

# Womanizing Theory

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In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Carol Boyce Davies tells a story from a conference on African literature, where feminist scholars of color were presenting their work on established African writers.<sup>1</sup> An African American male academic had criticized them for the absence of "a theoretical framework" within which he might locate their work, a response that triggered a variety of reactions from Davies and her co-presenters, defensiveness among them. Similarly, what Davies labels "a well-known figure in African-American literary criticism" had more recently argued at an Oxford University symposium on Africanist discourse that women of African descent "do not do theory," possibly with the exception of Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby and Barbara Smith (39, 175).

These incidents, depressing as they may seem, necessitate, of course, a definition of theory. Catherine Lutz, who helps Davies along, defines theory as writing that identifies itself as such. Theory, Lutz states, signals itself through "self-labeling," through abstract, preferably difficult language, through citations of other theorists, and through a situating of itself "at, or in relation to, a moment of origin."<sup>2</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen's "Black Deconstruction: Russell Atkins and the Reconstruction of African-American Criticism," for example, alerts us to its status as theory not only through its place of publication, the high-status and highly theoretical journal *Diacritics*, but also through its self-labelling: black *de-*

<sup>1</sup> Carol Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

*construction*.<sup>3</sup> Abstract, occasionally obscure language further ensures Nielsen's – and Atkins' – membership in an academic, theoretical discourse community, as one example will demonstrate: "Atkins understood that there had been a violence implicit in the assertion of the previously existing value-contexts, just as there had been a violence associated with the sundering of that hegemonic set of discourse agreements . . ." (87) References to "Foucault's analyses of the disciplinary effects of discourses" (87), to Jacques Lacan, Christian Metz, Jacques Derrida, to name a few, reassert the article's theoretical mode; the theoretical *haut monde* serves, moreover, as the platform from which Nielsen argues for a rewriting of the history of poststructuralism. An African American poet, he asserts, theorized deconstruction way in advance of deconstruction entering the American academy from abroad. Nielsen explains this "blindness" to Atkins' efforts with what he calls "the continuing practice [among contemporary critics] of not reading the theoretical work of black poets who have published outside the established circuit of the academic press" (86).

His efforts to bring together African American aesthetics and poststructuralism draw, possibly, on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whose 1983 essay "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" sought to write into critical theory what he labels "black mythology's archetypal signifier, the Signifying Monkey."<sup>4</sup> Nielsen and Gates thus both engage in the project of changing the hue of critical theory. Catherine Lutz, however, makes in Davies' representation of her (unpublished) work a case for the gendering of theory. She asserts that theory occupies a masculine space; non-theory, a feminine one. Accordingly, theory is preoccupied with paternity and patriliney, as in Nielsen's work on Atkins. In Lutz's explanation, "theories spawn patrilineal offspring who belong more to their father theory than their mother data."<sup>5</sup> On both sides of the Atlantic, however, theory spawned some daughters as well, though mostly of the rebellious rather than the dutiful sort. In France, for example, H  l  ne Cixous, Catherine Clkment, Luce

3 Aldon Lynn Nielsen, "Black Deconstruction: Russell Atkins and the Reconstruction of African-American Criticism," *Diacritics* 26.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1996), pp. 86-103.

4 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 286.

5 In Davies p. 39.

Irigaray and others emerged from the loins of, say, a George Bataille and a Jacques Lacan, to become, as in the title of the book Clément and Cixous co-authored in 1975, *The Newly Born Woman*.<sup>6</sup>

When this newly born woman embraced theory, she sounded not like the fathers and brothers who had developed what Derrida and Lacan entitled the Language of the Law or the Phallus. As the following lengthy excerpt from Hélène Cixous' *Le Livre de Promethea* demonstrates, she de- or remythologizes not just the figure of Prometheus but also the figuration of theory. Both emerge from the Atlantic in a womanized, certainly sexier model:

All right. I'm going to try to do the introduction. Because nobody wants to replace me for this task. Neither of the two real female doers can decide whether they want to do it.

For a week, H has been trying in vain. Sincerely. As for Promethea, it is in fact she who has already fashioned the text, which I have just come out of a half-hour ago. My hair is still sticky with the Atlantic and I have spots of crystal all over my body. Whoever wants to know the taste of this nearly-achieved work has only to lick my shoulder. I was saying: Promethea has already done her best. She has taken from her organs, her desires, from her memory; we can say that the text, for the most part, is made of her – physically, morally, nervously, and most of all, virtuously.

This is not a preface. It is a tiny chance to tell the truth about the origin of the text, from which I have just arrived: refreshed, worked up, and also submerged.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of the Atlantic, Cixous' swimmer merges, it seems, with a sister, who, this time voluntarily, steps unto the shores of North America from the African side.

Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" constitutes her most explicit attempt at womanizing theory from a womanist, i.e. black feminist perspective. Not only does the essay lack all the identifying characteristics of high theory Catherine Lutz spelled out, but it employs an intimate, autobiographical mode of expression that blends with other women's voices into a maternal signature. Walker calls upon, and responds to, Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One's Own* remythologizes an abundance of notions about masculinity/femininity/creativity, but mostly Walker draws upon the African American woman artists, known and unknown, who preceded her: Phyllis Wheatley, Bessie Smith, Nella

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975; rpt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Le Livre de Promethea* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 11-12; My translation.

Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, as well as the anonymous southern women of African descent whom Jean Toomer had earlier seen as "exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey."<sup>8</sup> These grandmothers and mothers, Walker writes, "were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (233). Walker is of course here deconstructing Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* and his theory of aggressive misprision with the harmonious chorus of women writing/inviting/rewriting women in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Her autobiographical, poetic, elliptic and multivocal discourse in this famous essay signifies, moreover, her difference from dominant cultural theoreticians and theories. Exploring the meaning of her mother's garden, Walker writes black feminine creativity as a marginal, maternal and magic space inhabited by mythic figures, whose knowledge and power explode traditional symbolic codes. In short, Walker presents in her essays, and, I believe, in her later novels, a womanist theory of "the blackness of blackness."

In "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," the concluding essay in Walker's collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, the fragments of autobiography that climax in the whirling, jubilant dancing of the final paragraph introduce the visions and re-visions that constitute the black woman born on these pages. Some thirty years after a shooting accident that partly blinded her, having groped her way from cuteness to blind self-erasure, the beautiful dancer of the title now emerges victorious and knowledgeable, discovering "a world" in the reflected image of her speckled blind eye. As the dancer swirls to Stevie Wonder's music, another "brightfaced" dancer joins her, a beautiful and free mirror image, whose presence helps define the feminine voice of the essay. With the emergence of the second dancer, who "is also me," Walker introduces the self-division of black femininity. At the same time, the dancing itself – and Wonder's music – signify a bodily, extralinguistic discourse that situates black feminine expression at the margin of traditional sign systems. "Estranged from language," Julia Kristeva writes, "women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak."<sup>9</sup> In Alice Walker's works, however,

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 232. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation Between Power and Denial," *New French Feminisms*, Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtilvion, eds. (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 166.

these marginal, visionary dancers articulate their existence as women and blacks, drawing simultaneously on discourses of femininity and African American aesthetic tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Walker's "Beauty" essay is above all about the African American writer's – Alice Walker's – special vision: "There was a world in my [blind] eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it. Even to see it drifting out of orbit in boredom, or rolling up out of fatigue, not to mention floating back at attention in excitement (bearing witness, a friend has called it), deeply suitable to my personality, and even characteristic of me." (393) With theory as storytelling, or storytelling as theory, Walker presents in "Beauty" the cosmic vision that characterizes also her post-*Color Purple* novels.

Interestingly, Walker has recently been joined by others, who from within the academy have abandoned traditional theoretical discourses. In *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Victor Villanueva, Jr., thus charts the life journey of a Puerto Rican university professor, from his childhood in New York City, via trade school and the military, community college and foodstamps to his present academic position. With this story, Villanueva raises issues of cultural identity, minority students in US classrooms, and dominant culture values. At the same time, however, he theorizes the field of Composition studies, the history of rhetoric, as well as the work of Gramsci, Freire and others. His autobiography becomes, in a sense, a manual for writers and teachers, also because of its explosion of traditional notions of genre and style. Villanueva blends story with sociolinguistics, excerpts of student papers with pedagogical theory, his constant signifying and self-invention the only textual absolute.

On some levels, Villanueva poses as the fashionable postmodernist, who has lifted from French poststructuralism his mixed genres, the narrative ruptures, the multiple selves and the autobiographical analyses. He has also, as he states in "A Post(modern)script," learned from Derrida that discontinuity invites the reader to become a co-author of the text at hand. Maybe, he writes, "the text displays a Lacanian schizophrenia."

<sup>10</sup> A version of the preceding paragraph appeared in "Signifying Difference: Alice Walker's Black Feminine Aesthetics," in *Multiculturalism and the Canon of American Culture* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993), p. 199.

"But," he continues deconstructively, "I'm just playing the postmodern academic's role in saying all this."<sup>11</sup> His next paragraph further maps the totalitarian impulses hidden between the fragments, his debts to Lultacs, and to Marx.

While Villanueva thus positions himself among fashionable and less fashionable theoreticians of his day, his insistent and dominant storytelling, his sense of voice, community and solidarity ultimately remythologizes traditional approaches to American education as well as traditional modes of communication. In the process, he mythologizes as well the American male academic (of color). In the biographical sketch closing his text, he describes himself as "a husband, a parent, a professor, and a happy man"; as a keynote lecturer at the 1995 College Communication and Composition Convention, he wished to be introduced only as "a father." (151) Possibly because of his ethnic consciousness and experience, he joins with feminists like Nancy Miller and womanists like Alice Walker in rewriting theories and practices of gender in the US.

Other writers remythologize, even womanize, their theories of gender and genre. Mike Rose, a professor of Composition at UCLA, states about the form of *Lives on the Boundary*, which describes his work with what the blurb labels "America's educational underclass": "The stories of my work with literacy interweave with the story of my own engagement with language. *Lives on the Boundary* is both vignette and commentary, reflection and analysis. I didn't know how else to get it right."<sup>12</sup> The story of Rose's own struggles as an underachiever in South Los Angeles thus becomes a theory of American remedial education, a term Rose would undoubtedly deconstruct, as well as a re-mythologizing of success, of masculinity, and of writing.

Like the Cixousian *faiseuse*, who declares about her text that "each sentence that does not belong to me, and that could pass for my own, I will do my best to give back to whom it belongs."<sup>13</sup> American writers of color (or not) are attempting to reinvent or remythologize themselves in

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11 Victo Villanueva, Jr., *Bootstraps: From An American Academic of Color* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1993), p. 140.

12 Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. xii.

13 *Le Livre de Promethea*, p. 12.

the process of refashioning their writings. Impatient with the constrictions of high theory, they reach beyond the academy towards a racial and educational other, and like Walker's beautiful dancer, whirl into new mythologies. Womanizing and theorizing, that other dancer is, of course, "also me."