Black Writing as Other : an Island of Feminine Otherness

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Primitive society practices its misogyny in terms of taboo and mana which evolve into explanatory myth. In historical cultures, this is transformed into ethical, then literary, and in the modern period, scientific rationalizations for the sexual politics ... Patriarchy has God on its side. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*)

I consider women's literature as a specific category, not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized. (Christiane Rochefort, "The Privilege of Consciousness")

I never meant anything. (Toni Morrison, *Sula*)

Womanhood, like blackness, is Other...

In hegemonic American discourse, the metaphor of the woman has turned into a reconfiguration of the articulation of marginality, otherness and isolation, so that one may wonder if the identity formation in ethnic and racial cultural productions is to be construed in terms of gendered race or gender politics and circumscribed to an enclosed area. Woman, Black, Other, have grown paradigmatic of the discourse on the formation of identity in Black literature. Being a "Feminine Other" has become a figure for a vaguely defined ontological marginality, which generates a process of isolation that may be applied to all "minority" literatures. The presupposition of women as an oppressed group has led to a methodological "feminization" and set apart racial literature in an American discourse that tends

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to insulate itself from external influences. Both the categories of "woman" and "race" consequently assume the status of metaphors that can serve as mirror allegories for "the isolated Other" in the rhetoric of oppression, as Trin T. Minh so aptly pointed out in 1989 in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism.*[2]

Theorizing on so-called non-canonical literature and most particularly on Black literature is a serious problem that admits of no intellectual recuperation of the notion of difference and suggests three questions: If writing "race" implies an academic distinction that accounts for Euro-American presumptions of Afro-Americans' otherness and isolation, is referring to race a way of denying individuality? Secondly, does the linguistic term "race" correspond to a natural category in itself, to metaphysical characteristics or is it but a language artifact, a term used deliberately to limit and determine the thought, imagination, and artistic creation, the very lives of non-white people? Finally, referentializing the notion of difference, what pattern of intertextuality can account for black writing being turned into that island of feminine otherness?

Is referring to "race" a way of denying individuality?

If one were to agree with Todorov's definition of racism as "the name given to a type of behavior which consists in the display of contempt or aggressiveness toward other people on account of physical differences (other than those of sex) between them and oneself,"[3] then racism — like sexism — would be limited to a well-attested social phenomenon. But racism is not necessarily linked to the display of contempt or aggressiveness. It can lie behind benevolence and well-intentioned statements dependent on generalizations about the attributes of a given individual. Such generalizations, which are devious ways of referring to people, are developed from characteristics — both physical and metaphysical — thought to be shared by members of a defined group. So, blackness is identified by white people through a generalizing process based upon essences assimilated to biological features. It stands out as a "negative" OTHER defined in contradistinction to a uniformly "positive" SELF. This paradigm pivots on the opposition between

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2 . Minh-ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 115-120.

3 . Tzwetan Todorov, "'Race', Writing, and Culture" *in* Gates, Henry Louis Jr., ed. *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 370.

male and female. Euro-American is SELF, masculine (the mainland). Afro-American is OTHER, feminine (an island).

Paternalism and benevolence can hide racism, as Hal Bennett shows it in *The Wilderness of Vines*: Dr. Stanhope, a white man, is driving away from Burnside, musing about the strength of love — the only way, according to him, to defeat hatred and violence. All of a sudden, moved by an "integrationist" impulse, he pulls up his car so as to pick up a group of elderly black men. Some time later, once they have left, Dr. Stanhope, while continuing to muse about the power of love to solve racial conflicts, takes off his handkerchief, cleans the seats where the black men had sat, folds his handkerchief and drops it disdainfully in the street, driving away. This episode is reminiscent of a passage from *The Primitive* where Chester Himes describes the benevolent white editor wiping his hand hurriedly on his handkerchief once he had shaken hands with the black novelist Jesse Robinson.

Physical ability, rhythm, laughter, singing are among the devious ways of referring to Blackness and thereby of isolating it. "You people sure can dance,"[4] says the white teacher to Selina, in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Laughter is an indirect way of identifying blackness in Alice Walker's "To Hell With Dying." Singing too is a symbol of blackness, like in Toni Cade Bambara's short stories. In "Medley," Bambara refers to Sweet Pea's and Larry's identities through the crazy musical times they have in the shower "stomping out the beat against the shower mat, with Larry taking an alto solo and Sweet Pea feeling she is Yma Sumac for one minute, so high she is on just sheer music, singing herself out and jarring the song out of shape, diving back into the melody line and not even knowing what song each other is doing, finishing up together just as the water turns cold."[5]

What is important is that the indirect references to race developed by African American novelists show these writers have chosen to use language in a dialectics of universal-particular, producing writerly designs which constitute literary and social paradigms. Thus the use of the black woman blues singer, a recurrent metaphor in black women writers' fiction. In black literary production feminized and isolated by hegemonic American discourse, the paradigmatic use of the black woman blues singer expresses the power and vitality of black people as well as a commitment to art in black women's lives and a sign of resistance in the enclosed

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[4] . Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 177.

[5] . Toni Cade Bambara, "Medley" in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (New York: Random House), p. 24.

world of black writing. The blues singer theme is to be found in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, in Sherley Anne Williams's "Someone Sweet Angel Chile," a poem about Bessie Smith, in Ann Petry's *The Narrows*, in Toni Cade Bambara's "Medley" and "Witchbird," in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Social paradigms are not only normalized but codified. The design of the black woman blues singer is a code for the writers themselves. It is a signifier of their own self-consciousness about their art as well as a symbol of their relationship to an artistic legacy and an intertextual tradition. It also enables them to assert themselves as creative writers and artists. They take strength from the feelings of a community which the dominant culture seeks to isolate and silence. Michele Wallace says in "The Color Purple — An Amos' n' Andy for the 80's" that the black woman blues singer is "a paradigm of commercial, cultural and historical potency" as well as a metaphor "for reconstructing black female experience on positive ground."[6] An episode of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*[7] illustrates the idea of cultural potency and positive black female experience: Claudia explains that when her mother was in a singing mood she would sing about hard times and bad times. But her mother's voice was so sweet that the young girl looked forward to "the delicious times when 'my man' would leave me, when I would hate to see that evening sun go down ... 'cause then I would know 'my man' has left this town!"[8] The black woman blues singer is an authentic metaphor of the potency of black culture, black tradition and black women, when Claudia concludes: "misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet."[9] The design of the black woman blues singer develops into a literary and social paradigm that codifies black family structures — in their isolation and in their estrangement — as an alternative to the cultural practices of white patriarchy. This is the metaphor of the woman who lives free by autonomous standards she sets for herself. She is not "the negative of the positive"[10] as defined by Shoshana Felman. She asserts a coherent black SELF, stable and positive. In "Witchbird," Honey mirrors the image of this potent, independent woman deeply

6 . Michele Wallace, "The Color Purple — An Amos' n' Andy for the 80's" in *The Village Voice*, vol. 31, n° 11 (March 18, 1986), p. 22.
7 . Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New-York: Rinehart & Winston, 1970).
8 . Ibid., p. 24.
9 . Ibid., p. 25.
10 . Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," *Diacritics 5* (Winter 1975: 10).

involved in her art; singing makes people "expect to absorb their blues and transform them maybe into songs."[11]

In "Talking that Talk," Henry Louis Gates Jr. emphasizes the idea that referring to blackness and therefore to race through generalizations based upon essences — depicted as biological — amounts to behavioral definitions. Such references are necessarily limited and limiting in so far as they depend upon physical characteristics rather than upon the nature of a transcendent metaphysical character. Turning what is external into "Other" through generalizations of manners, corresponds to a reductive description of the Other in his/her individuality.

Language and race

"Race" is but an act of language for Henry Louis Gates Jr., not an essence based on differences determined *a priori*. Only by turning to black literary tradition can one define a specificity and locate what Henry Louis Gates Jr. words as a "signifying black difference."[12] Focusing on intertextuality, it is to be remembered that

> literary works configure into a tradition, not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representation of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the texts themselves — in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody — that a "tradition" emerges and defines itself.[13]

Circumscribed and enclosed like an island, black writing, as W. Lawrence notes it, can only be apprehended through an awareness of "the ontological structures and mythological thought systems that Blacks develop to define and reinforce their definition of self and existence.[14]

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* illustrates the deliberately negative use of "race" to determine the thoughts and lives of non-white people, rendering them powerless and symbolically non-existent. Pecola's victimization arises from her

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11 . Michele Wallace, op. cit., p. 22.

12 . Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Talkin' That Talk," in *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 405.

13 . Foreword to *Contending Forces* by Pauline E. Hopkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xviii.

14 . W. Lawrence, *Discourse and the Other* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1985), p. 133.

blackness. Pecola's classmates berate her dark skin in an insulting verse "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked/ stch ta ta stch ta ta/ stch ta ta ta ta."[15] The intraracial confrontation related to color involving Pecola and an adult, Geraldine, scars Pecola both properly and figuratively. She receives facial scratches from a cat that Geraldine's son throws at her and moral scratches from Geraldine who expels her. Unworthiness, powerlessness, irrelevance are assigned to Pecola because of her black self. She must be wiped away. Her perception of herself through her black skin isolates her in a negative self-image offering evidence of self-hatred.

Sartrean influences are not absent from Pecola's confrontation with Yacobowski when the girl enters the Fresh Vegetable, Meat and Sundries Store to purchase Mary-Jane candies:

> Blue eyes. Blear dropped. Slowly... he looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (pp. 41-42)

Pecola associates Yacobowski's distaste for her with his distaste for her blackness. Her race and skin color, she thinks, create that vacuum in her. Her black self is turned into an object, then neutralized. For the white vendor "there is nothing to see" that is to say "no-thing." The little black girl is simply negated.

The episode of the hunters, when Cholly Breedlove is forced to turn his copulation into a performance under the flashlights of white hunters, exemplifies the "negative look" of the Whites: their denial of black identity, their perverse interpretation of race, their substitution of free self-definition for stereotypes and external classification. The Whites' look, their focusing on race and blackness — reductively associated with hyper-sexuality — give rise to the reification, the isolation, the alienation and the exclusion of the Other. Black writing reflects this exclusion as in the symbolic order ruling the American society, it is allotted the marginal position of an island of feminine otherness.

Among the persisting echoes sometimes used out of bitterness and anger, sometimes in parody of the racist's thought, is the metaphor of "the primitive" black male. This paradigm of the black male's primitiveness appears noticeably in Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade*, in Ernest Gaines's *Bloodline*, in Clarence Major's *All Night Visitors*, in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* or in Hal Bennett's *Lord of Dark Places*.

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15 . Morrison, ibid., p. 55.

In Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade*, the description of Luther Mac Gregor — the African — evokes Shakespeare's Caliban. His identity is given him (by his white wife Mollie) through his body: "the thickness of his torso and the width of his muscular shoulders," with an emphasis on the color of his skin, "his flat-featured African face seemed blacker than the usual connotation of the word."[16] The description turns into a paradigm of the primitive black male when Luther Mac Gregor exclaims:

> Look man, as long as I be black and ugly white folks gonna hate my guts. They gonna look at me and see a nigger.[17]

This comparison is echoed in Gaine's *Bloodline* by Old Munford who explains that Blacks are pre-determined in their acts and even vices by white people who need to keep Blacks in a state of primitiveness and delinquency so as to assert their difference.

> They need me to prove they human — ... They need us. Because without us they don't know what they is — they don't know what they is out there. With us around, they can see us and they know what they ain't. They ain't us.[18]

The intertextuality of these metaphors on the theme of the black male's primitiveness allows a figuration of the Inside/Outside structure. Not only does it deconstruct the stereotypes of the violent, primitive black male but also the myths of black race. The other is reified because the freedom to define his own self is denied to him. Afro-American writers purposely develop the cliché of the violent, primitive black male to conjure up a metaphor of the cultural *apartheid* imposed on the black community, and, beyond it, of the colonization and feminization of a literature sensed as external to Euro-American and perceived as an island of otherness.

The feminine Other

The "Othering," the setting apart of black literature through feminization is to be understood in an ideological American context of sexual politics that comprises male power and domination, with an overview of patriarchy as a political

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16 . Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade* (New York: Knopf, 1947), p. 28.
17 . Ibid, p. 329.
18 . Ernest Gaines, *Bloodline*, p. 110.

institution. Kate Millett says sexism may be more endemic than racism in American society. She associates patriarchy as an institutionalized force with racism and colonialism. She emphasizes the subordinate position of the "feminine" in a society where patriarchy encourages imbalance along lines of sex.

Sartre's definition of the "Other" is to be construed in reference to human relations pivoting around the experience of "the Look."

> I grasp the Other's Look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. ... The Other as a Look is only that — my transcendence transcended. ... Thus my project of recovering myself is fundamentally a project of absorbing the Other.[19]

Being looked at by the "Other" is both a proof of one's reality and a threat to one's sense of freedom. In Toni Morrison's fiction, many characters try to define themselves through the eyes of others. They learn to like being used. They partake in the process of their own reification so that they can feel they have "chosen" to do so. They try to live up to an external image whereas they have, in fact, internalized the "Look" of the majority culture — an internalization that is life-denying and destructive of human emotion. They seem to accept the process of isolation of the feminine.

Can the concept of "Feminine" be defined? Womanhood, like blackness, is considered as "Other" in the American society. As Simone de Beauvoir words it, patriarchy denies female selfhood, making it the "inessential who never goes back to being the essential... the absolute Other without reciprocity." The status of women in a patriarchal society mirrors that of Blacks in a racist one.

Judith Kegan Gardiner remarks in her article "On Female Identity" that "in a male-dominated society being a man means not being a woman."[20] Female modernist writers like Woolf and Stein develop fictional universes which question patriarchal assumptions about the conformity between gender and personality. Philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky defines woman's "infatuation with an inferiorized body" and her alienation between outer and inner selves mirroring the opposition between appearance and reality.[21]

Christiane Rochefort in "The Privilege of Consciousness" refers to women's writing and culture as "the literature of the colonized." Kathleen Barry's

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19 . Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 340.

20 . Judith Kegan Gardiner, "On Female Identity," in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1981, vol. 8, number 2, p. 360.

21 . Sandra Lee Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," p. 41.

sociological inquiry *Female Sexual Slavery*[22] emphasizes the subordinate position of a victimized woman in America as does the study of Roger Langley and Richard Levy, *Wife Beating: the Silent Crisis*.[23] The concept of "Feminine Otherness" implicitly suggests an idea of cultural domination exerted over a female group set in a subordinate position.

Black women writers — Toni Morrison most particularly — emphasize the dilemma of the black woman isolated in a society whose female ideal is white, blonde and blue-eyed. The black woman's image, say Williams Grier and Price M. Cobbs in *Black Rage* is the "antithesis of American beauty," and, as such, the black woman is doubly Other and isolated in a circumscribed world. The theme of the subordinate feminine Other and of the domineering masculine is a recurrent one in black women writers' fiction, where the victimized female character is symbolically acted upon, powerless in her island of exclusion and totally passive. Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* reflects the inward anger and resentment of a self-sacrificing housewife. Louise Merriwether's "A Happening in Barbados" is centered on a dialogue limited to men or directed toward men while the narrator is turned into another female victim. Alice Walker's "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring" is the moving story of a black woman artist's struggle against physical, intellectual subjugation and of her efforts to develop her self-awareness.

The creative rendering — through an intertextual pattern — of an imbalance along lines of sex is important because it structures the representation of the black woman's experience in the African American tradition but also because it sets the outline of the masculine domination of the hegemonic Euro-American discourse and its "Othering" of black literature as an external and subordinate form of cultural expression. This hegemonic critical approach and discourse affect black writing. Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha* provides a convincing illustration of it. Maud Martha's life is apparently quite ordinary. She seems content with her enclosed life with her husband and her daughter. Even though she rebels against her confinement she expresses her resentment and her anger inwardly. Her rebellion against the ideal of self-sacrifice that is imposed on her is never vocal. Her anger is always expressed in such an indirect way that it makes her look passive. She seems to have become responsible for her own impotence. In "The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction" critic Raymond Hedin says that conveying anger has always been a difficult problem for black writers. It

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22 . Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1979).

23 . Roger Langley & Richard Levy, *Wife Beating: the Silent Crisis* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), p. 138.

is Hedin's contention that black writers (beginning with the slave narrative) have had to repress anger and other emotions that could be interpreted by white audiences as evidence of the brutal nature of black men. This being done in order to present a benign humanity that would ease the fears of white readers. Gwendolyn Brooks, like many black writers emphasizes rationality and downplays emotion. The structure of the novel more metaphorical than rhetorical turns *Maud Martha* into what Robert B. Stepto defines as an "authenticating narrative" in which the text itself becomes a document bearing evidence of the isolation of black women.[24]

The protagonist expresses anger obliquely by painting unflattering portraits of those who persecute her. When she leaves her circumscribed world she is exposed to the condescension or hostility of Whites but she remains evasive so as to distance herself from her own violent reactions.

Because the freedom to define herself is denied to the black woman, she can try to fit the description of a dominant society based on the reification of the Other and immerse herself in the white culture. This is illustrated by Maud Martha who represses her own feelings or by Toni Morrison's Mrs. Breedlove. She feels she exists only through the stereotype of her sexuality: "I know that my flesh is all that be on his mind. That he couldn't stop if he had to ... I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young."[25] By accepting to model herself on a stereotype and to correspond to "the idea" others have of her and be "seen" by them — to put it in Frantz Fanon's words — she accepts to be reduced to an object. But the black woman can also be defined solely by her exclusion from the patriarchal society, like Sula, who finally confesses: "I never meant anything," which seems to insist on her passivity and powerlessness. [26]

Does black women's writing imply a gendered creative process, a woman's language, a woman's culture? Stereotypically associated with inferiority, the concept of "feminine" has, for the past ten years, been going through a gradual redefinition with both French and American feminist criticism struggling to sever it from its common-place association with subordination. Theories on women's writing, explains Elaine Showalter in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," make use of four models of difference, four kinds of isolation: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. While Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in*

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24 . Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 5.

25 . Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p. 101.

26 . Toni Morisson, *Sula* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 127.

the Attic[27] structure their analysis of women's writing around metaphors of literary paternity, typical of patriarchal western culture, Alicia Ostriker stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery.[28] In black women's writing, the theme of the Otherness and body metaphors merge together. Ntozake Shange's choreopoem "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf" deliberately celebrates those aspects of femaleness that have been deemed unattractive. The lady in green reclaims those signs of her identity she has been taught to despise.

> I want my arm with the hot iron scar/and my leg with the flea bite/i want my calloused feet and quick language back in my mouth/...i want my own things...[29]

When all the women join together at the end for singing in gospel style "i found God in myself / and i loved her fiercely," the image evoked is not the culturally accepted one of a white male God but of that African tribal woman, described by Carol P. Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, a woman whose body and skin color did represent divinity.[30] Besides, more than any other black woman writer, Shange has tried to demystify the sexual mores that make female sexuality a taboo subject. No aspect of female sexuality is excluded — all are here: menstruation, sexual pleasure, pregnancy, abortion, lesbianism.

What is most significant in Shange's works is that the body metaphors or demystification of female sexuality are fundamental to understand how black women conceptualize their situation in society. Shange's focus on the body is mediated by innovations in linguistic and literary structures as well as by a different social outlook illustrating thereby the quintessence of woman's literary practice and a dialectical identification.[31] The question is not to draw hasty general conclusions and state that writing is gender marked. But, through her writing, Ntozake Shange asserts her difference as a Feminine Other. The sign of the rejection of the male-dominated forms of a hegemonic Euro-American culture is Shange's discarding of standard English, of conventional spelling, punctuation and

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27 . Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth - Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univesity Press), 1979.

28 . Alicia Ostriker, "Body Language: Imagery of the Body in Women's Poetry" in Michaels, Leonard & Rick, Christopher ed., *The State of the Language* (Berkeley: Beacon Press, 1980).

29 . Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p.13.

30 . Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 117.

31 . See Miller, "Women's Autobiography in France: For a Dialectics of Identification" *in* McConnell-Ginet, Sally, Borker, Ruth, Furman, Nelly ed., *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), p. 271.

grammar. Carol Christ says in *Diving Deep and Surfacing* that this repudiation of standard forms mirrors Virginia Woolf's assertion that women's experience could not be neatly fit into the "the rhythms of dominant and subordinate clauses that were patterned after the ordered and hierarchical world of upper class [white] men."[32] In *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo,*[33] traditional narrative patterns are strangely broken up with recipes, dreams, letters from Mama.

In her fiction and most particularly through linguistic innovations such as in "aw babee you so pretty,"[34] the rejection of standard patterns allows Shange to bridge two cultures: the middle-class, educated black woman narrator who is at home in European, North American culture remains rooted in Black American culture. Her language is not merely the expression of black culture. It is confessional, personal and therefore fragmented because it is disorganized by the weight of both the white culture and patriarchy. Nancy Chodorov in "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective" locates the originality of women's writing in the author's psyche.[35] In their analysis, Gilbert and Gubar say that the woman writer experiences her own gender as "a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy."[36] They further relate the loneliness of the female artist to her feelings of alienation from their male predecessors.

The woman's image of herself as a solitary figure in the world is brought into relief in Paulette Childress White's "The Bird Cage" and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha.* The protagonists are artists and their art seems incompatible with the lives they lead. In "The Bird Cage" the young wife and mother of four sons dreams of living alone in a house with "one bed, one chair, one table, and one, just one of anything." This is echoed by Paule Marshall's "Reena." Sitting alone, at night, after her divorce, Reena says that despite her loneliness everything seems possible. Janie, at the end of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is represented as a solitary dreamer. The intertextual metaphor of the black woman's desire for self-realization through art is thwarted by the politics of domesticity. Woman's impotence, like Maud's in *Maud Martha,* is intertextually reminiscent of the suicide endings of such earlier women's writings

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32 . Virginia Woolf, "Speech, Manuscript Notes" *in* Mitchell A. Leaska, ed., *The Pargiters,* (London: O.U.P., 1978).

33 . Ntozake Shange, *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (NewYork: St Martin's Press, 1982).

34 . Ntozakee Shange, "aw babee, you so pretty," in *Essence Magazine,* April 1980.

35 . Chodorov, Nancy, "Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," Future of Difference, in *Critical Inquiry,* 1981, vol. 8, number 2., p. 11.

36 . Gilbert & Gubar, ibid., p. 50.

as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) or Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928).

Black women's writing has to be placed in a context not merely of black culture but of women's culture. Gerda Lerner has argued about the duality women live "as members of the general culture and as partakers of woman's culture."[37] According to Shoshana Felman, "the challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to 'reinvent' language ... to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the fallacy of masculine meaning."[38]

From a political perspective, parallels can be drawn between the feminist problem of a woman's language and the black language issue in the history of decolonization — according to Aimé Césaire's definition that language makes a man in fetters a free man. Black women writers have used language as a means of resistance. Developing intertextual patterns and speaking vernacular are for African American women novelists a way to their "othering," to assert their gendered difference but also to escape the island of marginality where they have been enclosed by a masculine, dominating discourse. These racial voices reflect the ontological structures and mythological thought system of a community which the dominant culture externalizes or seeks to silence.

To conclude, the intellectual subjugation of Afro-American writers by hegemonic Euro-American perspective has led to a collective form of "othering" and has turned black writing into an island of otherness. Black writers have created a variety of protagonists that comprises paradigmatic stereotypes (primitives for men, subordinate victims for women) homogenized as "others" and thereby remaining isolated. A focus is put on some particular traits or manners aiming at codifying their difference, at fixing their Otherness in timelessness. The Other, textually produced, temporally distant, deprived of any explicit anchoring, is fixed and unmovable, being just an element in a system of reference. Language, for black women writers and for African American writers, is a means to write oneself into existence.

Not only the "politics of sex," Barbara Smith points out, but also the politics of race and class are "crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers." White culture is so dependent on alienation, exclusion and reification of what is considered as Other, that black literary production is constantly

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37 . Gerda Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History" in *The Majority Finds Its Past* (New York: O. U. P., 1981), p. 52.

38 . Shoshana Felman, ibid, p. 10.

threatened with being defined as exotic and alien. African American writers tend to be excluded from the "transcendent" idea of the novel identified by Milan Kundera as "Europe's creation" with, as a consequence, either the marginalization or the colonization of African American literature.

Even if the term "race" is currently explained away in the critical discourse, African American culture does exist and both gender and race, seeking meaning in language inform and are informed by it. All influences are valuable and a literary work does not automatically become better or flawed because it is responsive to those influences. But, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. stresses, egalitarian criticism generated by Euro-American literature is likely to evolve into what Soyinka terms as the "neocolonial wolf" and Appiah the "post-colonial legacy." Black literary production, if severed from its textual specificity, runs the risk of being either underscored as minority literature or else embedded in Eurocentric culture. It is by turning to black textual tradition conveyed in an oral, colloquial language that the significant otherness that inheres in blackness and the specificity of black literature can be apprehended.

Through this awareness of the significant black difference, African American writers have changed the role of the black artist. Black literary production is no longer homogenized or leveled down to the creation of we-objects. African American writers are no longer objects but the subjects of their own narratives, both "outside" and "inside" their own experience. They bear evidence to it and take part in it. They are no longer enclosed in an island of marginality, a "feminine OTHER" to the male SELF of the dominant culture. They delineate the very African American tradition. They themselves are the SELF.

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