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Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African-American Women Writers

Karla F. C. Holloway

I

There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished.

—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

A stream of linguistic madness that merges the images of an internally fractured psyche and an externally flattened physical world is the opening and closing linguistic figuration in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. We come to learn that the injured spirit belongs to Pecola and that the opening scene of the fictional Dick-and-Jane house that her metaphorically blue eyes see ("Here is the house. It is green and white. . . . It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house." [7]) is the one-dimensional remnant of the illusory world that has claimed her.

This fragmented and flattened stream is just one of the shapes of language in Morrison's shifting novel. There is also the ironically poetic and visually vivid language that describes Claudia's struggle to rise above the depression in her physical world:

She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, her head yielding to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. . . . she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort . . . intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (158)

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Colors and textures thicken this novel as if they are the only dimensions left of language and vision that are able to tell the story of Pecola's madness. Even though the sisters who befriend her are saved by "the greens and blues in [their] mother's voice [that] took all the grief out of the words" (24), Pecola is left with the biting shards of all the grief that surrounds her. "The damage done was total" (158), her one-time friend Claudia reflects. The only language which remains for her is the internalized monologue of a narrative stream whose shape, sound, and sense contain the fractured psyche of the tragically injured Pecola. It alone can testify that her madness was framed by the recurrence of a shifting textual language. Each change in the narrative reminds the reader of another of its forms. Eventually it is this characteristic of a shifting language which frames the recursive structures (signals of textual reflexiveness) of Morrison's first novel.

My purpose in this essay is to suggest ways in which the recursive structures of language in literature by contemporary African-American women writers are signaled by what is essentially a "multiplied" text. Recursive structures accomplish a blend between figurative processes that are reflective (like a mirror) and symbolic processes whose depth and resonance make them reflexive. This combination results in texts that are at once emblematic of the culture they describe as well as interpretive of this culture. Literature that strikes this reflective/reflexive posture is characteristically polyphonic. The textual characterizations and events, the settings and symbolic systems are multiple and layered rather than individual and one-dimensional. This literature displays the gathered effects of these literary structures to the extent that, when we can identify and recognize them, we are also able to specify their relationship to thematic and stylistic emphases of the traditions illustrated in these works. Because all of the structures share complexity—features of what I refer to as both the "multiplied text" and the "layered" text—, I have chosen to use the term *plurisignation* as a means of illustrating the dimensions of vision and language in the contemporary literature of writers in this tradition.¹

Plurisignant texts are notable by their translucence. One interesting consequence of this imagery is a certain "posturing" of the textual language. This posture places the narrative language at a formative threshold rather than on an achieved and rigid structure. This is not to suggest that thesis and content are constantly *in potentia* in these texts. It means instead that these works are often characterized by the presence of a translucent

flux and identified by a shifting, sometimes nebulous text. The characteristic of words and places in these works is their representation of events and ideas that revise and multiply meanings to the point that their external ambivalence is but an outward sign of internal displacement. The result for these translucent works is textural dissonance.

Whether it is gender or culture or a complication of both that has directed the works of contemporary African-American women writers toward this exploration of the state of being of its voices, the various linguistic postures within these texts are clearly intertextual. Writing in *Figures in Black*, Henry Louis Gates suggests that "shared modes of figuration result only when writers read each other's texts and seize upon topoi and tropes to revise in their own texts . . . a process of grounding [that] has served to create formal lines of continuity between the texts that together comprise the shared text of blackness" (128-29). Considerations of gender weave an additional texture into this line of continuity.

The translucence I refer to begins to have an interesting quality when viewed not only as method in literature, but as an objective dimension of the literature. It is this kind of complexity that becomes a "formal line of continuity" and that identifies the discrete aspects in the texts of African-American women's writing. One might look, for example, at how black women in the literature of these authors visualize themselves. Instead of reflections that isolate and individuate, characters such as Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha or Ntozake Shange's Sassafrass see themselves surrounded by a tradition of women like them.

Sassafrass's ancestral women come "*from out of a closet*" and beg her to "*make . . . a song . . . so high all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune*" (80-81). The "Lady" that Sassafrass conjures calls to "*multitudes of brown-skinned dancing girls*" (81) who become Sassafrass's spirit-informants, assuring her a place in their own line of continuity as they stabilize her spiritual relationship to them. Shange's achievement is a text that recalls ancestral voices to assist her own obviously contemporary story. For example, it is when Sassafrass's living begins to echo a blues song that the text dissolves into italics and the "Lady" comes from the closet. When this ancestral "*Lady sigh[s] a familiar sigh*" (80), Sassafrass herself enters the italicized narrative. This is a signal that there is no level of the story, no space in this narrative that is not hers:

The Lady turned to the doorway on her right and shouted, "Come on, y'all," and multitudes of brown-skinned dancing girls with ostrich-feather

headpieces and tap shoes started dotng the cake-walk all around Sassafrass, who was tryng to figure out the stitching pattern on their embrot-dered dresses (81)

The message for Sassafrass is that the texture of their appearance (the “stitching pattern”) is as important as their lineage. These ladies are there to instruct her and, even more importantly, to replace the abusive Mitch, who, Shange writes, had been “on her mind” (82). The mixture of images that Sassafrass learns to live with—the creation banner over the stove, the looms that revision her own growing-up in her mother’s house, her writing and her recipes—are all fragments of the spiritual energy she will need in order to rescue her spirit from the disabling presence of Mitch.

The poignancy in Shange’s writing extends from her successful mingling of languages. Poetry and music exist in the same spaces as dialogues and dreams. Women’s sharing of their most intimate and creative language with each other is a significant feature of Shange’s method. Part of this sharing is clearly evident in the recipes and letters from Sassafrass’s, Cypress’s, and Indigo’s mother, but it is also an important dimension of the lesbian relationships in this novel. Some of the most generative and thickest language surrounds Shange’s descriptions of the women’s dance collective the Azure Bosom.

Dense in color and texture, and full and resonant in shapes and forms, this collective represents the deepest levels of the stylistic effort in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Here, the language is as full-bodied as the women’s gender dance, “a dance of women discovering themselves in the universe” (141). In the house Cypress shares with the dancers from the Azure Bosom, she sees “herself everywhere . . . nothing different from her in essence; no thing not woman” (139). In this novel, Shange brings full circle the revelation of her dramatic choreopoem *for colored girls* Here, the generational dimensions of womankind are explored as a variety of creative energies—Sassafrass’s weaving and writing, Cypress’s dance, and eventually Indigo’s personification of biological creativity. She becomes a midwife—a creatrix. Because it is Indigo’s vision that both opens and closes the story, she is Shange’s final coalescence of the extended imaginative dimensions of the novel. Indigo represents the metaphorical bridge between African-American women and their African ancestry. She is an elemental link, embodying the qualities of air (“a moon in her mouth”), earth (“‘earth blood, filled up with the Geechees long gone’”), and water (“‘and the sea’” [1]). It is not until Sassafrass wears white and sees a vision of her “Mother”

(Shange capitalizes this word, giving it a resonance and depth that extends beyond her immediate biological mother) that she finds the spirit she shares with her sister Indigo. By this time in the story, Indigo has come to embody the midwifery talents of her mentor Aunt Haydee. We are told that her place in the ancestral tradition Haydee represents is appropriate because, more than having “an interest in folklore,” Indigo “was the folks” (224).

Maud Martha’s vision of her place in the line of ancient folks that claim Sassafrass as one of them is vision as well as revision. Her recursive glance represents both a call from her history and a response from her own psyche:

A procession of pioneer women strode down her imagination; strong women, bold; praiseworthy, faithful, stout-minded; with a stout light beating in the eyes. Women who could stand low temperatures. Women who would toil eminently, to improve the lot of their men. Women who cooked. She thought of herself, dying for her man. It was a beautiful thought. (200-01)

That Maud Martha’s imagination shifts in this novella just enough so that she does not become the sacrificial victim of a man who would define the parameters of her own dream for her is its thesis. Instead, Maud Martha learns to include her own self as something “decently constant” to depend upon—similar to the discovery of Toni Morrison’s Sethe (in *Beloved*), who learns to accept that she is her own “best thing”—and learns as well that “leaning was work.” Significantly, Maud Martha does not revision the procession of women from her imagination. Instead, she learns to revisualize the nature of their work. In *Maud Martha*, translucence is related to the shifting presence of Maud and her dreams. For example, her husband tells her that the place he visualizes for her, their apartment, will be her “dream.” But the reader is confronted with textual structures that insist on their own dreaminess: the silences that fracture each scene and the stifling spaces of Maud’s life (both the apartment and her marriage) that define her liminality. Maud’s thoughts mix themselves into these structures as if they are actually translucent. In an episode that describes Maud’s sparing the life of a tiny mouse which “vanishes” after her act of liberation, Brooks writes, “Suddenly, she was conscious of a new cleanness in her. A wide air walked in her. . . . In the center of [her] simple restraint was—creation” (212-13).

Equally as significant a moment and also an illustration of the revision that occurs when “modes of figuration” are shared is the moment that follows the embrace between Ciel and Mattie in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. I find in Maud’s

sudden translucence (the wide air that “walked” in her) a luminous quality similar to Ciel’s moan, a sound so “agonizingly slow, it broke its way through [her] parched lips in a spaghetti-thin column of air that could be faintly heard in the frozen room” (103).² Both moments mark occasions that initiate a cleansing of psychic despair. Maud realizes that she is good, and Luciel realizes her grief.

The Women of Brewster Place is a novel where time and place (space) immediately collide. The first section, “Dawn,” is an introduction to the history of Brewster Place, which Naylor characterizes as a “bastard child” (1). The focus in the novel is on the women of this place, whose own histories are as bastardized as their contemporary locus. Mattie, Ciel, Etta Mae, “The Two,” and Kiswana are all women separated from their familial sources and are left alone to become the communal “daughters” of the place. Such spiritual dislocation, complicated by the vapid air of Brewster Place, exacts its tragic due. In the last section of the novel, “Dusk,” Brewster Place “wait[s] for death, which is a second behind the expiration of its spirit in the minds of its children. . . . the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn” (192).

In this work, the metaphor of a place serves as an ancestral presence. Brewster Place exists both before the women who inherit it and afterwards. Its fundamental irony, and Naylor’s bitter commentary on these spiritually dispossessing city spaces, is that Brewster Place is generatively inadequate and sterile. Over and over again African-American women’s texts present characters poised between a spiritual place and a place that has been defined for them, assigned by some person, or extracted from some ritual they are unable to remember.

The quality of translucence that reveals such plurisignant texts is also one that complicates the identities of the tellers of the stories. The boundaries between narrative voices and dialogue often become obscure, merging one into the other.³ Speech that is circumvented has come to be a discrete feature of the African-American women writers’ canon. The result of this frustration, this struggle towards articulation, is that voice in these writer’s works is manipulated—inverted from its usual dimensions and re-placed into non-traditional spheres (layers) of the text. In this formulation, speech is often liminal, translucent, and subject to disarray, dislocation (in the Freudian sense of *Verschiebung*), and dispersion. Only the thematic emphasis on the recovery of some dimension of voice restores the balance to the text between

its voices and those collected into its rearticulated universe. Such empowerment at the metaphorical level—storms and hurricanes that have psychically disruptive potentials, trees that are serene and knowledgeable, rivers whose resident ladies (goddesses) hold the promise (or denial) of fertility—provides poetic activation of the textual voices in African-American women writers' texts.

II

Only the final section . . . raises the poetry to a sustained high level . . . recall[ing] the English metaphysicals . . . fus[ing] African and European elements as in the best of Mr. Soyinka's early verse . . .

—William Riggan, reviewing Soyinka's *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*

Indeed, the basic differences between British and Igbo experiences and values are what make it necessary . . . to have to *bend* the English language in order to express Igbo experience and value in it.

—Chinweizu (emphasis added)⁴

Shift

I cite the Riggan review and the Chinweizu excerpt as a means of focusing on both the nature of textual revision and the substance of the interpretive discourse that often follows the work of writers whose cultural sources are non-Western. Central to my definition of metaphorical revision in the texts of African-American women writers is an acknowledgment of the cultural sources of their (re)membered theses. What becomes increasingly important to my consideration of the intertextual nature of the literature produced by black women writers is the premise that the plurisignant text has a multiple generation as well as a multiple presence. Both source and substance are traceable through the culturally specific figurations of language that are discrete figures in literature by black women authors. Shift happens when the textual language "bends" in an acknowledgment of "experience and value" that are not Western. A critical language that does not acknowledge the bend, or is itself inflexible and monolithic, artificially submerges the multiple voices within this literature. For this reason, critical strategies that address the issues within these texts must in one sense be mediative strategies between the traditional ideologies of the theoretical discourse and the ancestry of the text itself. Such mediation demands a shift in the scope (if not the tone) of critical terminology—a redirection that calls attention to different (and often contrary) ideologies. This is a task that demands a particular kind of

assertiveness. This assertiveness directs my discussion on the nature of shift and revision.

My primary argument is this: When the interpretive spaces of the Afrocentric text are culturally specified, and when theory attends to the dimensions of gender that are discrete in the figurations of texts by black women writers, the tangential accomplishment of such specification and articulation is a presentation of the plurisignant text as the ideal center of the critical discourse among the cultural etymologies of words within the critical and textual traditions. Texts by black women writers are those which are most likely to force apart the enclosed spaces of critical inquiry. The ideologies especially challenged by the plurisignant text are those held by the "resident theoreticians"—those who have gerrymandered the districts of the interpretive community to the extent that all texts and theorists who do not succumb to the lexical tyranny of the English metaphysicals (and their descendants) are effectively redlined. Such a community has decided upon its membership by a tacit agreement on the formal methods of interpretation and has effectively enclosed the terms of inquiry and imprisoned methodology in the lexical tyranny of Western ideologies. However, by disabling the definitions—that is, by acknowledging a textual language that is translucent and in flux—, both the text and (ideally) the inquiry surrounding the text are freed from the tyranny of the West. This act of liberation is directly related to the language within black women writers' texts because their plurisignant nature models the cultural complexity of the language that would engage a "liberated" interpretive community.

In a rather serious "play" with the issues of critical theorizing, Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" identifies black women as having the historical claim as the "race" (and gender) for theory because

people of color have always theorized . . . in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic . . . in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. . . . And women . . . continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. It is this language, and the grace and pleasure with which they played with it, that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of [black women writers]. (68)⁵

Christian's familiar note that the form of black women's textual language is a hieroglyph ("familiar" because it is a figure Zora Neale Hurston used to describe "Negro" Speech) that is both "sensual and abstract . . . beautiful and communicative" (68) is

an appropriate metaphor as well for the activities of criticism and interpretation of these texts.

However, instead of grace and dynamism, pleasure and pithy speculation, the more likely dimensions of literary assessment have been those that reflect the sort of cultural chauvinism evident in William Riggan's assessment of Wole Soyinka's 1988 book of poetry. Riggan, who is only able to critically appreciate Soyinka's verse when the author "reaches the level of the English metaphysicals" with poetry that reflects its European ancestry, would constrict the African and African-American writer's literary domain. Such ethnocentrism is in fact responsible for disabling the relationship between African and African-American texts and their literary traditions rather than encouraging their (mediative) dialogue.

The idea that the plurisignant text calls attention to the syncretic relationship between individual novels and the novels within the cultural as well as gender-specified genre suggests that the polyphonic nature of these texts is essential not only to their internal figurations, but is also definitive of the tradition that collectively identifies them. Not only do the texts of African-American women writers articulate the dimensions of cultural pluralism in their world, but the perceptual "outsidedness" of these authors (a factor of both gender and culture) propels a revision in the critical discourse about their literature. In such a discursive space, "shift" becomes a necessary mediation between the reader and the text and encourages a dialogue among critical postures within the interpretive community. Shift positions the alternative interpretations represented by the assertions of culture and gender within the textures of this literature. The critical result is a theoretical acknowledgment of the multiplied text.

In case a shifting text and a shiftiness in critical vocabulary seem too problematic for what is generally an urge towards firmness in literary theory, let me suggest a perspective of Paul Ricoeur's as a potentially stabilizing one. In "Hermeneutics: The Approaches to Symbol," Ricoeur notes that "it is only when . . . interpretation is seen to be contained in the other that the anti-thetic is no longer simply the clash of opposites *but the passage of each into the other*" (88, emphasis added). Ricoeur is certain of a *textural* point of intersection in symbols. The concrete moments of a dialectic represent a "peak of mediation." He notes:

In order to think in accord with symbols one must subject them to a dialectic; only then is it possible to . . . come back to living speech. In returning to the attitude of listening to language, *reflection passes into the fullness of speech . . . the fullness of language . . . that has been instructed by the whole process of meaning.* (88, emphasis added)

I suggest that it takes only a slight shift for an understanding of Ricoeur's comment regarding the "passage of each into the other" to extend to the "Others" who are the subjects and authors of African-American literature. The metaphorical figuration that results from this reformulated "other" (the symbols, the speech, the reflective language that Ricoeur includes in the processes that make meaning) is a symbolic reflection of my initial claim about the translucent nature of the plurisignant text. This refiguration brings me to a point where a reconsideration of gender and culture in what I have described as the "translucent" texts of African-American women writers is appropriate.

III

. . . the unconscious is the discourse of the Other. . . . The dimension of truth emerges only with the appearance of language.

—Lacan

(Re)membrance

In a reflection on the use of folk material as "imagery and motif" as well as "a basic element of the inner forms" of African-American literature, Keith Byerman's conclusion is that its use "implies a fundamentally conservative [i.e., preservationist], organic vision on the part of these writers" who recognize the "wholeness, creativity, endurance[,] and concreteness" in maintaining the perspectives of the past as "vital to their own sensibilities" (276). Byerman underscores an important relationship between folk material and the perspective of the past it recovers in his concluding chapter of *Fingering the Jagged Grain*. However, the "wholeness" and "concreteness" that he suggests are features of this (re)membrance of the past are in fact antithetical to the issue he attempts to resolve in his study. Actually, the search for wholeness is representative of the critical strategies of Western cultures. It represents a sensibility that privileges the recovery of an individual (and independent) text over its fragmented textural dimensions. Byerman's discussion is an example of the negative dialectic that can disable the relationship between interpretive effort and the textual tradition. Although he clearly understands the thematic effort of these works as an attempt to diminish the importance of "individual identity [which] does not exist separate from the community" (277), it is because the "concrete" history which engages the community and its members is a disabling (and therefore translucent) history that literature by African-American women writers actually

disassembles the “wholeness” of this revived folkloric text. This is, however, not an act of textual sabotage.

Such activity in African-American women writers’ texts is paradoxically an effect of *(re)membrance*—a word which cannot, in this canon where the “shared” tradition belies the scattering effects of the diaspora as well as its contradictory “gathering,” *simply* mean ‘wholeness.’ Such an image gives a critical edge to what Morrison’s Sethe calls in *Beloved* “rememory.” Sethe’s vision of history has a translucence akin to that described at the opening of this essay. It is “a picture floating . . . a thought picture” that has as much a place in her vision of the past as it has in the actual past. Consequently, it represents a multiplied (and seemingly contradictory) form of memory because although it achieves its presence through its translucence, its form is a consequence of Sethe’s visualization. It is this kind of implicit dualism that calls attention to the cultural traditions within this literature and that begs the questions of gender. For example, it is important to acknowledge the West African ideologies represented in the narrative traditions in African-American women’s literature because such tracery would assure our exploring the vestiges of folktales in the African-American text in conjunction with the historically female voices of/in the tales. The tellers, the mode of telling, the complications and sometimes obfuscations of telling become critical not only to the “folkloric” tradition, but to the larger narrative traditions as well. The specificity of voice as well as its assignation are facets of the (re)remembered texts by women of the African diaspora.

In “Reshuffling the Deck,” Claudia Tate comments on the canon, noting that,

unlike the black aesthetics, black feminist criticism examines not only its discursive territory but its own methodologies as well, *realizing that they are not ideologically neutral . . .* The criticism’s placement in traditional, academic, humanistic discourse gives rise to this *reflexive posture* because critics involved in this enterprise realize that the very terms for engaging in this discourse, that is, formulating hypotheses and evolving praxes, inherently valorize cultural production that is white, patriarchal, and bourgeois-capitalistic. (120, emphases added)

Tate recognizes, in this essay that reviews contemporary works in Black feminist criticism, the “changing literal and figurative terms of the game,” which is a tacit recognition of the quality of “shift” and the nature of (re)membrance. The figuration that is accomplished in these texts is one that reshapes the familiar structures of memory and that implicates a pre-text for African-American women’s writing that would, if tapped into, address the significance of their race and culture and gender. The mytho-

poetic territory for these writers is a territory defined through the reconfiguration of memory. (Re)membrance does not imply the wholeness Byerman (for example) figures as a result of the folkloric traditions in Black literature. Instead, (re)membrance is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement to the traditions of memory that become the subjects of these works. The substance of literary traditions, whether European or African or American or combinations thereof, is reconstituted in such a literary ethic.

In a recognition that the text of feminist literary studies is discrete, Lillian Robinson calls for the "next step in the theoretical process" which will be "for the female nontext to *become* the text" (32).⁶ Robinson identifies this nontext as the "creative incapacity" equated with silence and sees the restoration of voice as a discrete aspect of a feminist critical tradition. But it is exactly this kind of definition which, as it asserts the feminist text, simultaneously squeezes the black woman writer's literary tradition into a space too narrow to contain it. The (re)remembered textual source of this gender-specified literary tradition includes a *cultural* source which is based in a collective orature. Robinson, who clearly understands that there is significant empowerment through language, curiously reaches for restoration of "a common literary heritage" within the restored "voice" of women's texts. However, such restoration may very well undermine the cultural specificity of women's language in the African-American text. The "common" heritage which Robinson concludes may be the "real thing" for feminist criticism is one she artificially simplifies to a decision that "people have to live in a house, not in a metaphor" (34). It is precisely because of this kind of formulation that critical theories of African-American women's texts must clarify the distinctiveness of the traditions those texts embody and the specificity of the heritage that resonates in the texts, lest those traditions and that heritage be subsumed into a feminist-inspired "commonness."

Consider my final epigraph. How can the discourse of the Other possibly be perceived as a monologue? Truth, language, and alterity (otherness) find their definition within the "discursive territories" of a literary heritage that values and affirms pluralism. A consideration of the text, specifically its language, is exactly what forces critical inquiry back into a textual tradition and forward toward a theory that unequivocally addresses the sources, meanings, and cultural complications represented within the textual language. Because the African-American woman's literary tradition is generated from a special relation-

ship to words, the concerns of orature and the emergence of a textual language that acknowledges its oral generation must affect the work of the critics of this tradition.

The revised and (re)membered word is both an anomaly in and a concretizing of the traditions represented in literature by African-American women. Such seeming contradiction, rather than calling attention to a weakness, should draw attention to the need to identify, call, and specify the plurisignance within the texts of this tradition. This is a task of definition as much as it is an act of interpretation. Interestingly, the critical task participates in the "layering" that is intrinsic to the texts of African-American women writers. I find in what the editors of *Yale French Studies* identify as the need to read "collectively, [to speak] in a plural voice" the dimension of feminist criticism that is most like the texts of the African-American woman's tradition, and it is because of this similarity that I basically agree with Lacan's judgment that it is our own "unconscious" that is the actual Other. The presence of the differing self, the "Other" is established through a recursive project, one that repeats the text in order to produce the text. As Christopher Miller effectively argues in "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology",

By defining the Other's difference, one is forced to take into account, or to ignore at one's peril, the shadow cast by the self. But without some attention to the African past, some effort to describe the Other, how can we accurately read the African present? There are in fact two ways to lose identity, be it one's own or someone else's . . . by segregation in the particular or by dilution in the "universal." (300)

Miller's citation of Césaire's comment on the loss of identity is a maxim critical to the textual and accompanying critical need for a reflective (re)membrance of the textual source which is, after all, the basis of its identity. Within such a perspective, the nature of a critical language is redefined and is subsequently shifted towards the full-bodied voices of the shared traditions reflected within the literature.

Notes

¹I use *plurisignation* in an effort to distinguish the idea of multiple meanings from a text that is (simply) ambiguous. Rather than meaning either one or the other of these terms, a plurisignant text signals the *concurrent* presence of multiple as well as ambiguous meanings.

²Interestingly, "luminous" moments in this literature are often accompanied by a visual translucence that effectively includes the textual language as a factor in the shimmering quality of the metaphorical intent.

³Zora Neale Hurston is the foremother in African-American literature of merged textual voices. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, especially, uses this

device in the blending of the poetic narrative voice and the poetic dialect of Janie's storytelling and reflective dialogues with her friend Pheoby. For further discussion of this dimension of narrative, see Holloway.

⁴My preference here, and indeed the thoughtful advice of a reader of this essay, was to use citations that dealt more directly with the women writers under consideration. However, there is a compelling reason that the Riggan/Chinweizu epigraphs serve as appropriate choices for my discussion in this section. In focusing on Riggan's comment about Soyinka, I am able to draw attention to the paucity of critical response that African women writers have received *outside* of those theorists sympathetically interested in the traditions their gendered and encultured literature reflects. On the other hand, African male writers have managed to enter the wider critical arena (in other words, white males comment on their work). Unfortunately, this extended audience minimally (if at all) appreciates or understands the cultural traditions in the literature. The Riggan response is so striking in its ethnocentrism that it begs to be highlighted. (Carol Boyce Davies raises this issue of critical inattention to African women writers in the thoughtful discussion of her introduction.) As a consequence of Riggan's assessment, Chinweizu's comment on the cultural dimensions *within* a linguistic system, especially as he directly comments on the "British" experience which Riggan celebrates, is a particularly poignant example of my point concerning the cultural sources of (re)membered theses.

⁵Christian's essay bewails the lack of clarity in the critical enterprise, arguing that it underscores a central inattentiveness to text. In addition she argues that this criticism is as "hegemonic as the world it attacks." Christian's comments have the effect of reducing "valuable" critical activity to a practical criticism (similar to her own enterprise) while undermining the theoretical because it "has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature." Ironically, Christian's protest against writers whose criticism ignores the third world and continues to exert its control over the Western world implies the need for a textual exploration of the "center" of the literature of African and African-American women writers from the center that their texts identify.

⁶Robinson takes issue here with Audre Lorde's "dictum" that "the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house."

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