



Aoi Mori

Toni Morrison  
and Womanist Discourse

**Modern American Literature**  
New Approaches

Yoshinobu Hakutani  
*General Editor*

Vol. 16

Aoi Mori

**Toni Morrison**  
**and Womanist Discourse**

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*For Yasuhiro Mori who made this book possible*

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### Making an Eloquent Crazy Quilt: Theorizing the Womanist

#### 1. Womanist Theory

**Womanist** 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

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

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

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* xi–xii)

"Womanist," the term which Alice Walker defined, manifests a tremendous potentiality for forging a new inclusive female autonomy



regardless of race, sex, or "sexual preference,"<sup>1</sup> transcending the overwhelming argument between white feminists and women-of-color thinkers and activists, the latter criticizing the former for dominating female discourse. Her definitions of "womanist," supplanting "feminist," indicate that Walker celebrates a diversity of individual experiences while she simultaneously preserves African-American folk culture and values. A womanist will saliently evade the authoritative domination associated with elite white feminists, about whom most women of color have expressed their distrust and dissatisfaction.

Women-of-color critics, writers and activists have critiqued white feminism because of its propensity for excluding the presence and voices of marginalized women, thereby failing to develop a critical theory that applies to an integral body of various female works and experiences. The white feminist movement, which was originated by gifted intellectuals in academia, has been alien to other ethnic groups of women, the majority of whom belong to the working class. Toni Morrison expressed her strong distrust of an exclusive white feminist movement early in her literary career:

The early image of Women's Lib was of an elitist organization made up of upper-middle-class women with the concerns of that class (the percentage of women in professional fields, etc.) and not paying much attention to the problems of most black women, which are not in getting into the labor force but in being upgraded in it, not in getting into medical school but in getting adult education, not in how to exercise freedom from the "head of the house" but in how to *be* head of the household. ("What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" 16)

Since most of the cases debated in women-centered scholarship have been of middle- or upper-class Euro-American origin, women of color, although they also defy a patriarchal dominance just as white feminists do, perceive the white female movement as another form of racialized repression, thus causing them to disavow their advocacy for feminism.

The lack of subjectivity attributed to African-American women in white feminist discourse is the major critique rendered by women of color. Women-of-color activists and critics in general agree that most of the

literary models used in women-centered psychology have been of middle- or upper-class Euro-American origin. The essays by women of color incorporated in *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Making Face, Making Soul* are a strong reaction to this kind of prevalent racism among white women, expressing anger, dissatisfaction, and doubt regarding white intellectuals who are only concerned about middle-class white women. Chrystos epitomizes these suspicions, which for her culminate in an ultimatum to racialized feminism: "I no longer believe that feminism is a tool which can eliminate racism—or even promote better understanding between races & kinds of women" (69).

Some women of color averted their interests from white feminism because they felt they were being used by white feminists as token victims in the process of establishing a feminist movement. White feminists eventually alienated racial issues from their concerns and arguments, failing to investigate the political and social causes of wrongs inflicted on the marginalized. Morrison continues to express her concern about a feminism incongruent with the problems of other ethnic groups of people. She states in her interview with Lester:

[F]eminism followed the civil rights movement, so that the energies began to be turned away from liberation for black and minority peoples into the women's movement, and it put black women in a peculiar position of having to make choices that were fraudulent: to work for the black movement OR feminism. (1983b, 52)

Morrison and other women-of-color writers fundamentally share with white feminists the same concern for recuperating the neglected subjectivity of their ancestors from patriarchal oppression. However, they repudiate the white feminist's liberation movement which has devalued the struggle and friction caused by social conditions, disregarding the need to seek an effective resolution of racial and gender issues.

Some white feminist writers have recently included culturally and socially neglected women in their anthologies. Moreover, the works of non-canonical texts have been assigned in reading lists at universities. Yet mainstream literary discourse tends to treat this inclusion as an

absolving gesture which settles the debate about African-American participation in that discourse and canon. For instance, Bruce Bawer asserts that the argument for inclusion in the canon waged by the marginalized is now moot because of his assumption that texts by African Americans are already embedded in the curriculum. Moreover, he decries Morrison, saying, "Morrison's cardinal weakness as an artist resides in her insistence upon seeing self and other not in individual but in racial—and, secondarily, in sexual—terms: blacks (or, sometimes, black women) are *us*, whites (or, sometimes, white men) are *them*" (17).

Hazel V. Carby, however, asserts from her experience teaching African-American and Caribbean literature in the English Department that courses on culturally marginalized literatures are considered non-canonical and inappropriate for embodying universal values. Further, students are not so positively and earnestly engaged in surveying marginalized literatures. Carby notes:

The students occupy the position of tourist, a position which reproduces dominant American attitudes that regard the Caribbean as a romantic vacation paradise. . . . the mere presence of marginalized cultures in the curriculum changes very little. ("The Canon" 38)

Such superficial inclusion of what is called "minority" literature without substantial evaluation and interpretation simply satisfies the curiosity of students and appeases the conscience of educators who are afraid of being considered racist.

Even well-intended white feminists still tend to tokenize the oppressed as victims without altering their primary perspective toward marginalized women. In her article, "Inclusion Without Influence," Lynet Uttal expresses her strong disappointment at the nature of this stance:

Well-intended Anglo feminists are developing support networks for women of color and including women of color as subjects/objects of their research without actually modifying their own academic practices to reflect the significance of race and class dynamics. By not doing so, they continue to deny the significance of representing the varied perspectives of women of color in their own work. These practices limit the quality of all scholarship as well

as information about women of color. In other words, business goes on as usual with the only change being the inclusion of token women of color in the feminist group, a token women of color issue in an anthology, or token women of color in research samples. (42—43)

As Uttal indicates, it is indispensable for understanding the significance of diverse race and class dynamics that both groups of women collaborate with one another. Still, most white feminists dismiss the fact that the simple inclusion of women-of-color issues in the feminist discourse is pernicious, failing to establish a reciprocal relationship for the benefit of both groups of women. A superficial inclusion of women of color in a white feminist text gives the appearance of authenticating their anthologies as inclusive feminist texts. This kind of inclusion, omitting any candid, substantial dialogue, preserves the gap between these groups of women, merely alienating them further from one another.

The dissension between these two groups of women is ascribed to the fact that white middle-class women with greater social and political advantages are apt to disregard the disparate cultural experiences and historical backgrounds of the less privileged. The former unconsciously or consciously reveal a necessity to formulate a feminist movement distinct from that of marginalized women, causing significant misunderstanding and conflict. By objectifying or even tokenizing the latter as victims, privileged white women tend to overlook the struggles of the oppressed, who seek not only liberation from male dominance but also the collective cultural recovery of their ethnic identities.

African Americans were designated as inferior during institutionalized slavery which considered slaves as property, imposing an absolute racial hierarchy; and this fact has long shaped the consciousness and attitudes of whites as well as those of African Americans. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the renowned abolitionist text by Harriet Beecher Stowe, epitomizes how African Americans have been objectified as stereotypes, such as faithful Aunt Chloe and entertaining Topsy, whose inner voices have never been heard.<sup>2</sup> In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the principal black characters are displaced from 19th-century American society. They are either exiled to Canada or Africa or doomed to die in order to attain the "highest"



happiness in heaven, (symbolically underlining the absence of African-American subjectivity in mainstream society). The novel was "so successful as propaganda that when President Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe he called her 'the little woman that started the war'" as Barbara Christian notes (*Black Feminist Criticism* 168); however, the prominent abolitionist writer's interests are primarily aligned with a pious, virtuous and beautiful white Victorian heroine like Eva, who generously displays a warm compassion for and pity toward slaves. (Uncle Tom is not a speaking subject but an object to be pitied by a white lady.)

Black women, observed as doubly repressed victims to be sympathized with because of their race and gender, debunk the passive image of victimization produced by whites. (Contrary to the image of suffocated white women imprisoned by men, African Americans under slavery have paradoxically fostered an "equal" relationship between men and women because of the nature of a capitalistic plantation economy which exploited and abused African-American women and men "equally" in order to increase profits.<sup>3</sup>) Impartially exploited and reviled to the same degree as the men, slave women were not sheltered or protected as white women were.<sup>4</sup> This reveals an ironic counterpoint of female oppression between whites and African Americans. Patriarchal society, which imposed a Victorian notion of womanhood on racially privileged women, idealizing the female as beautiful and fragile and regulating her behavior to conform to such ideals, exempted African-American women from such a form of gender oppression. (As a consequence, those African-American women who strived to survive the same ordeal inflicted on men were defiant and arrogant in order to challenge racial oppression. They established a strong autonomy and a collaborational relationship with men, as Morrison remarks in her interview with Lester:)

[B]lack women are much more suited to aggressiveness in the mode that feminists are recommending, because they have always been both mother and laborer, mother and worker, and the history of black women in the States is an extremely painful and unattractive one, but there are parts of that history that were conducive to doing more, rather than less, in the days of slavery. We think of slave women as women in the house, but they were not, most of them

worked in the fields along with the men. (They were required to do physical labor in competition with them, so that their relations with each other turned out to be more comradeship than male dominance/female subordination.) (1983b, 48—49)

(The peculiar nature of slavery strongly influenced African Americans in shaping consciousness, facilitating an equal partnership between men and women.) (African-American women who sought collective, racial survival as a whole under slavery embraced a distinctive perspective toward men.<sup>5</sup>) This was in contrast to middle/upper-class white women whose survival concern was rather on an individual level, as observed in their struggle for liberation from an isolated domestic sphere and its accompanying psychological enclosure, rebuking men as a major source of oppression.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the economic oppression ensuing from Emancipation differentiated African-American women's perspectives of gender issues from those of white women. By becoming a work force outside the house replacing men, black women faced another form of ironic gender parity which white women desired to obtain. The male dominant society which confined white women at home at the same time required black women to work as a labor force which it could employ at a wage lower than that paid to black men. In *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner effectively illustrates how African-American women's work experiences are alien to white woman's desire to work:

([B]ecause the lowest-status, lowest-paid jobs in white society are reserved for black women, they often can find work even when black men cannot.) In fact one can say quite definitely that white society has economically pitted black women against black men. For black women, this has meant that they are trained from childhood to become workers, and expect to be financially self-supporting for most of their lives. They know they will have to work, whether they are married or single; work to them, unlike to white women, is not a liberating goal, but rather an imposed lifelong necessity. (xxiv)

(The lowest paid jobs in white society were reserved for black women, placing them at the lowest stratum in the racial and gender hierarchy, even when black men were jobless, and inevitably heightening tensions in their

relationship with black men. (A black man, denied his maleness and unable to fulfill the conventional "male" role of supporting and protecting his family, was frequently pressured to leave home, feeling uncomfortable with staying with his family; while a woman, denied her femininity by patriarchal supremacist expectations, was left with the responsibility of being head of the family.) Whereas the financial independence from patriarchal influences achieved by obtaining a job was considered by white women to be a crucial step toward social and political participation, work to black women meant both racial and gender oppression. To cite Morrison, "we anticipated it [work], so we did not have the luxury that I see certain middle class white women have, of whether to work OR to have a house" (Interview with Lester 1983b, 49). Work was not a symbol of liberation but a heavy burden imposed on black women.<sup>6</sup> And because of this burden, black women had to be strong and self-sufficient, independent of men.

While the racial and economic condition imposed by mainstream society created many female-headed African-American families, it also fabricated the myth of a black matriarchy to reduce its fear of black women who took over the "male" responsibility of sustaining a family. K. Sue Jewell points out the manipulative power of the myth of "strong" African-American women:

It is clear that the term "matriarch" and cultural images of the Aunt Jemima, mammy, Sapphire and the bad-black-girl have been applied to African American women because their use of power and display of independence represent a threat to men who are determined to marshal societal resources and control institutions. (131)

Lest the women, who did not meet the stereotypical images of non-threatening mammies or mulattas, should subvert the power structure, the dominant society needed to undermine confidence in their ability to be emotionally and financially independent, labeling them as deviant matriarchs who symbolize "the 'bad' Black mother" who "allegedly emasculates [her] lover and husband" (Collins 74). (The myth of black matriarchy is a controlling tool to restrict African-American female

behaviors and consciousness, relegating them to the periphery of society in order to preserve the hierarchy of racism.<sup>7</sup>

(Likewise, stereotypes created by mainstream society serve to repress African-American subjectivity.) Barbara Christian stresses the controlling power of stereotypes and how these have buried African-American women. Examining stereotypical roles of black women in American literature up to the 1940's, she points out two characteristic roles. The most typical role permeating the antebellum South is the black woman seen as the mammy figure, like Aunt Jemima, who is very dark in color, fat, nurturing, kind, religious, and strong (*Black Feminist Criticism* 2). This reductive domestic image is imposed on Black women as a yardstick to modulate and control their behavior, as Patricia Hill Collins argues:

By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. (*Black Feminist Thought* 71)

Producing a harmless, nurturing image, the supremacists maneuvered to shape black woman's behaviors and impose them on her womanhood—creating an expectation which praises the faithful obedience and patience of black women in order to confine them in a domestic context and suppress their capacity for anger and rebellion.

(The other stereotypical role is the tragic mulatta who represents the conflict of values that blacks face as a conquered people. Although she physically combines features of both races, she is illegitimate and suffers from an identity crisis. As Christian notes, a mulatta "emerges out of the sexual relationship between a black slave mother and a white slave master, a sexual relationship denying the most basic philosophical concept of slavery—that blacks were not human beings" (*Black Feminist Criticism* 3). In most cases, tragic mulattas were shunned by their fathers who were afraid to admit their sexual abuse and miscegenation, trying to maintain the dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed. Moreover,

white property owners were constantly terrified at the idea of losing their properties to African descendants.

(Barbara Jeanne Fields historically discusses the legal category of slavery and points out in her article, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," how it coincides with white patriarchy.) According to Fields, in the colony of Maryland in 1664, white men, who were afraid of the erosion of their property rights by the offspring of free white women impregnated by slave men, experimented with assigning slave status according to the status of the father. Yet this experiment was soon dropped, because slaveholders realized that paternity is always ambiguous, whereas maternity is not; thus they took advantage of an unambiguous rule of descent, one that would guarantee to owners all offspring of slave women, however fathered. Besides, having considered the fact that a white man was more apt to have a sexual relationship with a black woman than a white woman with a black man (white women constrained according to the codes of Victorian womanhood were less likely to have an intimate relationship with a black man), slaveholders found it much more profitable to establish a law favorable to patriarchal behavior. Accordingly, they asserted that the race of a child depended on its mother. (Thus, mulattoes were conveniently considered black as a race and reduced to the status of chattel by their fathers who institutionally justified the sexual exploitation.

Since her representation has been controlled by the dominant group, the true voices of the "mammy" or the "mulatta" have hardly been reflected accurately in the American literary tradition, and their diverse subjectivity has been ignored. (The purpose of a stereotype created by the dominating group of society "is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations," as Hazel V. Carby contends (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 22). A stereotype is a convenient, psychological tool for the oppressor, banning the oppressed from expressing their thoughts and feelings and from seeking self-esteem and an integral autonomy.) (The task given to a womanist is to deconstruct these controlling images and retrieve the

subjectivity of women of color long hidden under the masks of stereotypes, and thereby to defy the reductiveness of sexual and racial oppression.

## 2. Theorizing and Quilt Making for a Womanist Autonomy

Because of the various cultural and social backgrounds of female experiences and discourses, the definition and methodology of a female-centered theory are more or less ambiguous and even controversial. Some women-of-color writers and critics dispute about the values and efficacy of a theory, questioning if it will be useful to the reality of women of color who have no access to academia. Proponents of theorizing a female discourse, however, argue that they need a logical theory to analyze the repressed female subjectivity and defy falsifying patriarchy.

African-American women writers in general concede that they have been suppressed. Even when black male writers became recognized among critics and included in the mainstream literary discourse, quite a few female writers were forgotten.<sup>8</sup> The Civil Rights movement enabled black women writers to draw more public attention to themselves; but a solid, critical discourse in academia was still absent, which some womanists of color regarded as fatal. They believed that the establishment of a theory for black female literature should be an urgent assignment in order to gain intellectual and cultural control from white and/or male critics who have dominated literary discourse. Deborah E. McDowell notes the necessity of feminist criticism in relation to the dismissed presence of African-American women.

The recognition among Black female critics and writers that white women, white men, and Black men consider their experiences as normative and Black women's experiences as deviant has given rise to Black feminist criticism. . . . Although there is no concrete definition of Black feminist criticism, a handful of Black female scholars have begun the necessary enterprise of resurrecting forgotten Black women writers and revising misinformed critical opinions of them. ("New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" 187-88)

Since no clear-cut criterion for African-American women's literature has yet been formulated, some women-of-color scholars have been struggling hard to theorize their position.

On the other hand, other women-of-color critics and activists express their concerns about theorizing, pointing out the dominating propensity of white feminists for theorizing exclusively on behalf of Euro-American elite interests that preserve the racialized power structure. Although most critics agree that the attempts of women of color at theorizing should be encouraged, some critics perceive an imminent danger in generalizing about the whole body of female literature, possibly resulting in the elimination of those writings which do not fit their theory.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, some women-of-color scholars ascribe to theory and its critical language a controlling function determined by a dominant group of people, reducing the subjectivity of the oppressed. Therefore, they are apprehensive about producing a theory.

Barbara Christian, for instance, aware of the danger of a theory which can contribute to establishing a power structure with manipulative language, contends that the metaphysical critical language in Euro-American discourse threatens and excludes other languages as inferior. She expresses her disapproval of such a dominating, metaphysical language: "I am appalled by the sheer ugliness of the language, its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence construction, its lack of pleasurable quality, its alienating quality" ("The Race for Theory" 339). Christian admonishes that those who are in power manipulate language and alter semantics to reflect only their interests and benefits. Suspicious of a theory which tends to focus on a limited vision of itself, colonizing other perspectives, Christian anticipates that the oppressed might become the oppressors by placing themselves in a position of power and control when they attempt to assert their own versions of theory. She has already observed this inclination in the Black Arts Movements, notwithstanding its relatively short history:

It is true that the Black Arts Movements resulted in a necessary and important critique both of previous Afro-American literature and of the white-established literary world. But in attempting to take over power, it, as Ishmael Reed

satirizes so well in *Mumbo Jumbo*, became much like its opponent, monolithic and downright repressive. ("The Race for Theory" 341)

Christian, who senses the emergence of modern African-American women into mainstream discourse, now fears that theory restricted to African-American women only could become authoritarian, excluding and renouncing other races. She does not want to deny African-American women access to theory but points out the danger of having a monolithic theory and a dominating language, repudiating the diverse and complex experiences and desire of other women.<sup>10</sup> A "strong" race theory might repel other women who have divergent perspectives and belong to a different ethnic group.

A counter language, produced in order to repel oppression in academia, might become a specialized intimidating language understood exclusively by those who rule over the critical terrain, an inaccessible language "that blocks communication, makes the general listener/reader feel bewildered and stupid" (Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul* xxiii). The responsibility of womanists is to discover a tangible language which can unite academic discourse and daily experience, preventing any dominating plethora of logocentrism. Instead of Western logocentric abstractions, Christian prefers the powerful vivid language of women of color, such as the vernacular tradition of African-American narratives. This latter tradition has preserved the values and history of its culture without depending on rigid written documentation, reinforcing her view of womanist discourse based on ontological experiences and acceptance of other marginalized women without being trapped in the small sphere of theoretical discourse.

Christian, who repudiates logocentrism and theory, however, leaves her argument vulnerable to critical and theoretical discourse. bell hooks, who insists on articulating a counter theory in the battle against academia, criticizes Christian's anti-theoretical position. In her article, "feminist theory: a radical agenda," hooks considers Christian's abnegation of Western forms of logic as inaccurate and risky, because the oppressors postulate that a dismissal of a metaphysical theory denotes the deficiency

of credibility of African-American women, designating them as inferiors lacking the abstract concepts necessary to inaugurate an intellectual exchange. As hooks contends, a lack of a coherent theory might be abused by the oppressors to authenticate their superiority, discrediting the perspectives of those who lack a theory. Thus, establishing a theory in order to present oneself on academic grounds is crucial for women of color.

After all, despite Christian's aversion to a theory which, she argues, is associated with a dominating, controlling group, her perspectives are based on the idea of strengthening the solidarity of women of color who have been ignored in the Western hierarchy and discouraged from expressing their thought. In this sense, she shares the same ideas with other women of color who try to theorize, even with bell hooks. Although her concern about the creation of a monolithic theory should be seriously taken into consideration, a coherent and persuasive theoretical discourse is necessary.

The focal concern of white feminists is that women need to theorize to occupy an academic territory which has excluded female subjectivity. In her article, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," Elaine Showalter explains the necessity of creating a feminist theory for building a solid basis for defying patriarchy. Since feminist criticism was isolated and misunderstood in the 1970s, the absence of a clearly articulated theory made feminist criticism vulnerable to male critics who claimed deficiencies on "academic" grounds (Showalter 127). She is aware of the controversy among women about a patriarchal academia which has relegated female experiences to the status of trivia, acknowledging a distrust of elite feminists who have inhabited an isolated intellectual domain without understanding the reality of the working-class women. Showalter still asserts the need to theorize a female discourse, without which women's participation in academia would be precluded just as the oppressors wish. (Women have to enter academia to deconstruct its male-oriented values and thought, creating a reciprocal interaction between men and women.)

Women writers have struggled to reinscribe the subjectivity of female experiences in literature, revising received ideas and expressing a

subjectivity which did not necessarily meet the expectations of patriarchal society.) Such women were considered deviant, analogous to Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the "monster," a term created by men for those women who unconventionally deviated from the Victorian notion of womanhood.<sup>11</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, further, contend that a pen represents a penis, for in patriarchal Western culture the text's author is a father who has the power to generate (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 6).<sup>12</sup> However, since women are biologically and figuratively engaged in production, women need to deconstruct a male dominant discourse and replace it with a reproductive one. As Gilbert and Gubar continue: "But if to write is metaphorically to give birth, from what organ can males generate text?" (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 7). It is a woman who possesses the organ of reproduction. Because biological sex differences were used against women by men who tried to justify male dominance and legitimacy, women need to reject this patriarchal manipulation. Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar represent the interests of white feminists in academia who have attempted to recover the female precursors expelled by the mainstream literary tradition. Although those white feminists have tried to counteract the chauvinistic nature of academia, what is lacking in their argument is a concern with women of color, who are made invisible even as an object in the revised discourse itself.<sup>13</sup> Their perspectives for theorizing feminism conveys the tendency to replicate a racial hierarchy in academia which negates women-of-color experiences.

The critical disparity between white feminists and womanists derives from the fact that the former are more concerned about fighting against male-dominated academia to help them enter the profession, by formulating a feminist discourse which can defy patriarchal oration. On the other hand, women of color need a theory which serves as a reliable signpost in order to escape from imminent oppressions. Those women who are pressed with the struggle for daily survival do not identify their problems with those of white women occupied with academic concerns. White feminism has launched its enterprise of theorizing in academia, leaving women of color with fewer chances for educational and professional achievements.

Not only white feminists but even some privileged women of color have been inclined to be engaged solely in academic discussion quite alien to the ongoing struggles of more subordinated women. Womanists, therefore, need to reject the narrow implications of a feminism which reflects the interests of only a certain influential group of women and link the academy to the reality of working-class women of color. Patricia Hill Collins' call for generating theory from ordinary activities, suggesting that intellectual creativity and action can be coordinated, is recapitulated in her discussion of Sojourner Truth, an influential yet illiterate ex-slave, a grass-roots activist who spoke for African-American women in her famous declaration, "Ain't I a Woman?" (Collins 14–15). Importantly, theory should be redefined so as to reflect the inner voices of the oppressed and to help them to obtain freedom from social, racial and gender disadvantages—in the process deconstructing those "intellectual" concepts which might be repressive.

Women should be united based on their fundamentally shared experience of confronting patriarchy in order to promote an awareness of female objectification. Michele Wallace asserts that all women should become allied with each other to fight against sexism, which she recognizes even in her own race.<sup>14</sup> The feminist movement has many problems to solve; nevertheless, establishment of a supporting sisterhood is indispensable as a repository of strength and knowledge for female survival. In order to advance a sustaining movement of women and to activate discourse, each woman should speak up, sharing her ideas for the common good and developing a strategy helpful for an integral female discourse. [The differences among women should be understood and embraced so that none of them will be relegated to a periphery, because racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia all stem from an inability to deal with differences effectively.]

For the expansion and development of a womanist theory, some white feminists point out the importance of relinquishing their ethnocentric focus on theorizing female experiences. Nancy K. Miller proposes that "the formula 'the personal is the political' requires a redefinition of the personal to include most immediately an interrogation of ethnocentrism; a poetics of

identity that engages with the 'other woman'" (110). By extending their understanding to other groups of women, white feminists will be able to contribute to theorizing an inclusive female discourse without preempting it. No woman should be relegated to the status of object or restricted in her behaviors and sensitivities; womanist criticism, a reconstruction of feminism, should establish subjectivities for all women which will liberate them from patriarchal limits and promote an understanding among them which can overcome differences.

In the process of understanding, however, some women of color are concerned about the "politically correct"<sup>15</sup> gestures of the major group of feminists. Recalling her experience working with white feminists, Lynet Uttal perceives that the affirmative nods of white feminists in response to womanist concerns do not necessarily mean anything encouraging, although they look like an informed supportive gesture ("Nods That Silence" 317–20). Although those feminists who are cognizant of the controversy about the exclusion of women of color from a feminist discourse deliver ostensibly encouraging signs, their intention might lie in an interest in establishing smoothly an institutionalized and bureaucratized discourse rather than in attempting to comprehend diverse subjectivities. Mitsuye Yamada expresses the frustration of women of color when they are asked to speak as representatives of their racial or ethnic group at white feminist conferences: "we are expected to move, charm or entertain, but not to educate in ways that are threatening to our audiences" (71). Yamada's remark underlines a lack of communication between the two groups of women. As Uttal argues, it is coalitions that will open up a discussion (as long as they are temporary and formed with specific goals in mind), enabling all women to work together. The politically correct gestures of white feminists do not encourage the marginalized women, and might even function instead as a way of dismissing their responsibility for formulating a coexisting female autonomy and theory. The future of a womanist discourse will be undermined if it seeks freedom for only one particular group of women. Bridging the boundaries between various groups of women is necessary in order to avoid a split inside the frame of female discourse and a consequent failure of the whole female movement;



otherwise, the movement will fall victim to "a strategy of divide and conquer" (Eisenstein 50), just what the patriarchal oppressors are expecting to happen to weaken female solidarity without intervening directly.

It is urgent to conceive an inclusive womanist theory which can be applicable and valuable both on academic grounds and on more practical daily bases. Women-of-color critics need to de-academize any feminist theory influenced by notions of Western hierarchy and reconstruct a womanist theory which respects the collateral experiences and voices of women of color. (Patricia Hill Collins' proposal for creating a theory based on the African-American notion of diversity serves as an alternative to the Western notion of theory based on binary opposition.) She suggests that African-American women construct an Afrocentric female aesthetics, which is symbolized by their traditional quilt art. Collins observes that

African-American women quiltmakers do not seem interested in a uniform color scheme but use several methods of playing with colors to create unpredictability and movement. . . . the symmetry in African-American quilts does not come from uniformity as it does in Euro-American quilts. Rather, symmetry comes through diversity. (89)

In African-American quilts, therefore, a strong color may be freely juxtaposed with another strong color.<sup>16</sup> Yet African-American women see the individual differences not as detracting from each piece but as enriching the whole quilt (Collins 215).<sup>17</sup>

Collins' argument of African quilts parallels the Eastern religious and philosophical notion of mandala, an exquisite pattern suggesting a cosmos, which can accommodate any entity, expanding endlessly without restriction. In those non-Western traditions of aesthetics and philosophy, any individual presence is embraced in an integrated unity and harmony. (In the same way, womanists will celebrate individual freedom and collective solidarity simultaneously based on their fundamental interests in creating wholeness and a harmony of aesthetics.)

A womanist theory based on quilting also emphasizes female values rather than patriarchal identification. Alice Walker considers the quilt as

a signifier of neglected women and proposes that every woman should be invited to join a supportive female network for the survival of all. In *The Color Purple*, Walker postulates that quilt making is a source of female cooperation and strength. Although the protagonist Celie is defenselessly isolated at home and abused by her husband, she begins to receive support from Sofia and Shug in the process of their making a quilt together. By participating in quilt making, these women learn how to cooperate with and support one another. Quilt making leads Celie to achieve a solid identity, learning how to express her feelings and thoughts and how to live by herself independent of her husband. Although she was treated mercilessly, almost like a piece of neglected rag, at the beginning of the story, she changes into a reliable and attractive woman just as worthless scraps of material are transformed into a beautiful and functional quilt.

Quilt making has special implications for African-American women whose artistry has historically remained submerged. In the title essay of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker emphasizes the importance of remembering her foremother through the discussion of a quilt exhibited in the Smithsonian Institution:

Though it [the quilt] follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." (239)

The quilt in the Smithsonian represents the denied voice of a black woman whose creativity and production were exploited while her individuality became invisible. Recovering a female history implied by the quilt is significant for formulating a theory of women who are not remembered in the mainstream history.

Literature of the marginalized needs to be retrieved and illuminated for serious interpretation because it has inscribed a hidden aspect of history which otherwise has recorded mainly the values and intentions of those who were in power.<sup>18</sup> The nineteenth-century slave narratives camouflaged and omitted certain details because the writers were afraid to

offend their readers, mainly white Christian women. *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances E. W. Harper exemplifies the degree of African-American assimilation into dominant society. The protagonist, Iola Leroy, born of a union between a wealthy white plantation owner and a slave mother, seeks the fulfillment of the American dream for black people, that of marrying a prominent doctor and engaging herself in charities. As McDowell points out, Harper was conscious of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and created a heroine, Iola Leroy, who has the same virtues as Eva does ("The Changing Same" 287). Although Iola is an unrealistic character, Harper had to present a respectable ideal black heroine in order to appeal to her white audience, showing how a black woman is "uplifted." Harper's deficiencies illustrate that not only did the history of dominant society written by white historians reduce the presence of the marginalized but also that African-American writers were pressured to conform to mainstream social practices and expectations.

(In patriarchal society, history has reinforced male superiority and erased female experiences from authoritative documentation, considering female views to be fragmentary, irrelevant and invalid.) Because women have, for the most part, been discouraged from documenting their thoughts or were suppressed in narratives written by men, female voices have been absent from mainstream history. On the other hand, women have managed to preserve their history in oral traditions, in narratives and myths, which is "a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it" (Cixous and Clément 6). African Americans, in particular, had to depend almost exclusively on the oral tradition and folklore to preserve their thought because access to literacy was forbidden during slavery.<sup>19</sup> The muted voices of tale-telling women, therefore, need to be articulated for the sake of female survival; and rewriting a history written by mainstream historians is an important enterprise to undertake for marginalized women in order to legitimize their discredited past and presence.✓

### 3. Morrison's Theorizing of Narratives

Morrison constantly forwards her interest in challenging (the political, social, racial and gender hierarchies in American literary discourse.) By placing a woman at the center of her novels, she takes a historical approach in order to reconstruct African-American culture and history in slavery. Aiming at subverting a racial hierarchy and validating African-American culture, she challenges a dualistic Western Civilization which has mutilated and debased African Americans physically and psychologically: right or wrong, black or white, the oppressors or the oppressed. African Americans have been subject to the harmful dichotomizing by race which has strongly restricted their behaviors and social and political participation. In slavery, the status of slaves was determined by the race of mothers, either a legitimate white or a conquered black, with no acknowledgment of degrees of racial identity between these polarities, as discussed previously. That is, the lives of slaves were determined by a strict racial dualism from the very beginning; and they could never subvert or qualify the imposed racial status.

△ Morrison attempts to alter Euro-American dichotomies by returning to the past before Western Civilization was established in order to deconstruct the legitimacy of racism and reconstruct a new sphere for African Americans. Returning to the origin of Western Civilization means going back to Egyptian culture, a non-white civilization, which has strongly influenced Western Civilization. The Greeks borrowed from many aspects of Egyptian civilization, although this fact has often been neglected; whites have disdained and subjugated non-white races so that the hierarchical supremacy of Western Civilization would be well maintained. Since Westerners still basically refuse to concede the influence of non-European races on their culture, race is still a difficult issue to discuss. Morrison points out the difficulty in her article, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken":

[I]f all of the ramifications that the term [race] demands are taken seriously, the bases of Western civilization will require re-thinking. Thus, in spite of its

implicit and explicit acknowledgement, "race" is still a virtually unspeakable thing. (3)

Yet Morrison continually takes on this unspeakable topic and suggests that the American literary canon should be expanded to accommodate the unspeakable subject of African-American heritage.

In the American literary tradition, the presence of African Americans has been neglected. They were viewed as objects and given only harmless secondary roles, such as nurturing mammies and faithful slaves, as discussed previously. Although in the Western system of values blackness has been negatively associated with darkness, invisibility, sin, death, etc., black does not mean absence. Despite the fact that African Americans have been inconspicuous behind the veil of mainstream discourse, they have played a vital, reciprocal role in American society. Morrison insists that the canon which has excluded the African-American presence should be reexamined, since the contribution of this presence to American literary discourse is evident.

△ Morrison further explains from a historical perspective why African Americans are disparaged and relegated to a marginal position, in the section, "romancing the shadow" incorporated in *Playing in the Dark*. She illustrates that most of those who immigrated to America were repressed politically, religiously, or economically in their old countries: they escaped from the Old World to the New World in search of freedom. Although they tried to leave behind their Old World fear of repression, it consistently haunted them even in the New World. In order to be free from this fear, they projected it onto the blackness of African Americans, who became the surrogate insecure selves of previously repressed white people. Transformed from the oppressed into the oppressor, they enjoyed a freedom and power heretofore allowed only to the ruling class in the Old World. Naturally, they contrived to justify their subordination of African Americans to protect their new, previously forbidden privileges. In this milieu, freedom translates into revered "individualism" and newness into "innocence."

It is crucial to reinscribe the received notion of slavery and history from a black female perspective. For instance, in *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner attempts to present American history from a black woman's point of view. Lerner introduces the voices and writings of ordinary, anonymous black women who have been buried at the bottom of the social hierarchy and lets them talk about their experiences, serving to create respect for black women in a legitimate past (xvii). In *Jubilee*, a Civil War story from a black female point of view and based on her maternal great-grandmother's life, Margaret Walker breaks the stereotypes of the "mammy" or mulatta figure by discovering and revealing her ancestors' strength in pursuing emancipation. In *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams delineates a black slave woman's emerging self, shifting the power of control of writing from a white man to a slave woman.

Likewise, Morrison is committed to authenticating and reconstructing the history of African Americans who were forbidden access to literacy and were overlooked by mainstream historians.<sup>20</sup> Her intention to argue that accounts of slavery written by white authors disregard the voices of enslaved African Americans is embodied in *Beloved*, which is, obviously, a revision of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe from an ex-slave woman's point of view.<sup>21</sup> Choosing as the setting a small Ohio town near Cincinnati, where Stowe lived for over twenty years, Morrison tries to subvert the myth of faithful Tom and entertaining Topsy, who are supposedly devoted to white masters, overthrowing the stereotypical images by articulating the voice of an abused ex-slave woman.

Morrison appears to have created *Beloved* in order to correct stereotypical images and to undermine Stowe's authority to dictate the story of African-American women through characters like Topsy and Chloe.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Chloe happens to be also Morrison's given name might have influenced her to challenge Stowe's stance as an abolitionist only within the context of the hierarchical racial structure.<sup>23</sup> Morrison attempts to describe how her characters probe freedom through intricate reconciliation without negating other people. Although some of them confront a serious and destructive conflict within their lives, their survival