competent black male, an act which shows how much they really prefer the dominating position they supposedly have in black society¹⁷.

Though ostensibly denying myth of the black matriarchy, Staples grossly misinterprets the data. It is not "*despite* the unfounded rumors about the emasculation of the black male" that black women deferred to the men in the movement, but rather "*because of*". Coming from a tradition in which the male-female partnership was an egalitarian affair, this shift represented another futile attempt by the black woman to be accepted by her male - or at least not blamed for his misfortune. As Toni Cade Bambara has written,

Unfortunately quite a few of the ladies have been so browbeaten in the past with the Black Matriarch stick that they tend to run, leap, fly to the pots and pans, the back rows, the shadows, eager to justify themselves in terms of ass, breasts, collard greens just to prove that they are not the evil, ugly, domineering monsters of tradition¹⁸.

Meanwhile Black Power advocates were denouncing the use of birth control methods as "racial genocide" and exhorting their women to provide the revolution with more soldiers —a ploy which, has had devastating effects on the common black women and her children even while denounced by some furiously vociferous black mothers.

Finally, one tall, lean dude went into deep knee bends as he castigated the Sisters to throw away the pill and hop to the mattresses and breed revolutionaries and mess up the man's genocidal program. A slightly drunk and very hot lady

¹⁶ "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy", *The Black Scholar*, vol. 12, num. 6, November/December, 1981, pp. 26-4.

¹⁷ Staples, footnote num. 29, p. 34.

¹⁸ Toni Cade, "The Pill: Genocide or Liberation", *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, New York and Scarborough, Ontario, New American Library, 1970, p. 163.

from the back row kept interrupting with, for the most part, incoherent and undecipherable remarks. But she was encouraged finally to just step into the aisle and speak her speech, which she did, shouting the Brother down in gusts and sweeps of historical, hysterical documentation of mistrust and mess-up, waxing lyric over the hardships, the oatmeal, the food stamps, the diapers, the scuffling, the bloody abortions, the bungled births. She was mad as hell and getting more and more sober. She was righteous and beautiful and accusatory, and when she pointed a stiff finger at the Brother and shouted, "and when's the last time you fed one of them brats you been breeding all over the city, you jive-ass so-and-so?" She tore the place up¹⁹.

On the one hand, therefore, "black women were not willing to jeopardize progress for their people by insisting on rights for their sex. Nor were they willing to embrace an issue that had always been dominated by white women, especially since relationships between black men and white women in the Movement had destroyed the sense of sisterhood black women and white thought they shared at the beginning of the struggle"²⁰, resulting in the hostility expressed in poems such as Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl"²¹. Yet on the other hand, the frustration of sexual oppression was becoming ever more unbearable to many black women, particularly as the gains of white women widened the already yawning gap between them and threw even more light on their demeaned situation.

The most vocal protest at first came from the only group of black women who stood nothing to lose by earning the black man's wrath, mainly because they already enjoyed it - the black lesbians. But that support for feminism just managed to muddy the waters even more. Beth Richie writes that "hatred for homosexuals and fear of being associated with lesbian women are both commonly expressed reasons that black women do not identify with the feminist movement"²². Given the great emphasis on the black family, motherhood and all, homophobia has been the rule rather than the exception within the black community and lesbians have been looked upon as social pariah as well as free game for black male sexual assault. ("Black males think that a lesbian is fair game sexually for anybody, because she can't get a man or is turned off by men"²³.) Thus, identifying the incipient black feminist sentiment with a group excluded from the norm turned women's rights into a dangerous game even for those who were becoming acutely conscious of the need to speak out against sexism as well as racism. Opponents of black feminists, mainly males but many females, too, were further antagonized when Michele Wallace burst into the fray with her

¹⁹ Bambara, "Pill", p. 163.

²⁰ Wade-Gayles, p. 34.

²¹ Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, *Conditions Five: The Black Woman's Issue*, Fally, 1979.

²² Richie, p. 43.

²³ Fay Johnson, quoted in Ann Allen Shockley and Veronica E. Tucker, "Black Women Discuss Today's Problems: Men, Families, Society", *Southern Voices*, vol. 1, num. 3, August/September, 1974, p. 18.

bombshell *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, lambasting the pernicious myths underlying the relationships between black men and women and calling for a "collective ideology" of black women and "some clear understanding of (their) own priorities":

History has been written without us. The imperative is clear: either we will make history or remain the victims of it²⁴.

So violently was Wallace's book denounced²⁵, the young author has sworn never to write so honestly and so controversially ever again²⁶, yet there is no doubt that it helped open the way for a more sincere dialogue on the problems of sexism within the black community in that by writing with and inspiring such anger, Wallace forced black people to confront their own prejudices face to face²⁷.

Perhaps it is just this anger which has at long last provoked the black woman to break out of "the narrow space, the dark enclosure"²⁸, "anger in the form of growing and open revolt against ideologies and attitudes that impress women into servitude and powerlessness, anger as a source of creative power (attested to by) signs of a growing feminism in the literature of black women writers"²⁹. Although before the sixties only 26 major novels by black women had been published over a period of three decades³⁰ and though the 1960s saw a new surge of literary activity, "anger admitted, surfaced, vented is a rare phenomenon in the literature of black women before the late 1970s"³¹.

²⁴ Wallace, p. 91.

²⁵ See, for example, Paula Giddings, "The Lessons of History Will Shape the 1980s, 'Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman' Won't", *Encore American and Worldwide News*, March 19, 1979, pp. 50-51. To the contrary Alice Walker was one of the very few to defend Wallace's right to express her views in the book. She wrote: "It is a book that, while not sound or visionary or even honest enough to 'shape the eighties', can still help us shape our thinking. It is, in short, an expression of one black woman's reality. And I persist in believing all such expressions (preferably stopping short of self-contempt and contempt for others) are valuable and will, in the long run, do us more good than harm". Alice Walker, *To The Black Scholar, Gardens*, p. 325.

²⁶ Karen Boorstein, "Beyond *Black Macho*: An Interview with Michele Wallace", *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 18, num. 4, Winter, 1984, p. 165.

²⁷ In her article "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement" in *The Black Scholar*, vol. XVI, num. 2, March/April, 1985, pp. 4-13, Barbara Smith reviews the impediments to feminism that black women have always felt: Myth num. 1: The Black woman is already liberated; 2. Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront; 3. Feminism is nothing but man-hating; 4. Women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns. People of color need to deal with the "larger struggle"; 5. Those feminists are nothing but Lesbians. Yet she concludes that "despite continual resistance to women of color defining our specific issues and organizing around them, it is safe to say in 1985 that we have a movement of our own" (p. 7).

²⁸ This is the definition Gloria Wade-Gayles gives to the situation of black women in America today and yesterday and is the thesis of her critical work *No Crystal Stair*.

²⁹ Mary Helen Washington, "New Lives and New Letters", *College English*, vol. 43, num. 1, January, 1981, p. 8.

³⁰ Wade-Gayles, p. 14.

³¹ Washington, p. 6.

Among this “renaissance” of black women writers of the late 1970s and the 1980s, Alice Walker ranks perhaps highest in her commitment to the feminist cause for she feels that “to the extent that black women dissociate themselves from the women’s movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of radical black herstorical tradition: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer would not have liked it. Nor do I”³². Walker is one of many black women writers of our era dedicated to instilling in others a new collective consciousness which would make them aware not only of the sexism and racism rampant in their lives, but also of the need for and appreciation for each other. This networking is essential, she believes, if women are to make good their claim on humanity, and black women writers today all seem to converge in this one important area. Toni Morrison, when asked how she specifically differentiated black women’s writing from that of other groups, replied that white men write about other white men, white women write about their relationships with white men, black men write about confrontation with white men, but black women write about each other³³. As Walker has written, “By and large black women writers support themselves, they support each other and support a sense of community much more than any group I’ve ever come in contact with, except for the civil rights era when people tended to be collective”³⁴. The need for a “sense of community”, defined by Cleath Brooks as

that sense of shared experience that comes from living within, and as a part of, a group of people who share basic assumptions, a common system of values, including morals and manners, the same historic experience, the same traditions, and all the other things that cause men to feel that they are not alone in an alien world or surrounded by an unfeeling society,³⁵

is pervasive in Walker’s work, though sometimes, as in her first novel, it is striking for its absence rather than its presence.

Though repeatedly denounced by black men for daring to give such a “negative” picture of their role in this community, Walker nonetheless has conscientiously and continuously explored the lives of black women in all dimensions and has not flinched before the magnitude nor the controversy of such a task. Her main

³² “One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)”, *Gardens*, pp. 379-380. This essay is also found in Janet Sternbury, ed., *The Writer On Her Work*, New York, London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1980, pp. 121-140.

³³ I had the privilege of asking Ms. Morrison this question myself in a “question and answer period” after her talk on her work given at the annual conference of French Americanists (AFEA) held in Toulouse, France, April 26-28, 1985, on “American Women Writers”. This session took place on Sunday morning, April 28, 1985.

³⁴ In Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1981, p. 184.

³⁵ “The Current State of American Literature”, *The Southern Review*, vol. IX, num. 1, New Series, Spring, 1973, p. 279.

concern from the first has been "the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world"³⁶. True to the feminist spirit, her ideas are central to all aspects of her work —be it her poems, her essays, her research, her short stories or her novels— and her commitment to the betterment of her race through her consistent support of black women —"the mules of the world"³⁷— pervades the totality of her oeuvre. To remark as Karen Gasten has that

possibly the only impediment to Walker's future as a novelist will concern her tendency to diffuse her energy by producing mediocre poetry, frequently polemic magazine articles, and editions of her favorite, almost forgotten black women writers³⁸,

is to ignore Walker's profound dedication to her cause. Far from being an impediment, it is precisely her insistence on women's values in her writing that has accorded her such popularity, especially the 1983 best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winner *The Color Purple*, and her collected essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. To the student of Walker's work it can come as no surprise that the latter book is filed under a double category³⁹ —Literature/Politics— for in fact there is a "political" undercurrent in *all* of her work, understanding "political" in the feminist sense of the word —"politics is personal", and the personal in feminist literature being used as a step forward in the unfolding of what is "woman".

Yet, perhaps because of all the reigning confusion among black women over the women's movement, Walker has not elected to label herself a "feminist", not even a "black feminist", as expression she "has a problem with"⁴⁰. Though on one occasion she has remarked that "'black feminism' sounds like some kind of spray"⁴¹, it seems more likely that her rejection of the term is a conscious attempt to avoid

³⁶ Alice Walker, "From An Interview", *Gardens*, pp. 250-251. This essay is also found in *Interviews with Black Writers*, John O'Brien, ed., New York, Liveright, 1973, pp. 185-211.

³⁷ From Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Urbana, Chicago, London, University of Illinois Press, 1978, p. 29.

³⁸ "The Theme of Female Self-Discovery in the Novels of Judith Rossner, Gail Godwin, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison", Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Auburn University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms International, 1984, p. 260. This remark borders on the sarcastic and is totally gratuitous in light of the fact that Gaston never mentions any of Walker's work but her novels in this dissertation.

³⁹ *Gardens*, back cover.

⁴⁰ Alice Walker, "Coming Apart", in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, Laura Lederer, ed., New York, William Morrow and Company, 1980, footnote on p. 100. This "short story" is also included in her book *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, London, The Women's Press Ltd., 1982, pp. 41-53, but the long, explanatory footnote concerning her rejection of "black feminist" for "womanist" is left out.

⁴¹ Hermione, Lee, "Rally Neat, Alice", Interview with Alice Walker, *The Observer*, may 5, 1985, p. 24

being confined by a word whose definition has been blurred by connotations of lesbianism. (*Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*⁴², for example, has an extremely high percentage of writing by black lesbians and was edited by an avowed black lesbian.) This is not to say that Walker is disowning this group of women from the movement. (She has been commended by black lesbians as the *only* female heterosexual writer to give positive reviews of lesbian writing⁴³, and certainly the lesbian relationship of Shug and Celie is central to *The Color Purple*. On the other hand, she objects to interpreting a close relationship between females as lesbian unless specifically stated to be so⁴⁴.) It *is* to say that her values as a woman will not be limited by sexual choice even while including the right to that choice. She has rejected “black feminist”, then, in favor of a word which she feels encompasses the whole sense of being a woman, specifically a black woman —“womanist”— and has actively defined herself and her writing as such.

Just exactly what is “womanism”?

Walker has made several overt attempts to define herself and with each try the meaning seems to become richer, deeper, more mature. The first time she uses the term is in her short story “Coming Apart”. Although originally invited to write an introduction to the Third World Women’s chapter in Laura Lederer’s book *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, Walker found herself so moved by certain essays that she wound up writing what she calls a “fable” rather than the required “Introduction”, and in it she writes of the female protagonist,

The wife has never considered herself a feminist —though she is, of course, a “womanist”—. A womanist is a feminist, only more common⁴⁵.

Here she seems to imply that, unlike a feminist, a womanist is a woman who is aware of her own values but has never felt the need to declare herself or actively participate in the movement —hence she is “more common”—. While in the edition of short stories *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* she footnotes “womanist” merely as “approximates ‘black feminist’”⁴⁶, (emphasis added), her explanatory notes in *Take Back the Night* are much more extensive:

⁴² Barbara Smith, ed., New York, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983.

⁴³ Ann Allen Shockley, “The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview”, *Home Girls*, p. 92. She writes: “The Black female heterosexual reviewers who *could* be sensitive to these works are usually too afraid of their peers to give them any kind of positive review; they are frightened of being tagged a closet Lesbian, or a traitor to the Black male. As a result, the Black female heterosexual reviewer, with the exception of Alice Walker, either joins the males with all-around negative reviews or elects not to review the work at all”. Walker reviewed Shockley’s lesbian novel, *Loving Her*, in “A Daring Subject Boldly Shared”, *Ms.*, April 1975, pp. 120 & 124.

⁴⁴ Alice Walker, “Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson”, in *Gardens*, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁵ Walker, “Coming Apart”, in *Take Back*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ Walker, “Coming Apart”, in *Good Woman*, p. 48.

"Womanist" encompasses "feminist" as it is defined in Webster's, but also means *instinctively* pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women's culture. It comes (to me) from the word "womanish", a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: "You're acting *womanish!*" A labelling that failed, for the most part, to keep us from acting "womanish" whenever we could, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired.

An advantage of using "womanist" is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word "Black" (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word "feminist"), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface "feminist" with the word "white", since the word "feminist" is accepted as coming out of white women's culture⁴⁷.

There are two things to which attention may be drawn in this definition. First, the emphasis is on womanism as a part of the black woman's heritage which would therefore validate Beverly Guy-Sheftall's opinion that Walker "is definitely a feminist. 'Womanism' is just a term she uses to relate feminism to black women"⁴⁸. Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, Walker not only uses but emphasizes the word "instinctively" which would mean she is affirming that there is indeed a specific intrinsic set of women's values. While the root for the word may come from black culture, it is important to note that her expression "instinctively pro-woman" is not initially defined as "black". In an interview published in 1981, Walker reiterates these same ideas but stresses the importance of a new dimension—strength:

And I like the way it feels in my mouth. I like "womanist". I always felt that "feminist" was sort of elitist and ethereal and it sounded a little weak. I once mentioned that to Gloria Steinem, who said, "Well, maybe so, but our job is to make it strong"⁴⁹.

Later in 1981, in a review of Jean McMahon Humez' *Gifts of Power*, objecting to the author's labelling Rebecca Jackson's relationship with Rebecca Perot as "lesbian", Walker wrote again of womanism:

The word "lesbian" may not, in any case, be suitable—or comfortable—for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho's residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing;

⁴⁷ Walker, "Coming Apart", in *Take Back*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Justine Tally, "Black Women's Studies in the 1980s: An Interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall", *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, núm. 10, p. 200.

⁴⁹ Krista Brewer, "Writing to Survive: An Interview with Alice Walker", *Southern Exposure: Festival*, vol. IX, num. 2, Summer, 1981, p. 12.

but, instead, referring to themselves as “whole” women, from “wholly” or “holy”. Or as “round” women, women who loved other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all back people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be “womanist”. At any rate, the word they chose would have to be both spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied. A word that said more that they choose women over men. More than that they choose to live separate from men. In fact, to be consistent with black cultural values (which, whatever their shortcomings, still have considerable worth) it would have to be a word that affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world⁵⁰.

Again there are two fascinating images which strike the mind. First, her play on the words “wholly” and “holy” suggest that Walker’s concept of “saintliness” is bound up with “completeness” as a woman, the image being pursued also in “round” women in which she apparently includes the connotation “well-rounded” in the sense that the psyche of her “whole” woman is balanced by a love of humankind and nature, and far from extremism in any give direction. Moreover, it ties in the philosophy of “holism”, a theory that holds that “the universe and especially living nature is correctly seen in terms of interacting wholes (as of living organisms) that are more than the mere sum of elementary particles”⁵¹, echoing the feminist tendency to reject men’s habitual dissection and classification of life in all its richness into neat, rather sterile cubbyholes.

While preferring women’s view of the world and “loving other women”, the womanist cares for men even while possibly rejecting the “male” (i.e., male values) in them. This is an important departure from the connotations of “feminist” or “black feminist”, which, rightfully or not, often come to signify a rejection of men per se. Even though the men she cites are of blood relationships —“fathers, brothers, sons”— it must be kept in mind that these terms in black culture are equally applied to persons who are not technically kin.

This idea seems confirmed in the last sentence and second major point to be made that the word should affirm “connectedness to the *entire* community and the world”. The fact that this strikingly reiterates what female psychology has been saying lately about women’s values in general (values “suppressed” in men) and that she attributes this affinity for all living things to “Black culture”, not black women specifically, suggests the interesting hypothesis that these values are common to the “oppressed” sector of society (women and black people), having been relegated to them by the dominant sector (white men). This type of analogy has also been made for other aspects of culture: Huggins’ explanation of the use of minstrel shows to laugh at the “primitive black” so as to allay fears of the white

⁵⁰ Walker, *Gardens*, p. 81.

⁵¹ According to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1973, p. 546.

man's own primordial instincts⁵², echoed by Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act*⁵³; Rowbotham's extension of this need for a representative of "primitivism" to women⁵⁴; the myth of the black woman as "sensual" so that the white woman might remain "chaste"⁵⁵; or the comparison of "woman's flair for oral communication" with the "quite fantastic verbal ability in blacks"⁵⁶, accounted for by the ostracism of both groups from the more "sophisticated" means of communication. It is therefore not surprising to see the same values surface in both "women's" and "Black culture", if in fact both these groups have been made "cultural receptors" for values rejected by the white Western male.

Borrowing from Alice Walker's manuscript for *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Barbara Smith quotes her definition of "womanism" as making "the connection between plain common sense and a readiness to fight for change". She writes:

WOMANIST: (According to Walker) From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish" i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the colloquial expression of mothers to daughters, "You're acting womanish", i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interest in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown-up. Interchangeable with other colloquial expression: "You're trying to be grown". Responsible. In charge. *Serious...*

2. Also: Herstorically capable, as in "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me". Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time"⁵⁷.

⁵² "Thus the black face minstrel objectified and therefore created a distance between white men's normative selves (what they had to be) and their natural selves (what they feared or were fascinated by)." Huggins, p. 257.

⁵³ "Indeed it seems that the Negro has become identified with those unpleasant aspects of conscience and consciousness which it is part of the American's characters to avoid." New York, Random House, 1972, p. 100.

⁵⁴ "As it became less and less possible politically to sentimentalize workers, blacks, or the colonized as representatives of the primitive, the yearning of the bourgeois for animality which did not shatter the repression and work-discipline essential to capitalism focused completely on women." Rowbotham, p. 7.

⁵⁵ "From the beginning, the Dark Lady had represented the hunger of the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon male not only for the rich sexuality, but also for the religions which he had disowned in fear, the racial groups he had excluded and despised." Feidler, *Love and Death*, p. 301. The theme of the Fair Maiden and the Dark Lady as basic to the portrayal of women in American literature runs all the way through Feidler's book. See also, Hooks, pp. 59, 110-111; and Gerda Lerner, "The Myth of the 'Bad' Black Woman", *Black Women in White America*, New York, Vintange Books, 1973, pp. 163-164.

⁵⁶ Kate Millet, "Introduction to Prostitution: A Quartet for Female Voices", p. 21, quoted in Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction", in *Feminist Literary Criticism*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1975, p. Josephine Donovan, ed., p. 17.

⁵⁷ *Home Gils*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

The emphasis of the first section of this definition is decidedly on maturity, a process which, as Annis Pratt points out in women's literature, is consistently cut short: "the disjunctions we have noted inevitably make the woman's initiation less a self-determined progression *towards* maturity than a regression *from* full participation in adult life"⁵⁸. While historical circumstances have always forced "maturity" and "responsibility" onto the black girl/woman at early age, the feminist movement has found itself with the initial problem of convincing white women that they could participate fully in their own adulthood. Therefore the "blackness" of the first definition is explicit in "black feminist" and implicit in the second, "historically capable" —black women have traditionally been considered and recognized as capable while white women must be re-educated as it were—. Nonetheless, white feminists most decidedly insist on this personal development and, in fact, is something they have traditionally envied in the black woman. Writes Sara Evans of the Civil Rights Movement:

In the ensuing search for others to emulate, these determined but uprooted young southern white women turned again and again to the examples of black women. There they found models that shattered cultural images of appropriate "female" behavior. "For the first time", according to Dorothy Dawson Burlage, "I had role models I could really respect"⁵⁹.

Thus, while "outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior" and being "grown-up", "responsible", "in charge", "serious" and "capable" may be attributes traditionally assigned to black women, they are exactly those that white women have tried to asset via the woman's movement in these last decades.

What is not clear is whether Smith's quotation from Walker is an excerpt from the manuscript to suit her own purposes, or Walker went on to expand her definition even more before publication of her own collection of "Womanist Prose". Whatever the case, Walker's second definition of the term in her own book is much more inclusive and here she added a third and fourth entry:

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden with every color flower represented". Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and

⁵⁸ *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Brighton, Sussex, The Harvester Press Limited, 1982, p. 36.

⁵⁹ Evans, p. 51.

I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me". Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time".

3. *Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.*

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender⁶⁰.

Along with "capable" —even before it— Walker returns to her idea of "wholeness", both of the individual and of the community. She explicitly leaves sexual choice to just that —a choice—, recognizing that sexual love is an external physical expression of an internal warmth or feeling of "connectedness" and of love⁶¹, regardless of a person's sex. In this appreciation of people for themselves, not for their sexual, racial, and class definition, Walker reaffirms her universalism and it is important to note that the color white is not excluded from her flower garden —meaning that the recognition of affinity with all kinds of human beings includes even those who have historically oppressed Third World peoples—. In a note to Leonie Caldecott after her interview in San Francisco, Walker is even more specific on this point when she writes "to amend something she had said about the Native Americans' attitudes to nature and their fellow human beings, in contrast to the 'rape of the earth' perpetuated by the white man's culture. She emphasized that 'it isn't *just* indigenous peoples who can offer us good things to shape the future with but we must *accept* and *use* and *love* what is good from *all* of us. *Each* people. *Each* gender. *Each* race. Even each age..."⁶².

The womanist, Walker insists, appreciates herself, her culture, her womanly attitudes and emotions *unconditionally*, even in the face of a society which has insisted that tears, emotion, compromise, subjectivity, and other "feminine" traits are signs of weakness and of an inferior nature when compared with the "manly" attributes of emotional self-control, dominance, and objectivity. Here Walker is again right in tune with modern feminist psychologists who insist that far from being inferior, "women's" traits are not only laudable but fundamental to the well-being of all human beings. Love of artistic expression, nature, people, the life and the living, and the Spirit —the awareness of something other than the strictly conscious self—, all make up the whole woman, a person who is at peace with the world and with herself.

Finally, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender", that is, including all that is implied in the latter but deeper, richer, more vibrant, regal. Far from negating her feminism, Walker expands it to affirm all those qualities Western culture has tried to stifle and in doing so comes to define what more closely

⁶⁰ *Gardens*, pp. xi-xii.

⁶¹ See, for example, Marge Piercy, "The Turn-on of Intimacy", *Ms.*, vol. XII, num. 8, February, 1984, pp. 46-48.

⁶² "Alice Walker: Enduring in the face of Everything", *Good Housekeeping*, vol. 127, num. 6, June, 1985, p. 227.

represents the sentiments of the “second wave” of feminist thought, a feminism which has lost much of its stridency of the early 1970s with its insistence on access to male culture, and which has come to believe in women’s values as the lost half of the proverbial apple. In fact, Caldecott notes that she

describes herself as a “womanist” rather than a feminist... (a term) by which she defines *her particular emphasis on the importance of traditionally female values in redeeming the culture...* (emphasis added)⁶³.

Walker writes with the same type of conviction as that of people involved in the early Civil Rights Movement, wholly (“holy”) taken up with the idea of “the beloved country”⁶⁴, those who felt that they were participating in “some type of holy crusade”⁶⁵. As a writer and lecturer she has taken it upon herself to forment her concept of womanism and to stimulate women to new, higher objectives:

Your job, when you leave here —as it was the job of educated women before you— is to change the world. Nothing less or easier than that. I hope you have been reading the recent women’s liberation literature, even if you don’t agree with some of it. For you will find, as women have found through the ages, that changing the world requires a lot of free time. Requires a lot of mobility. Requires money, and, as Virginia Woolf put it so well, “a room of one’s own”, preferably one with a key and a *lock*. Which means that women must be prepared to think for themselves, which means, undoubtedly, trouble with boyfriends, lovers, and husbands, which means all kinds of heartache and misery, and times when you will wonder if independence, freedom of thought or your own work is worth it all.

We must believe that it is. For the world is not good enough; we must make it better⁶⁶.

It is this faith in the future and the new possibilities to be opened up by what women have to offer that moves Walker to write as she does. She shares with other women writers the “urge to create a new set of values that will suit the lives and purposes of women as seen by women: a system of authentic emotional relations and interconnected beliefs drawn from lived experiences that will develop the force of social myth, and thus explain the workings of the world and direct appropriate behavior”⁶⁷. The author’s “womanism” is more than just an attempt to bring black women into the movement; it is a belief in the development of a

⁶³ Caldecott, p. 224.

⁶⁴ Evans, p. 98 and elsewhere.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Marion Barry and John Lewis, “Interviews on Nashville Sit-ins: Nonviolence Emerges”, *Southern Exposure: Stayed on Freedom*, vol. IX, num. 1, Spring, 1981, pp. 30-32.

⁶⁶ Walker, “A Talk: Convocation 1972”, *Gardens*, p. 37.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Janeway, “Women’s Literature”, *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed., Daniel Hoffman, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England, Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 376.

here-to-fore wasted human potential which has the power to enrich every human life.

JUSTINE TALLY

Universidad de La Laguna