Personal Names and Heritage: Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

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The short story "Everyday Use"[1] is central in Alice Walker's writing, particularly as it represents her response to the concept of heritage as expressed by the Black political movements of the 60s. Despite its importance, no adequate explanation of the African and Arab names used in the text has to my knowledge appeared. Yet Walker was very careful in her choice of names, which signify an important part of her characterization.

"Everyday Use" is found in Alice Walker's collection of short stories, In *Love* and *Trouble,* which was published in 1973.[2] This was in the heyday of the Black Power ideologies when "Black was beautiful," the "Afro" hairstyle was in fashion and Blacks were seeking their cultural roots in Africa, without knowing too much about the continent or the routes of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Or as Clara and Inger Juncker say in their notes to the short story in their anthology of Afro-American Women Writers, *Black Roses* from *1984:*

> Dee has joined the movement of the Cultural Nationalism, whose major spokesman was the black writer LeRoi Jones (Imamu Baraka.) The Cultural Nationalists emphasized the development of black art and culture to further black liberation, but

1. The short story was on the compulsory reading list from the National Examination Board for Norwegian High Schools from 1989-1996 and although there are no longer compulsory texts to be read after the Reform 94, it is still included in textbooks and widely taught.

2. Alice Walker, *In* Love *and* Trouble (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973). All quotations are from this edition.

> were not militantly political, like, for example, the Black Panthers. The ideas of the Cultural Nationalists often resulted in the vulgarization of black culture, examplfied in the wearing of robes, sandals, hairspray "natural" style, etc.[3]

Sometimes this took on strange forms. In 1969 I was a student at Antioch College in Ohio. This was a time when it was progressive to have co-ed and co-racial dorms, so when the Black students at Antioch wanted a segregated dorm for Blacks only, the House of Unity, it created quite a row. In hindsight, in the light of the women's movement in the 70s it is easy to see the need for the Blacks to stick together for conscious- raising purposes. The Black students at Antioch took Swahili classes in 1969 at their all-black Afro-American Studies Institute and gave their house a seemingly Swahili name.

"House" in Swahili is "nyumba," but the sign at Antioch reads "Nyambi Umoja." Did they not know better? Their teacher was not a native Swahili speaker himself, but a Kisii from Kenya. The Kisii speak a related Bantu language and house is, incidently, spelt the same way in Kisii and Swahili. The way the Black Antioch students used it on their House of Unity was probably just an unfortunate spelling mistake. "Umoja" is, however, the correct form of "unity."

My point in writing about this is to illustrate the often misleading concepts the Blacks around 1970 had about Africa. The Atlantic slave trade had brought most Black Americans from West Africa where Swahili is not spoken, so it would probably have made more sense to learn some West-African language if they really were looking for their roots. The Arab slave trade from East Africa generally sent slaves to the Arab peninsula and to the plantations on the islands in the Indian Ocean.

The program at Antioch was one of the first of its kind, but it was not unique. As one can read about social history at the end of the 60s in *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* by Thomas J. Archdeacon from 1983:

> A new generation of scholars discovered that blacks, too, had a valuable past, and popular interest grew both in the elements of African heritage that had survived slavery and in the Afro-American culture created under the conditions of the New World. Even moderate leaders perceived a need for blacks to take control of the schools and institutions that most directly affected their lives.[4]

3. Clara and Inger Juncker, *Black Roses* (Copenhagen: Kaleidoscope Press, 1984), 128
4. Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becorning American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 216

Or as one can read in the textbook A People and a Nation from 1994:

> College students pressed for black studies programs, and activists adopted the terms black and Afro-American in preference to Negro. Once again as in the 20s, African Americans saw themselves as a nation within a nation.[5]

Alice Walker knows better than the black Antioch students from 1969. She has lived in Africa long enough to see the difference between the reality and the idealized Africa of the cultural nationalists. She criticizes their shallow knowledge of Africa in subtle terms. She won a scholarship as an exchange student to Uganda in 1964 after her junior year in college. She also visited Kenya in the summer of 1965 as can be seen in her first collection of poetry, Once, which was partly "written in Africa, while sitting underneath a tree facing Mount Kenya, or at Sarah Lawrence College in New York where I was completing my senior year,"[6] as she says in the introduction to Once in Her Blue Body Everything We Know, her collected poems from 1991. Once was, however, first published in 1968. The first section in this volume is called "African Images – Glimpses from a Tiger's Back." I repeat: from a Tiger's Back. As we all know, the only tigers in Africa are found in zoos and Alice Walker relates that a friend of hers protested and said that she could not use this title when she wrote about Africa.
She responded with a poem:

> There are no tigers
> in Africa!
> You say.
> Frowning.
> Yes. I say.
> Smiling.
> But they are
> very beautiful[7]

I include this because it may tell us that fact and fiction may also be blurred when Alice Walker talks about Africa.

The first two poems from the Tiger's Back section read as follows:

5. Mary Beth Norton et al, *A People and A Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 1002
6. Alice Walker, Her Blue *Body Everything We Know* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), 3
7. Ibid.. 4

Beads around
My neck
Mt. Kenya away
over pinappled hills
Kikuyuland.

A book of poems
Mt. Kenya's
Bluish peaks
"Wangari!"
My new name.

The footnote on the page[8] says "Wangari is a Kikuyu clan name indicating honorary acceptance into the Leopard clan." In "Everyday Use" Alice Walker lets the educated sister Dee introduce herself as "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo." The uninformed reader may think this is an ordinary African name. I assure you it is not.

Even a recent casebook on "Everyday Use" edited by Barbara T. Christian in 1994, only added to the confusion of the African names since it mistakenly noted that,

> … the name given to Walker by Africans during her trip there was Wangero,(sic!) a name she uses for herself in Once and for the educated sister in "Everyday Use."[9]

In the next paragraph it says:

> Names are extremely important in African and African American culture as a means of indicating a person's spirit.[10]

These important names Dee bases her new-found identity on resemble Kikuyu names, but at least two of them are misspelt. Wangero is not a Kikuyu name, but Wanjiru is. It is one of the other original nine clan names of the Kikuyus. (Cf. Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya).*[11] The last of the three names is also distorted. The correct Kikuyu name is Kamenju. The middle name is not a Kikuyu name at all. One of my Kikuyu informants told me he knew a lady from Malawi who was called Leewanika, so it is at least a mixture of names from more than one ethnic group and maybe that is the point. Dee has names representing the whole East African region. Or more likely, she is confused and has only superficial knowledge of Africa and all it stands for.

8. Ibid., 9
9. Barbara T. Christian, *Everyday Use* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 13
10. Ibid., 13
11. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing* Mount *Kenya* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), 8

This idea becomes stronger when you look at the other African phrase Dee Wangero uses in the short story. She greets her mother: "Wa-su-zo-Tean-o." This is a Luganda phrase showing how the Buganda people of Uganda say "Good morning" to a woman, and it is supposed to mean something like "I hope you have slept well." The greeting is different if you want to say good morning to a man, as I painfully realized when I used this phrase to a male receptionist in my hotel in Uganda some years ago. It was not well received as he did not picture himself to be feminine at all.

What this adds up to is a pan East African mixture of names and phrases used by Dee in the story. Add to this her long, flowing dress, which is a West African feature. The only Africans I have seen in traditional flowing dresses in East Africa are the Muslim women on the coast hiding inside their black bui-buis. Otherwise colorful traditional dresses are made of two pieces such as the kangas in Tanzania or have a distinct waistline such as the busutis in Uganda. Of course I have seen and even bought and used long flowing gowns made for tourists, but they have nothing to do with traditions, only with fashion.

Then you may ask: Does Dee know or care? or Does Alice Walker know or care? I believe Alice Walker does know, and that she has made Dee embrace this confusion of misunderstood cultural bits and pieces from all over Africa on purpose either to let Dee represent anything African or perhaps more likely to portray her as a very shallow and superficial young woman who does not bother to check her sources. Dee follows the fashion, and right now it is "in" to celebrate the distant African roots. She has discarded her given name, Dee, because as she says: "I couldn't bear it any longer being named after the people who oppress me."[12] She fails to understand that the name Dee also goes back several generations on the American continent and therefore is more part of her heritage than an adopted African name which does not even make sense.

Christian goes on to say this about Walker and African names:

> During the 1960s Walker criticized the tendency among some African Americans to give up the names their parents gave them – names which embodied the history of their recent past – for African names that did not relate to a single person they knew. Hence

12. Walker, *In Love and Trouble, 53*

> the grandmother (sic!) in "Everyday Use" is amazed that Dee would give up her name for the name Wangero. For Dee was the name of her great-grandmother, a woman who had kept her family together against all odds. Wangero might have sounded authentically African but it had no relationship to a person she knew, nor to the personal history that sustained her.[13]

Dee's companion in the story, Hakim a Barber, is a Black Muslim who greets the mother and sister with the well-known Arab greeting Asalamalakim (as-salam alaykum) which means "peace be with you". The mother in the story, Mrs Johnson, at first thinks this is his name, that he introduces himself, and some confusion arises till he tells her that she can call him Hakim a Barber. This is a corruption of the name Hakim al Baba since Barber is not an Arab name, but in Mrs. Johnson's mouth it might have been pronounced the same way. This is most likely Alice Walker's way of mocking people who shed their recent roots to take on foreign names without question. These names clearly make no sense to ordinary sensible people.

Walker may know that Hakim means ruler or leader and she therefore adds to the irony when Mrs Johnson, who is a practical woman, shows that she has respect for her Muslim neighbors when she says: "You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road. They said 'Asalamalakim' when they met you, too." But her daughter's city dwelling companion answers: "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style."[14] He accepts what is suitable for him and leaves the rest. Some leader to guide you, you could say! He does not eat pork though, something Dee delights in, but she does not have a Muslim name either.

Alice Walker said in an interview with John O'Brien in 1973:

> I am intrigued by the religion of the Black Muslims. … "Everyday Use" a story that shows respect for the "militance" and progressive agricultural programs of the Muslims, but at the same time shows skepticism about a young man who claims attachment to the Muslims because he admires the rhetoric. It allows him to acknowledge his contempt for whites, which is all he believes the group is about.[15]

13. Christian, *Eveiyday Use,* 14
14. Both quotes from Walker, *In Love and Trouble,* 53 and 55
15. John O' Brien, "Interview with Alice Walker" in Christian, *Everyday Use,* 75-76

All in all this couple is put in an unflattering light and you can of course say that it is not necessary to know about the confusion of their names to understand that. I still argue that this knowledge adds depth to the understanding of the characters in the story.

In the story and certainly in the many comprehension questions textbook writers and exam paper writers have made to guide our teaching of the story, Dee seems to be the villain and Maggie the hero. The ugly uneducated sister wins the love and affection of the mother at the end where they "sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed,"[16] as the story concludes.

The quiltmaking sister is the one preferred and accepted because as Nikki Giovanni says in her poem "Hands: For Mother's Day"

> … Quilts are the way our lives are lived … We survive on patches … scraps … the leftovers from a materially richer culture … the throwaways from those with emotional options … We do the far more difficult job of taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it … not only seeing its worth … but making it loveable … and intrinsically worthwhile …[17]

This is the same thought which Alice Walker herself expresses in her famous essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" from 1974. The central idea here as in "Everyday Use" is the celebration of the anonymous women who have been able to devise something beautiful and functional out of throwaways. In both texts the quilt is the central metaphor for this unrecognized female creativity.

The preference of Maggie over Dee makes me uncomfortable as an educated woman partly estranged from my roots myself. I have no wall space on which to hang the quilt I inherited from my great-aunt, but the family churn has a prominent place in my living room as has also my mother's spinning wheel. I do not know how to quilt, I do not know how to make butter in that churn and I cannot spin. Am I therefore a fool because I not only keep, but also strongly value this part of my heritage? And what about the Luo name that was given to me while I worked in Kenya, and which I still proudly use in certain circumstances?

Mary Helen Washington has an insightful essay in the already

16. Walker, *In Love and Trouble, 59*

17. Nikki Giovanni, *Those who Rzde the Night Wind* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1983), 14

mentioned casebook on "Everyday Use" where she refers to an interview she had with Alice Walker (also in 1973) where Walker said about the women in "Everyday Use" that she thinks of these three characters as herself split into three parts. Walker goes on to say:

> … I really see that story as almost about one person, the old woman and two daughters being one person. The one who stays and sustains–this is the older woman – who has on the one hand a daughter who is the same way, who stays and abides and loves, plus the part of them – *this autonomous person,* the part of them that also wants to go out into the world to see change and be changed ….I do in fact have an African name that was given to me, and I love it and use it when I want to, and I love my Kenyan gowns and my Ugandan gowns–the whole bit–it is part of me. But on the other hand, my parents and grandparents were part of it and they take precedence.[18]

In her essay Mary Helen Washington argues:

> … all three women characters are artists: Mama, as the narrator, tells her own story; Maggie is the quiltmaker, the creator of art for "everyday use"; Dee, the photographer and collector of art, has designed her jewelry, dress and hair so deliberately and self-consciously that she appears in the story as a self-creation.[19]

And we may add that she has also created her own name and thereby her new identity. But what Washington sees as most important in a postscript to her essay on Alice Walker is that this is above all a short story about what it means to be a female artist. She compares "Everyday Use" with another of Walker's stories: "A Sudden trip Home in the Spring" from Walker's second collection of short stories from 1981, *You Can't* Keep *a Good Woman Down.*

In *"A* Sudden Trip Home" the female sculpture artist, Sarah, is at the end granted "permission" for her art through her relationship with her male relatives. In "Everyday Use" this is not the case. Washington says about Walker:

> Like Dee, Walker leaves the community, appropriating the oral tradition in order to turn it into a written artifact, which will no longer be available for "everyday use" by its originators. Everywhere in the story the fear of the woman artist is revealed. The narrator-mother remains hostile to Dee and partial to the homely daughter, Maggie,

18. Mary Helen Washington, "An Essay on Alice Walker" in Christian, *Everyday* Use, 101-102
19. Ibid., 101

> setting up the opposition between the two daughters that Walker says mirrors her own internal struggles. The male triumvirate of "A Sudden Trip Home" has been replaced by these three women, but this female community does not generate reconciliation.[20]

Female fiction writers found it more difficult to be accepted than quiltmakers, garden makers or even blues singers in 1973, since fiction writing was still dominated by male writers, male publishers, male critics and male dominance in determining which works should be taught in the universities and later included in the canon. Although Walker has made long strides in the literary world since 1973, it might be useful to remember that this victory has not come easily and that the woman writer's fear of rejection is always there, especially now when we are about to enter a new phase of writing in cyberspace, dominated by Bill Gates and his, so to speak, all male crew. Back to square one?