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# Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation

Elizabeth Abel

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I realize that the set of feelings that I used to have about French men I now have about African-American women. Those are the people I feel inadequate in relation to and try to please in my writing. It strikes me that this is not just idiosyncratic.

—JANE GALLOP, “Criticizing Feminist Criticism”

Twyla opens the narrative of Toni Morrison’s provocative story “Recitatif” (1982) by recalling her placement as an eight-year-old child in St. Bonaventure, a shelter for neglected children, and her reaction to Roberta Fisk, the roommate she is assigned: “The minute I walked in . . . I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that’s my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean.”<sup>1</sup> The racial ambiguity so deftly installed at the narrative’s origin

1. Toni Morrison, “Recitatif,” in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, ed. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Amina Baraka (New York, 1983), p. 243; hereafter abbreviated “R.” I am deeply indebted to Lula Fragd for bringing this story to my attention and to Toni Morrison for generously discussing it with me. I am also very grateful to Margaret Homans for sharing with me an early draft of “‘Racial Composition’: Metaphor

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through codes that function symmetrically for black women and for white women (“they never washed their hair and they smelled funny”) intensifies as the story tracks the encounters of its two female protagonists over approximately thirty years. Unmediated by the sexual triangulations (the predations of white men on black women, the susceptibility of black men to white women) that have dominated black women’s narrative representations of women’s fraught connections across racial lines, the relationship of Twyla and Roberta discloses the operations of race in the feminine.<sup>2</sup> This is a story about a black woman and a white woman; but which is which?

I was introduced to “Recitatif” by a black feminist critic, Lula Fraggd. Lula was certain that Twyla was black; I was equally convinced that she was white; most of the readers we summoned to resolve the dispute divided similarly along racial lines. By replacing the conventional signifiers of racial difference (such as skin color) with radically relativistic ones (such as who smells funny to whom) and by substituting for the racialized body a series of disaggregated cultural parts—pink-scalloped socks, tight green slacks, large hoop earrings, expertise at playing jacks, a taste for Jimi Hendrix or for bottled water and asparagus—the story renders race a contested terrain variously mapped from diverse positions in the

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and Body in the Writing of Race,” which became central to my thinking on writing and race; and to Janet Adelman, John Bishop, Mitchell Breitwieser, Carolyn Dinshaw, Catherine Gallagher, Anne Goldman, Crystal Gromer, Dori Hale, Saidiya Hartman, Marianne Hirsch, Tania Modleski, Helene Moglen, Michael Rogin, Dianne Sadoff, Susan Schweik, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, and Jean Wyatt for their helpful comments on this essay.

2. The intervention of white men in relationships between black and white women is repeatedly represented in slave narratives, best epitomized perhaps by Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861); the intervention of white women in black heterosexual relationships is most fully explored in the civil rights fiction typified by Alice Walker, *Meridian* (1976). For a study of American literary representations of the relationships between black and white women in the nineteenth-century South, see Minrose C. Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1985); for an optimistic characterization of interracial female friendships in recent American women’s fiction, see Elizabeth Schultz, “Out of the Woods and into the World: A Study of Interracial Friendships between Women in American Novels,” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), pp. 67–85.

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social landscape. By forcing us to construct racial categories from highly ambiguous social cues, "Recitatif" elicits and exposes the unarticulated racial codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness. To underscore the cultural specificity of these codes, Morrison writes into the text a figure of racial undecidability: Maggie, the mute kitchen worker at St. Bonaventure, who occasions the text's only mention of skin color, an explicitly ambiguous sandy color, and who walks through the text with her little kid's hat and her bowed legs "like parentheses," her silent self a blank parenthesis, a floating signifier ("R," p. 245). For both girls a hated reminder of their unresponsive mothers, Maggie is not "raced" to Twyla (that is, she is by default white); to Roberta, she is black. The two girls' readings of Maggie become in turn clues for our readings of them, readings that emanate similarly from our own cultural locations.

My own reading derived in part from Roberta's perception of Maggie as black; Roberta's more finely discriminating gaze ("she wasn't pitch-black, I knew," is all Twyla can summon to defend her assumption that Maggie is white) seemed to me to testify to the firsthand knowledge of discrimination ("R," p. 259). Similarly, Roberta is sceptical about racial harmony. When she and Twyla retrospectively discuss their tense encounter at a Howard Johnson's where Twyla was a waitress in the early 1960s, they read the historical context differently: "'Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black—white. You know how everything was.' But I didn't know. I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson's together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters. You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days" ("R," p. 255). In the civil rights movement that Twyla sees as a common struggle against racial barriers, Roberta sees the distrust of white intervention and the impulse toward a separatist Black Power movement: she has the insider's perspective on power and race relations.

It was a more pervasive asymmetry in authority, however, that secured my construction of race in the text, a construction I recount with considerable embarrassment for its possible usefulness in fleshing out the impulse within contemporary white feminism signalled by the "not just idiosyncratic" confession that stands as this paper's epigraph. As Gallop both wittily acknowledges the force of African-American women's political critique of white academic feminism's seduction by "French men" and, by simply transferring the transference, reenacts the process of idealization that unwittingly obscures more complex social relations, I singled out the power relations of the girls from the broader network of cultural signs.<sup>3</sup> Roberta seemed to me consistently the more sophisticated reader

3. *Transference* is Gallop's own term for her relation to black feminist critics. In her *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (New York, 1992), esp. pp. 169–70, Gallop critiques the idealization and exoticization of black women, but she limits herself to making

of the social scene, the subject presumed by Twyla to know, the teller of the better (although not necessarily more truthful) stories, the adventurer whose casual mention of an appointment with Jimi Hendrix exposes the depths of Twyla's social ignorance ("‘Hendrix? Fantastic,’ I said. ‘Really fantastic. What’s she doing now?’" ["R," p. 250]). From the girls' first meeting at St. Bonaventure, Twyla feels vulnerable to Roberta's judgment and perceives Roberta (despite her anxiety about their differences) as possessing something she lacks and craves: a more acceptably negligent mother (a sick one rather than a dancing one) and, partially as a consequence, a more compelling physical presence that fortifies her cultural authority. Twyla is chronically hungry; Roberta seems to her replete, a daughter who has been adequately fed and thus can disdain the institutional Spam and Jell-O that Twyla devours as a contrast to the popcorn and Yoo-Hoo that had been her customary fare. The difference in maternal stature, linked in the text with nurture, structures Twyla's account of visiting day at St. Bonaventure. Twyla's mother, smiling and waving "like she was the little girl," arrives wearing tight green buttocks-hugging slacks and a ratty fur jacket for the chapel service, and bringing no food for the lunch that Twyla consequently improvises out of fur-covered jelly beans from her Easter basket ("R," p. 246). "Bigger than any man," Roberta's mother arrives bearing a huge cross on her chest, a Bible in the crook of her arm, and a basket of chicken, ham, oranges, and chocolate-covered graham crackers ("R," p. 247). In the subsequent Howard Johnson scene that Twyla's retrospective analysis links with the frustrations of visiting day ("The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food" ["R," p. 248]) the difference in stature is replayed between the two daughters. Roberta, sitting in a booth with "two guys smothered in head and facial hair," her own hair "so big and wild I could hardly see her face," wearing a "powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of bracelets," rebuffs Twyla, clad in her waitress outfit, her knees rather than her midriff showing, her hair in a net, her legs in thick stockings and sturdy white shoes ("R," p. 249). Although the two bodies are never directly represented, the power of metonymy generates a contrast between the amplitude of the sexualized body and the skimpiness and pallor of the socially harnessed body. Twyla's sense of social and physical inadequacy vis-à-vis Roberta, like her representation of her mother's inferiority to Roberta's, signalled Twyla's whiteness to me by articulating a

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the transference conscious rather than positing alternatives to it. In "Transferences: Gender and Race: The Practice of Theory," delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, 3 Apr. 1992, Deborah E. McDowell, who had inadvertently occasioned Gallop's comments about transference, deliberately spoke back from, and thereby exploded, the position of the transferential object.

white woman's fantasy (my own) about black women's potency.<sup>4</sup> This fantasy's tenaciousness is indicated by its persistence in the face of contrary evidence. Roberta's mother, the story strongly implies, is mentally rather than physically ill, her capacity to nurture largely fictional; Roberta, who is never actually represented eating, is more lastingly damaged than Twyla by maternal neglect, more vulnerable as an adult to its memory, a weakness on which Twyla capitalizes during their political conflicts as adults; the tenuousness of the adult Roberta's own maternal status (she acquires stepchildren, rather than biological children, through her marriage to an older man) may also testify figuratively to a lack created by insufficient mothering.

Pivoting not on skin color, but on size, sexuality, and the imagined capacity to nurture and be nurtured, on the construction of embodiedness itself as a symptom and source of cultural authority, my reading installs the (racialized) body at the center of a text that deliberately withholds conventional racial iconography. Even in her reading of this first half of the story, Lula's interpretation differed from mine by emphasizing cultural practices more historically nuanced than my categorical distinctions in body types, degrees of social cool, or modes of mothering. Instead of reading Twyla's body psychologically as white, Lula read Twyla's name as culturally black; and she placed greater emphasis on Roberta's language in the Howard Johnson scene—her primary locution being a decidedly white hippie “Oh, wow”—than on the image of her body gleaned by reading envy in the narrative gaze and by assigning racial meaning to such cultural accessories as the Afro, hoop earrings, and a passion for Jimi Hendrix that actually circulated independently of race throughout the counterculture of the 1960s; as Lula knew and I did not, Jimi Hendrix appealed more to white than to black audiences.<sup>5</sup> Roberta's coldness in this scene—she barely acknowledges her childhood friend—becomes, in

4. The “not just idiosyncratic” nature of this fantasy is suggested by Gallop's accounts in “Tongue Work” and “The Coloration of Academic Feminism” in *Around 1981*, pp. 143–76 and 67–74, and, by extension through the analogies she draws between constructions of race and class, in “Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter, with Vermeer,” in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York, 1986), pp. 137–56. In her analysis of the black woman's telling role in Joan Micklin Silver's film *Crossing Delancey*, Tania Modleski outlines an especially exploitative enactment of this fantasy; see Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (New York, 1991), pp. 129–30. In Richard Dyer, “Paul Robeson: Crossing Over,” *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London, 1986), Dyer succinctly summarizes the most pervasive, nongendered version of this fantasy: “Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things—spontaneity, emotion, naturalness—yet giving them a different implication. Black discourses see them as contributions to the development of society, white as enviable qualities that only blacks have” (p. 79).

5. On the general phenomenon of black innovation and white imitation in postwar American culture, see Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” *New Formations* 3 (Winter 1987): 33–54.

Lula's reading, a case of straightforward white racism, and Twyla's surprise at the rebuff reflects her naivete about the power of personal loyalties and social movements to undo racial hierarchies.

More importantly, however, this scene was not critical for Lula's reading. Instead of the historical locus that was salient for me—not coincidentally, I believe, since the particular aura of (some) black women for (some) white women during the civil rights movement is being recapitulated in contemporary feminism (as I will discuss later)—what was central to her were scenes from the less culturally exceptional 1970s, which disclosed the enduring systems of racism rather than the occasional moments of heightened black cultural prestige. In general, Lula focussed less on cultural than on economic status, and she was less concerned with daughters and their feelings toward their mothers than with these daughters' politics after they are mothers.

When Twyla and Roberta meet in a food emporium twelve years after the Howard Johnson scene, Twyla has married a fireman and has one child and limited income; Roberta has married an IBM executive and lives in luxury in the wealthy part of town with her husband, her four stepchildren, and her Chinese chauffeur. Twyla concludes in a voice of seemingly racial resentment: "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" ("R," p. 252). A short time later the women find themselves on opposite sides of a school integration struggle in which both their children are faced with bussing: Twyla's to the school that Roberta's stepchildren now attend, and Roberta's to a school in a less affluent neighborhood. After Twyla challenges Roberta's opposition to the bussing, Roberta tries to defuse the conflict: "'Well, it is a free country.' 'Not yet, but it will be,'" Twyla responds ("R," p. 256). Twyla's support of bussing, and of social change generally, and Roberta's self-interested resistance to them position the women along the bitter racial lines that split the fraying fabric of feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

Privileging psychology over politics, my reading disintegrates in the story's second half. Lula's reading succeeds more consistently, yet by constructing the black woman (in her account, Twyla) as the politically correct but politically naive and morally conventional foil to the more socially adventurous, if politically conservative, white woman (Roberta), it problematically racializes the moral (op)positions Morrison opens to reevaluation in her extended (and in many ways parallel) narrative of female friendship, *Sula*.<sup>7</sup> Neither reading can account adequately for the text's

6. For a particularly powerful statement of the disenchantment bred among women of color by white women's opposition to bussing, see Nikki Giovanni, "Why Weren't Our 'Sisters in Liberation' in Boston?" *Encore*, 6 Jan. 1975, p. 20.

7. By tracing the course of a friendship from girlhood through adulthood, "Recitatif" filters the narrative of *Sula* (1973) through the lens of race, replacing the novel's sexual triangulation with the tensions of racial difference. It is hard for me to imagine that the critical question that *Sula*, Roberta's knowing, transgressive counterpart, poses to Nel—"How

contradictory linguistic evidence, for if Twyla's name is more characteristically black than white, it is perhaps best known as the name of a white dancer, Twyla Tharp, whereas Roberta shares her last name, Fisk, with a celebrated black (now integrated) university. The text's heterogeneous inscriptions of race resist a totalizing reading.

Propelled by this irresolution to suspend my commitment to the intentional fallacy, I wrote to Toni Morrison. Her response raised as many questions as it resolved. Morrison explained that her project in this story was to substitute class for racial codes in order to drive a wedge between these typically elided categories.<sup>8</sup> Both eliciting and foiling our assumption that Roberta's middle-class marriage and politics, and Twyla's working-class perspective, are reliable racial clues, Morrison incorporated details about their husbands' occupations that encourage an alternative conclusion. If we are familiar (as I was not) with IBM's efforts to recruit black executives and with the racial exclusiveness of the firemen's union in upstate New York, where the story is set, we read Roberta as middle-class black and Twyla as working-class white. Roberta's resistance to busing, then, is based on class rather than racial loyalties: she doesn't want her (middle-class black) stepchildren bussed to a school in a (white) working-class neighborhood; Twyla, conversely, wants her (white) working-class child bussed to a middle-class school (regardless of that school's racial composition). What we hear, from this perspective, in Twyla's envy of Roberta, "Everything is so easy for them," and in her challenge to the status quo—it's not a free country "but it will be"—is class rather than (or perhaps compounded by) racial resentment, the adult economic counterpart to Twyla's childhood fantasy of Roberta's plenitude.

By underscoring the class-based evidence for reading Twyla as white, Morrison confirms at once my own conclusion and its fantasmatic basis. Morrison's weighting of social detail, her insistence on the intersections, however constructed, between race and class, are more closely aligned with Lula's political perspective than with my psychological reading, fueled by racially specific investments that the text deliberately solicits

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do you know? . . . About who was good. How do you know it was you?"—could be translated, in "Recitatif," into a white woman's challenge to a woman of color (Morrison, *Sula* [New York, 1973], p. 146).

8. In this exchange (November 1990), Morrison provided a more detailed account of her intentions than she does in her only (and very recently) published comment on the story, in the preface to her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992): "The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (The only short story I have ever written, 'Recitatif,' was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial)" (p. xi).

and exposes. By both inviting and challenging racialized readings that are either “right” for the “wrong” reasons or “wrong” for the “right” ones, “Recitatif” focusses some questions to address to the massive, asymmetrical crossing of racial boundaries in recent feminist criticism. If white feminist readings of black women’s texts disclose white critical fantasies, what (if any) value do these readings have—and for whom?<sup>9</sup> How do white women’s readings of black women’s biological bodies inform our readings of black women’s textual bodies? How do different critical discourses both inflect and inscribe racial fantasies? What rhetorical strategies do these discourses produce, and (how) do these strategies bear on the value of the readings they ostensibly legitimate?

Black feminists have debated the politics and potential of white feminists’ critical intervention, but they have not compared or critiqued specific reading strategies, which is perhaps more properly a task of white self-criticism.<sup>10</sup> This essay attempts to contribute to this task by examining signal moments, across a range of discourses, in the white critical texts

9. Although I realize that by isolating white / black dynamics of reading from white feminist readings of texts by other women of color I am reinforcing the unfortunate collapse of “color” and “black,” encompassing such a diverse textual field within a single analysis would blur important differences. In contrast, for example, to black feminist complaints about the white feminist misrecognition of the politics and language of black feminism, Norma Alarcón protests the Anglo-American feminist resistance to granting theoretical status to the multiple-voiced subjectivity of women of color; see Norma Alarcón, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism,” in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco, 1990), pp. 356–69. For a different perception of white feminism’s response to the multiple voicing characterizing texts by women of color, see Teresa de Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,” *Feminist Studies* 16 (Spring 1990): 115–50.

10. The strongest questions about, although not unqualified opposition to, white feminist readings of black women’s texts have been posed by bell hooks. See, for example, bell hooks [Gloria Watkins], “Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism,” *Inscriptions* 5 (1989): 159–62, and “Feminism and Racism: The Struggle Continues,” *Zeta* (July–Aug. 1990): 41–43; see also Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 745–73. For some more positive perspectives, see Valerie Smith, “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other,’” in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), pp. 38–57; Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, 1987), chap. 1; Michele Wallace, “Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston? Critics Carve Up the Legend,” in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London, 1990), pp. 179–80; Barbara Christian, “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History,” in *Changing Our Own Words*, pp. 67, 73; and hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, 1989), chap. 7. For a trenchant black male critique of the racial privilege concealed behind the self-referential gestures of some white male commentators on African-American texts, see Michael Awkward, “Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse,” *American Literary History* 2 (Winter 1990): 581–606. See also Kenneth W. Warren, “From under the Superscript: A Response to Michael Awkward,” and Awkward, “The Politics of Positionality: A Reply to Kenneth Warren,” *American Literary History* 4 (Spring 1992): 97–109.

emerging with such volume and intensity within contemporary feminism. By “contemporary” I mean since 1985, a watershed year that marked the simultaneous emergence of what has been called postfeminism and, not coincidentally, of pervasive white feminist attention to texts by women of color.<sup>11</sup> This new attentiveness was overdetermined: by the sheer brilliance and power of this writing and its escalating status in the literary marketplace and, consequently, the academy; by white feminist restlessness with an already well-mined white female literary tradition; and by the internal logic of white feminism’s trajectory through theoretical discourses that, by evacuating the referent from the signifier’s play, fostered a turn to texts that reassert the authority of experience, that reinstate political agency, and that rearticulate the body and its passions. The end of the most confident and ethnocentric period of the second wave (roughly 1970–1985) has interestingly collapsed postfeminism and prefeminism as the ideological frameworks in which white women turn to black women to articulate a politics and to embody a discursive authority that are either lost or not yet found. Like Frances D. Gage’s perception of Sojourner Truth rescuing the faltering 1851 Women’s Rights conference in Akron through the power of her physical presence and resounding question, “A’n’t I a woman?” which took “us up in her strong arms and

11. In “Feminism, ‘Postfeminism,’ and Contemporary Women’s Fiction,” in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana, Ill., 1991), pp. 268–91, Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt proposes 1985 as the date of postfeminism’s emergence and defines the phenomenon succinctly as the “uneven incorporation and revision [of feminism] inside the social and cultural texts of a more conservative era” (p. 269). For a more negative assessment of postfeminism, and a broader location of its origins in the mid-1980s, see Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), esp. part 3. In selecting 1985 as the watershed year in white feminists’ engagement with questions of racial location, I am building on Miller’s suggestion in the conversation held between Miller, Marianne Hirsch, and Jane Gallop, published under the title “Criticizing Feminist Criticism,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York, 1990), p. 359. In 1985 *Conjuring*, the first anthology of literary criticism coedited by a black woman and a white woman, was published. The same year *The Color Purple* was selected as the focus for a collective presentation at the sixth annual British conference on “Literature/Teaching/Politics”; this presentation culminated in several white feminist essays on the novel. This year also witnessed the first serious white British feminist response to critiques by women of color; see Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, “Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Review*, no. 20 (June 1985): 23–47; for four different responses to this essay, see Caroline Ramazanoglu, Hamida Kazi, Sue Lees, and Heidi Safia Mirza, “Feedback: Feminism and Racism,” *Feminist Review*, no. 22 (Feb. 1986): 83–105, and Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, “Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism,” *Feminist Review*, no. 23 (June 1986): 81–92. Another way to mark the shift occurring in 1985 is to contrast the semantic fields of two identical titles: *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women*, ed. Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick (Boston, 1984), about the enabling identification between women writers and the women about whom they write, and Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domestic and Their Employers* (Philadelphia, 1985), about the conflicts between white women and the black women who work for them.

carried us safely over the slough of difficulty turning the whole tide in our favor"; or, in one of the generative contexts for the second wave of feminism, like Jane Stembridge's discovery of a miraculously unashamed mode of female speech in Fanny Lou Hamer's proud bearing and voice at a 1964 SNCC rally—"Mrs. Hamer . . . knows that she is good. . . . If she didn't know that . . . she wouldn't stand there, with her head back and sing! She couldn't speak the *way* that she speaks and the way she speaks is this: she announces. I do not announce. I apologize"; the postfeminist turn to black women novelists enacts an anxious transference onto black women's speech.<sup>12</sup>

As Valerie Smith has eloquently argued, the attempt to rematerialize an attenuated white feminism by routing it through black women's texts reproduces in the textual realm white women's historical relation to the black female bodies that have nurtured them.<sup>13</sup> This relation unfolds along a spectrum of materiality. More complex than its prefeminist analogue, contemporary white feminism invokes black women's texts not only to relegitimize the feminist agenda called into question by post-structuralism but also, paradoxically, to relegitimize post-structuralism by finding its prefiguration in black women's texts. Yet whether as a corrective difference or a confirming similarity, as a sanction for a renewed or a resuspended referentiality, black women writers are enlisted to bestow a cultural authority that derives in part from their enforced experience of embodiment.

To attempt to do justice to the spectrum of white feminist approaches, I have organized this study through three case studies that, although far from exhaustive, nevertheless offer a range of influential discourses: deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and cultural criticism. This sequence traces a trajectory from a strategy that seems able to escape my own fantasmatic production of an embodied other to one that unexpectedly reproduces it. My conclusion will turn to the conclusion of "Recitatif" to reopen the question of reading and race.

12. I am following Phyllis Marynick Palmer's wonderful reading of Sojourner Truth's role at the Akron Women's Rights convention in "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Spring 1983): 151, 153. Palmer quotes from Frances D. Gage, "The Akron Convention," in *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir*, ed. Alice Rossi (New York, 1974), p. 429. Paula Giddings cites Jane Stembridge's reaction to Fanny Lou Hamer in her *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), p. 301. For SNCC's complex role in catalyzing the second wave of a white feminist movement, see chap. 17, and Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1979). In *Meridian* and in "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells" (1977), Walker offers narrative accounts of white women's predatory relation to a movement that gave them the illusion of purposefulness.

13. See Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" in *Changing Our Own Words*, pp. 38–57.

The nonblack feminist critic/theorist who honestly engages his or her own autobiographical implication in a brutal past is likely to provide nuances such as that of the black feminist critic. What, however, are the preconditions and precautions for the nonblack feminist critic/theorist who dares to undertake such a project?

—MAE G. HENDERSON, response to Houston A. Baker, Jr.,  
“There Is No More Beautiful Way”

Through the exchanges between Derrida and Lacan, we have become familiar with the debate between deconstruction and psychoanalysis over the discursive construction of subjectivity. Recent work by two prominent white feminist theorists, Barbara Johnson and Margaret Homans, suggests how this debate plays out in the related question of the discursive construction of race: a question especially urgent for critics reading and writing across racial lines.

Because it directly poses the question of the white reader's relation to the African-American text and because it has widely influenced readings of Zora Neale Hurston in particular, and of race in general, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston” is an apt focus for a study of Barbara Johnson's textual strategies.<sup>14</sup> “Thresholds” mounts an enormously complex and brilliant critique of the belief in essential racial differences that for Johnson is the substance of racism. (Arguing that black representations of a black essence always operate within a “specific interlocutory situation” and are “matters of strategy rather than truth,” Johnson brackets the question of a possible black belief in, or desire for belief in, a black identity [“T,” p. 285]). Through a read-

14. See Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 278-89; hereafter abbreviated “T.” For evidence of this essay's influence, see Angela P. Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” *Stanford Law Review* 42 (Feb. 1990): 581-616; Priscilla Wald, “Becoming ‘Colored’: The Self-Authorized Language of Difference in Zora Neale Hurston,” *American Literary History* 2 (Spring 1990): 79-100; Wallace, “Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston?” pp. 172-86; Tamar Katz, “‘Show Me How to Do Like You’: Didacticism and Epistolary Form in *The Color Purple*,” in *Alice Walker*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1989), esp. pp. 191-92. The race of the reader is not an issue in “Thresholds”'s companion piece, published the year before, “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1984), pp. 205-15, in which gender performs a more critical role than race; similarly, in her “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 184-99, another outstanding essay on structures of address, differences in gender occlude racial differences, which are theorized for neither the poets nor the critic. In Johnson's other African-American essays, such as “Euphemism, Understatement, and the Passive Voice: A Genealogy of Afro-American Poetry” and “The Re(a)d and the Black,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gates (New York, 1990), pp. 204-11 and 145-54, the racial position of the reader is similarly bracketed.

ing of three Hurston texts—"How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928); "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950); and *Mules and Men* (1935)—Johnson maps the interlocutory situations that generate Hurston's ambiguous and contradictory representations of racial identity and difference. Rather than a constant, color (which figures race for both Hurston and Johnson) varies with positions in discursive exchanges whose subversion of the difference between inside and outside, self and other, is detailed in Johnson's reading of Hurston's complex relation as a northern anthropologist to the southern black communities whose folklore (or "lies") she represents in *Mules and Men*. By anticipating and legitimating the project of dereferentializing race, and by relocating differences between the races as internal differences (as in her celebrated figure of resemblances among the heterogeneous contents of differently colored bags), Hurston—or the Hurston represented by these particular texts—is a deconstructive critic's dream.<sup>15</sup>

In the body of the essay, Johnson and Hurston seem to speak in a single voice, but the two voices occasionally diverge, and through their divergence the essay interrogates the politics of interracial reading. Paralleling the "multilayered envelope of address" with which Hurston frames the folktales of *Mules and Men*, Johnson frames her own readings with an analysis of her position as a "white deconstructor" interpreting a "black novelist and anthropologist" ("T," p. 278). As her language indicates, the frame deploys the rhetoric of racial essences the rest of the essay deconstructs. In addressing (as does Hurston's frame) the politics of a discourse on race, the frame also demonstrates their effects: the interlocutory situation of a white reading of a black text demands some acknowledgement of racial differences. The essay thus deploys a schizophrenic discourse, split between a first-person discourse on the politics of discourse across race and a third-person discourse on the discursive (de)construction of race. The discursive position of a "white deconstructor" of race is self-different, embracing both the assertion and the deconstruction of difference, positions the text constructs as white and black, respectively.

These positions, however, are themselves unstable. Through what

15. The Hurston represented by other texts fulfills other critical dreams. See, for example, Mary Helen Washington, foreword, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; New York, 1990), pp. vii–xiv, and Walker, "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now" and "Looking for Zora," in Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Walker (New York, 1979), pp. 1–5, 297–313, and "Foreword: Zora Neale Hurston—A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), pp. xi–xviii. In *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, Walker describes "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" as "an excellent example of Zora Neale Hurston at her most exasperating" (p. 151). For a black feminist reading that is closer to Johnson's, but is routed through Bakhtin instead of Derrida, see Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Changing Our Own Words*, pp. 16–37.

becomes an excess of politicized rhetoric in the frame, read retrospectively against the text's interior, the differences between outside and inside, first person and third person, white and black, collapse and with them the tension between politics and deconstruction. If the questioning of motive and audience in the frame's opening paragraph are to be taken straight, the response the next paragraph offers is far more problematic: "It was as though I were asking her [Hurston] for answers to questions I did not even know I was unable to formulate. I had a lot to learn, then, from Hurston's way of dealing with multiple agendas and heterogeneous implied readers" ("T," p. 278). The deference to Hurston seems as disingenuous as Hurston's comparably located and requisite expressions of gratitude to her white patron, Mrs. Osgood Mason; for as much as Johnson has to learn from Hurston about strategic discursive constructions of race, she has little to learn from her about strategies of discourse generally; far from a humble student or innocent reader with no anterior agendas of her own, she constitutes Hurston as much in her own deconstructive image as she is herself reconstituted by Hurston's texts.<sup>16</sup> Yet read in the context of Johnson's reading of *Mules and Men*, the dissembling rhetoric of the frame becomes a deliberate imitation of Hurston's imitation of the strategy of "lying" that she learns from the Eatonville residents who, weary of white folks prying into their ways, set verbal "'toy(s)'" "'outside the door[s]'" of their minds to distract and deceive their white investigators ("T," p. 286). If, as Johnson argues, "it is impossible to tell whether Hurston the narrator is *describing* a strategy [of lying] or *employing* one" since "Hurston's very ability to fool us—or to fool us into *thinking* we have been fooled—is itself the only effective way of conveying the rhetoric of the 'lie,'" Johnson's ability to fool us functions analogously as a rhetorical tool that, once we have understood its calculated impact, transports us along with both Hurston and Johnson from the outside to the inside of Eatonville's discursive universe ("T," pp. 286, 289).

The fluidity of this boundary transgression, however, conceals an important difference between Hurston crossing the boundaries between subject and object, North and South, literate and oral communities, and Johnson or her white readers crossing a racial boundary. In the course of Johnson's essay, a discourse on positionality comes to displace, as well as to produce, a discourse on race. As the frame slides into the interior, the questions it raises disappear. There is no further problem about a white deconstructor writing about, or writing as, a black novelist and anthropologist, since position has come to stand for race. This erasure of conflict is clear when the frame briefly returns at the end, merging Johnson's and Hurston's voices in the single conclusion that "the terms 'black' and 'white,' 'inside' and 'outside,' continue to matter" only as diversely inhab-

16. For a similar critique, see Tzvetan Todorov, "'Race,' Writing, and Culture," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Gates (Chicago, 1986), pp. 379–80.

ited and mutually constitutive positions on a signifying chain ("T," p. 289). By dislocating race from historically accreted differences in power, Johnson's deconstructive reading dovetails with Hurston's libertarian politics.<sup>17</sup>

In Johnson's discourse on gender, by contrast, her feminist politics enforce a distinction, political rather than metaphysical, between the positions inhabited by men and women: "Jacques Derrida may sometimes see himself as *philosophically* positioned as a woman, but he is not *politically* positioned as a woman. Being positioned as a woman is not something that is entirely voluntary." The shift from gender to race in the next sentence—"Or, to put it another way, if you tell a member of the Ku Klux Klan that racism is a repression of self-difference, you are likely to learn a thing or two about repression"—bypasses the racial analogy to the problematic masculine (= white) assumption of a figuratively feminine (= black) position to insinuate the reaction of the racist that places the white deconstructor in a position of vulnerability akin to (rather than politically distinct from) the black person's position.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Johnson distinguishes more firmly between the figurative and the literal in relation to gender than to race: "the revaluation of the *figure* of the woman by a male author cannot substitute for the actual participation of women in the literary conversation. Mallarmé may be able to speak from the place of the silenced woman, but as long as *he* is occupying it, the silence that is broken in theory is maintained in reality."<sup>19</sup> Johnson's relentlessly deconstructive discourse on race subverts the equivalent gestures that would subject her own role as a white deconstructor to her critique of masculine deconstructions of gender. This difference within her practice of deconstruction, the undoing of a counterpart for race to the feminist resistance to deconstruction, facilitates the project of writing across race. The interlocutory situa-

17. Hurston's resistance to considering race a sociopolitical obstacle to success recurs throughout her writing. For example, she asserts: "I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. . . . I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife" (Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, p. 153). Similar claims pervade her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). For an analysis of Hurston's racial politics, see Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, esp. chap. 11. For a different reading of Johnson's position in this essay, see Awkward, "Negotiations of Power," 603–4.

18. Johnson, introduction, *A World of Difference*, pp. 2–3.

19. Johnson, "Les Fleurs du Mal Armé: Some Reflections on Intertextuality," *A World of Difference*, p. 131. As the paragraph continues, Johnson qualifies, but does not undo, the figurative / literal distinction. The pressures created by Johnson's racial position are visible in her differences of emphasis from the Afro-Americanist whose position on race is closest, indeed very close, to her own: Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; see, for example, her response to Gates's "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago, 1989), pp. 14–38, 39–44.

tion that requires the white critic to acknowledge racial difference also requires her to dissolve the tension between literal and figurative, political and philosophical, voluntary and involuntary modes of sameness and difference.

Johnson's essay first appeared in the 1985 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled "'Race,' Writing, and Difference," edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whose position on the figurative status of race is signalled by the quotation marks with which he encloses the word; Johnson's essay conforms clearly to that volume's ideology. Gates has been criticized for the politics of his deconstruction of race, and some of the most passionate criticism has been launched by black feminists. Following one of these women, Joyce A. Joyce, Margaret Homans argues compellingly in a recent essay, "'Racial Composition': Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race," that Gates's, and thus by extension Johnson's, deliteralization of race is effectively a masculinist position.<sup>20</sup> The difference between Johnson and Homans derives to a significant degree from the shift from deconstruction to psychoanalysis and the consequent shift from the inside/outside opposition privileged by deconstruction to that between body and language, or the literal and the figurative, which psychoanalysis genders oppositely from deconstruction. Whereas for Johnson, playing primarily off Derrida, figuration enacts an emancipatory feminine displacement of phallogocentric reference, for Homans, playing off Lacan and Chodorow, figuration enacts a masculine displacement of the specifically female (maternal) body whose exclusion founds the symbolic register. Whereas for Johnson the figurativeness of race is enabling for all races, for Homans it enables only men, since women across race accede to figuration only by devaluing the femaleness that is culturally conflated with the body. Paradoxically, however, both positions serve to legitimate

20. "'Racial Composition': Metaphor and the Body in the Writing of Race" was delivered as a talk at the conference on "Psychoanalysis in African-American Contexts" at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 23–25 October 1992; hereafter abbreviated "RC." Although it is still undergoing revision, and may appear in print in a somewhat altered form in the forthcoming volume of conference papers, I have selected it for this analysis because it offers such an illuminating counterpart to Johnson's essay. For some earlier examples of Homans's writing on African-American women's texts, see Margaret Homans, "Her Very Own Howl!: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women's Fiction," *Signs* 9 (Winter 1983): 186–205, which is primarily concerned with negotiating tensions between Anglo-American and French feminist positions on language and women's experience, and which subordinates racial to gender differences; and "The Woman in the Cave: Recent Feminist Fictions and the Classical Underworld," *Contemporary Literature* 29 (Fall 1988): 369–402, which, by reading Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* with Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, also foregrounds the compatibility of French feminist discourse and fiction by African-American women. Juxtaposing "'Racial Composition'" and "Thresholds of Difference" exaggerates, perhaps, the differences between Homans and Johnson, who have both been influenced by both deconstruction and psychoanalysis; but the contrast also clarifies the ways each of these (internally heterogeneous) discourses informs the debate on the discursive construction of race.

white feminist readings of black women's texts: privileging the figurative enables the white reader to achieve figurative blackness; privileging the literal enables the white *woman* reader to forge a gender alliance that outweighs (without negating) both racial differences within gender and racial alliances across gender.

"'Racial Composition'" takes as its starting point the debate on black literary criticism carried out in four texts in a 1987 issue of *New Literary History*: the original essay by Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," criticizing the deliteralization of race in Gates and Houston A. Baker, Jr.; the responses by Gates and Baker; and Joyce's response to them.<sup>21</sup> Building on her premises that "the position Gates inherits from post-structuralism identifies and celebrates the abstract as masculine and devalues embodiment as female," and that Gates "substitute(s), in the undesirable position of the referent or ground from which language differentiates itself, female for black," Homans deftly teases out a gendered subtext in the exchange ("RC," pp. 3–4).<sup>22</sup> In Joyce's critique of the assimilation of black literary criticism to the elite discourse of post-structuralism that, through its esoteric terminology and

21. See Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 335–44; Gates, "'What's Love Got to Do with It?': Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 345–62; Baker, "In Dubious Battle," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 363–69; and Joyce, "'Who the Cap Fit': Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 371–84. In a recent interview with Charles H. Rowell ("An Interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *Callaloo* 14 [1991]: 444–63), Gates qualifies and clarifies the basis for his response to Joyce (pp. 451–52). For a different configuration of race, gender, and reading in the *NLH* (and other) critical debates, see Awkward, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of Reading," *Black American Literature Forum* 22 (Spring 1988): 5–27. Rather than gendering the dispute between Joyce and Baker and Gates, Awkward allies Joyce's position on race with Elaine Showalter's position on feminism as reductively sociopolitical modes of criticism and contrasts both with the more fluid post-structuralist approaches represented by Baker and Gates, on the one hand, and by Mary Jacobus on the other. One uncomfortable consequence of Awkward's construction is that, by using white feminism as his frame of reference, he erases Joyce's participation in the discourse of black feminism. For yet another account of the *NLH* debate, see Diana Fuss's chapter, "'Race' under Erasure? Post-Structuralist Afro-American Literary Theory," *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, 1989), pp. 73–96; Fuss sides primarily with Gates and Baker and mentions the gender implications of the debate only in passing.

22. Homans focusses appropriately on Gates rather than Baker, since the label *post-structuralist* applies far more accurately to Gates. In "Caliban's Triple Play," Baker's response to Gates's special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, for example, Baker sounds at times uncannily like Joyce in criticizing Anthony Appiah, and implicitly Gates as well, for belittling the visible, biological signs of race that function so perniciously in the "real" political world; see Baker, "Caliban's Triple Play," in "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, pp. 381–95. For a critique of Baker's "essentialism," see Elliott Butler-Evans, "Beyond Essentialism: Rethinking Afro-American Cultural Theory," *Inscriptions* 5 (1989): 121–34. For a defense of Baker's "materialism," see Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, pp. 86–93. Baker is definitely an "essentialist" when it comes to gender, as is clear in his recent book, *Workings of the Spirit*:

representation of race as a metaphor, severs its connections with the black reading community, with literary traditions rooted in the lived experience of black people, and with the concrete, sensuous features of black literary language, Homans sees a defense of the “body that is troped as female in post-structuralist theory and whose absence that theory requires” (“RC,” p. 7). In the high-handed and patronizing responses by Gates and Baker, she uncovers these critics’ sexualized self-representations as the saviors of a feminized black literary body in danger of a retrograde sensualization at the hands of black feminists. Homans then proceeds, via an analysis of the more egalitarian tone and terms of the debate on essentialism within black feminism, to a powerful analysis of the rhetoric of critical scenes in narratives by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, where the tension between (relatively) literal and figurative language constitutes the “rhetorical form in which the debate over racial and gendered ‘essence’ is worked out. The use or representation of a relatively literal language corresponds to and puts into practice a belief in the embodiedness of race and of gender . . . while the view that race is figurative coincides with and is performed as a celebration of language as figuration and a tendency to use conspicuous metaphors” (“RC,” p. 5). While insisting on the necessity of maintaining, at different times, both positions, Homans calls attention to black women writers’ continuing and complex commitment “to the body and to the literal,” a commitment that contrasts in both its substance and its ambivalence with Gates’s and Baker’s unequivocal endorsement of the figurative, and that reiterates, within a different context, Homans’s own perspective in *Bearing the Word* (“RC,” p. 19).<sup>23</sup> As Johnson extends and reauthorizes deconstruction through Hurston, Homans extends and reauthorizes, primarily through Walker, a reevaluation of the literal.

Like Johnson, Homans frames her argument by positioning herself in relation to black women’s texts. Both frames incorporate acknowledgements of racial difference; but whereas Johnson becomes, in the course of her argument, figuratively black, Homans becomes more emphatically white: “Neither literally nor figuratively a black feminist, then (nor even figuratively literally), I would prefer, following bell hooks’ recommendation, to identify my perspective clearly as that of a white feminist” (“RC,” p. 38). Homans’s feminist critique of the overvaluation of the figurative

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*The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing* (Chicago, 1991), and from Henderson’s response to Baker’s essay, “There Is No More Beautiful Way: Theory and the Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing,” in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, pp. 135–63. In her response to the panel on “Black Feminism” at the Wisconsin Conference on Afro-American Studies in the Twenty-First Century (Apr. 1991), Carby singled out for criticism Baker’s idealization of black women writers and erasure of black feminist critics.

23. See Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (Chicago, 1986), especially chapter one, which juxtaposes Lacan and Chodorow to explore the association of the literal with the feminine.

demands that, in direct opposition to Johnson, she affirm the literalness of (at least her own) race.

This is a necessary conclusion, in the context of Homans's argument, and also a brave and a problematic one. By embodying her own whiteness, Homans contests the racialization that coexists with the more overt gendering of the symbolic register. In a white feminist counterpart to Gates's strategy of making blackness figurative and figuration black ("figuration is the nigger's occupation"), Homans insistently pinions (female) whiteness to literality, resisting through a different route the dominant culture's splitting of a white symbolic realm from a black materiality.<sup>24</sup> Homans affirms solidarity with black women by asserting a literal difference that is ultimately overridden by the sameness of literality: by the shared association with embodiment.

In resisting white patriarchal culture's dissociation from the body, however, Homans also implicitly resists a recurrent construction of whiteness by black women writers such as Walker who, in one of the scenes from *The Temple of My Familiar* that Homans analyzes from a different perspective, represents whiteness as the "hideous personal deficiency" of having no skin, of being "a ghost," the quintessence of lack, not only of color, but also of body itself.<sup>25</sup> The occasional and moving alliances between black and white women that Homans analyzes in texts by Walker and Morrison do not necessarily produce or reflect a shared experience of embodiment. Six months pregnant, beaten, "sweating" milk for the eighteen-month-old baby from whom she has been separated, torn between "the fire in her feet and the fire on her back," Sethe hears Amy Denver's "young white voice . . . like a sixteen-year-old boy's" before she sees the scrawny body with its "arms like cane stalks" (*B*, pp. 79, 31, 34, 32). Although she has been "'bleeding for four years,'" Amy "'ain't having nobody's baby'": the carmine velvet that constitutes the goal of *her* escape sublimates the repro-

24. For Gates's revision of the traditional saying "signification is the nigger's occupation" to "figuration is the nigger's occupation," see "Criticism in the Jungle" and "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, pp. 1–24, 285–321. For the cultural splitting of a disembodied white femininity from a black female materiality, see Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York, 1985), chap. 1, and Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, chap. 2.

25. Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (San Diego, 1989), p. 360. This passage actually describes a white man, but the ghostliness and disembodiedness attributed to whiteness are typically applied to white women as well, not only throughout Walker's fiction, but also in the distinction she draws between (black) "womanist" and (white) "feminist": "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* [New York, 1983], p. xii). Note the similarity between Walker's account of white people's skinlessness and Morrison's description of "the men without skin" who operate the slave ship in *Beloved* ([New York, 1987], p. 210; hereafter abbreviated *B*); or between Walker's account and, from a different ethnic perspective, the white "ghosts" of Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York, 1976).

ductive female body into cloth (*B*, p. 83). As the midwife whose *last* name is conferred on Sethe's baby, Amy is affiliated as closely with the absent (and literate) father (with whom the baby will strongly identify) as with the birthing mother. By "reading" the scar inscribed on Sethe's back, Amy is positioned on the side of figuration vis-à-vis the massively embodied Sethe. By implying that the embodiment black and white women share is weightier than differences of color, Homans proposes a commonality often called into question by black women's texts.

More problematically, however, literalizing whiteness logically entails reliteralizing blackness as well, and an argument for the literalness of race (or sex) can be safely made only from the position of the subordinated race (or sex), which can define and revalue its own distinctiveness. Speaking for the literal from a position of dominance risks reinscribing the position of the dominated. Homans's position on figuration leads her to an impasse: as a woman she can't ally herself with a (masculine) position on the figurativeness of race; as a *white* woman she can't ally herself with black women writers' (ambivalent) adherence to the embodiedness of race without potentially reproducing the structure of dominance she wants to subvert. There are as serious, although very different, problems with revaluing the literalness of race as with asserting its figurativeness.

## 3

I began to wonder whether there was any position from which a white middle-class feminist could say anything on the subject [of race] without sounding exactly like [a white middle-class feminist]. . . . The rhetorical predictability of it all. The political correctness. . . . In which case it might be better not to say anything.

—NANCY K. MILLER, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism"

Different as are their consequences for the reading of race, deconstruction and psychoanalysis are both subjectivist critical ideologies that mandate a high degree of self-reflexiveness. Materialist feminisms, by contrast, which have always had priority within black feminist discourse, emphasize the political objectives (and objectivity) of the reading over the question of positionality.<sup>26</sup> Designed to disclose systematically (and ulti-

26. For an especially powerful and influential account of black materialist feminism, see The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1982), pp. 13–22; see also Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Spring 1983): 131–50. For a warning against eclipsing the formal and imaginative qualities of literature by privileging sociopolitical analysis, see Christian, "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway."

mately to change) the intersecting axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality through which women are multiply and differentially oppressed, materialist feminisms, both black and white, have de-emphasized the reader's racial location. White readers within this discourse have paid only perfunctory (if any) attention to the problem of their own positionality, and black materialists have generally been hospitable to white women's readings of black texts.<sup>27</sup> It is not coincidental that Valerie Smith, who insists on the materialist orientation of black feminist theory, also redefines this theory to "refer not only to theory written (or practiced) by black feminists, but also to a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class in modes of cultural expression"; or that Hazel Carby, writing within the discourse of cultural studies, has become one of the most resolutely antiessentialist and politically exacting black feminist voices, calling into question simultaneously the presumption of interracial sisterhood and the presumption of seamless continuity between racial experience, discourse, and interpretation.<sup>28</sup> The de-essentialization of race among black feminists (in contrast to both white feminists and male Afro-Americanists) has occurred primarily through the intervention of material rather than textual differences, and under the aegis of Marxism and cultural studies rather than deconstruction.

Materialist feminism would appear to be the approach through which white critics could write about black women's texts with the least self-consciousness about racial difference and perhaps with the least difference. Yet white investments in some form of black cultural or social specificity, investments exempted from analysis under the banner of an interracial socialist feminist sisterhood, tend to intervene in white readings of black texts, substituting racial for class specificity rather than disrupting each with the other. Racial differences are visibly played out in the critical response to *The Color Purple*. Both black and white feminists from diverse critical schools have celebrated the text's subversive stance toward the narrative and rhetorical conventions of epistolary, sentimental, and

27. Two examples of white materialist feminist criticism that either do not consider the critic's racial position an obstacle, or consider it a readily surmountable obstacle, are Lauren Berlant, "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Summer 1988): 831–59, and Anne E. Goldman, "I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in *Dessa Rose and Beloved*," *Feminist Studies* 16 (Summer 1990): 313–30. For some examples of black materialist feminist willingness to entertain readings by white feminists, see Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, chap. 1; Carby's argument that there are no "pure, autonomous cultures that belong to particular groups or classes of people" implicitly opens the analysis of cultural struggles and articulations to a diverse materialist readership (Carby, "The Canon: Civil War and Reconstruction," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 [Winter 1989]: 42). See also hooks, *Talking Back*, chap. 7, and Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other.'"

28. Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other,'" p. 39. See Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, chap. 1.

realist fiction, and toward the sexual, domestic, and spiritual institutions of patriarchy.<sup>29</sup> But among materialist feminists race has made a difference in the assessment of the novel's politics. For example, bell hooks criticizes the novel for isolating individual quests and transformative private relationships from collective political effort, for celebrating the "ethics of a narcissistic new-age spirituality wherein economic prosperity indicates that one is chosen," and for breaking with the revolutionary impulse of the African-American literary tradition epitomized by the slave narrative; Cora Kaplan, in an essay entitled "Keeping the Color in *The Color Purple*," defends the novel from accusations of bourgeois liberalism by British socialists who, she feels, have "bleached" the text into "an uncontentious, sentimental, harmless piece of international libertarianism" by failing to understand its relation to "a specifically racial set of discourses about the family and femininity." Kaplan revalues the novel through a black cultural context that hooks claims the novel has repudiated.<sup>30</sup> And whereas Hazel Carby criticizes the critics who, through their celebration of *The Color Purple* (and its line of descent from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), indulge in a romantic vision of rural black culture that enables them to avoid

29. See, for example, Deborah E. McDowell, "'The Changing Same': Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists," *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 281–302; Henderson, "The Color Purple: Revisions and Redefinitions," *Sage* 2 (Spring 1985): 14–18, repr. in *Alice Walker*, pp. 67–80; Thadious M. Davis, "Alice Walker's Celebration of Self in Southern Generations," *Southern Quarterly* 21 (Summer 1983): 39–53, repr. in *Alice Walker*, pp. 25–37; Christian, "Alice Walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward" and "No More Buried Lives: The Theme of Lesbianism in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, ed. Christian (New York, 1985), pp. 81–102 and 187–204; Katz, "'Show Me How to Do Like You'," pp. 185–94; Jean Wyatt, "Eros as Creativity: The Extended Family in *The Color Purple*," *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990), pp. 164–85; Molly Hite, "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: *The Color Purple*," *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), pp. 103–26. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, a difference in emphasis: some black feminists (preeminently McDowell) have emphasized the novel's subversion of the conventions of characterization and diction governing black literature, whereas most white feminists have located the novel in relation to the dominant traditions of white literature.

30. hooks, "Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*," in *Alice Walker*, p. 223; Cora Kaplan, "Keeping the Color in *The Color Purple*," *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London, 1986), pp. 182, 187. Focussing on twentieth-century black male discourses on gender and the family, Kaplan is foregrounding a different black literary tradition from hooks, yet, as the title of her essay indicates, she insists that the novel's value resides in its relation to specifically black cultural traditions. In Alison Light, "Fear of the Happy Ending: *The Color Purple*, Reading and Racism," in *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*, ed. Linda Anderson (London, 1990), pp. 85–96, the novel's "imaginary resolution of political and personal conflicts" (p. 87), which hooks protests in relation to a black audience, is endorsed in terms of the political importance of utopianism for a (white) feminist audience. Black discursive specificity enables Kaplan's rehabilitation of the text; white reading specificity implicitly enables Light's.

confronting the complex social crises in the urban black community, Susan Willis praises the novel for contesting industrial capitalism by resurrecting the homestead and cottage industry.<sup>31</sup> The representation of black social relations as utopian alternatives to industrial capitalism or to patriarchal nationalism has appealed more to white than to black materialist feminists.<sup>32</sup>

This appeal, and its problems, surface clearly in the work of Willis, who deserves special attention as the only white feminist author of a book on black women novelists and of an essay in Cheryl A. Wall's recent anthology of black feminist criticism, *Changing Our Own Words* (1989).<sup>33</sup> In *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987), Willis maps the ways that twentieth-century black women novelists record through their narrative strategies and subjects the shift from a southern agrarian to a northern industrial economy. Suffused with nostalgia for an agrarian culture that in Willis's opinion supported a "noncommodified relationship" between an author, her language, and her audience, the book insists that "one of the major problems facing black writers today is how to preserve the black cultural heritage in the face of the homogenizing function of bourgeois society."<sup>34</sup> This romanticization of "the" black cultural heritage, whose truth resides in an uncontaminated past to which these novels' protagonists repeatedly return, becomes apparent through the contrast between Willis's study and Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, published the same year, which situates nineteenth-century black women's cultural discourses in relation to hegemonic ideologies.<sup>35</sup> In her essay "I Shop There-

31. See Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 11, and Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison, Wis., 1987), chaps. 5 and 7.

32. The tendency toward idealization troubles even the most brilliant materialist reading of the text, Berlant's, "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*." For although Berlant ultimately repudiates the novel's (in her view inadequate) "womanist" alternative to patriarchal nationalism, her struggle to endorse this alternative contrasts with her less ambivalently negative representation of white women's privatized cultural bonds and identifications in her essay "The Female Complaint," *Social Text*, no. 19-20 (Fall 1988): 237-59. Despite her political critique of Walker's text, Berlant is more sympathetic to it than either hooks or Carby.

33. See Willis, "I Shop Therefore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" in *Changing Our Own Words*, pp. 173-95; hereafter abbreviated "I."

34. Willis, *Specifying*, pp. 16, 72.

35. See Carby, "Reinventing History / Imagining the Future," review of *Specifying*, by Willis, *Black American Literature Forum* 23 (Summer 1989): 381-87. In this detailed and largely favorable review, Carby criticizes only the romanticization of rural black folk culture, which for Carby typifies a misleading trend in contemporary Afro-American cultural history. Willis's book has received extensive and largely favorable reviews from black feminists. Although several have decried its arbitrary historical boundaries and selection of texts, they have mostly found her historically grounded readings provocative and illuminat-

fore I Am: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" however, Willis begins to engage this relation by shifting from a strict economic reading of a discrete literary tradition to a more variegated account of African-American participation in the cultural arena produced by commodity capitalism. The essay, more than the book, positions Willis in a relation to Fredric Jameson analogous to that between Johnson and Derrida, and even more to that between Homans and Lacan, since Willis, like Homans, prioritizes what is unincorporated by a master system. "I Shop Therefore I Am" opens up the third term that Jameson brackets in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," the term representing the possibility of "authentic cultural production" by marginal social groups that inhabit a position outside the dialectic of high culture and mass culture. More committed than Jameson to criticizing mass culture from a position of estrangement that tends in her work to devolve into a place of authenticity, Willis both racializes and genders a cultural exterior, relinquishing black men to an ambiguous dance of subversion and assimilation with mass culture while retaining black women as unambivalent voices of resistance.<sup>36</sup>

Willis answers her central question—whether it is possible for African Americans to participate in commodity culture without being assimilated to it—in gendered terms. The essay plays Toni Morrison, whose

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ing. See, for example, Christian, "Connections and Distinctions," review of *Specifying*, by Willis, *The Women's Review of Books* 4 (July-Aug. 1987): 25–26; Wall, "Black Women Writers: Journeying along Motherlines," review of *Specifying*, by Willis, *Callaloo* 12 (1989): 419–22; and McDowell, review of *Specifying*, by Willis, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*, by Hull, and *The Character of the Word*, by Karla Holloway, *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 948–52. One critic with nothing good to say about this "odd Marxist colonization (domestication? deflowering?) of black women writers" is Wallace, "Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston?" p. 184.

36. Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 140; Jameson devotes only a paragraph to this possibility. In his later essay, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-Aug. 1984): 53–92, he greatly complicates the position from which might emanate a political art no longer tied to cultural enclaves whose marginality is representable in two-dimensional space; there is no longer any position unincorporated within "the truth of postmodernism, that is, . . . the world space of multinational capital" (p. 92); Willis, however, is responding primarily to "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." For Willis, the utopian possibilities of marginal space are available to diverse groups. In her "Gender as Commodity," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (Fall 1987): 403–21, for example, children play the role that black women writers play in "I Shop Therefore I Am"; in Willis, "Fantasia: Walt Disney's Los Angeles Suite," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 83–96, the nature represented in the "Nutcracker" sequence images the utopian social relations of a space outside of capitalist production. In "Fantasia," Willis begins with the perspective of historical estrangement that the film offers for critiques of contemporary mass culture but slides into the utopian position offered by the "Nutcracker" sequence. In her discourse on black women's writing, estrangement is consistently utopian.

Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* represents for Willis “the radical potential inherent in the position of being ‘other’ to dominant society” by repudiating the white-dominated culture industry epitomized by a Shirley Temple doll, against Michael Jackson, who “states himself as a commodity” through the vertiginous display of self-transformations and imitations that undo the possibility of authenticity (“I,” pp. 174, 187). “*Moonwalker* suggests a split between contemporary black women’s fiction, which strives to create images of social wholeness based on the rejection of commodity capitalism, and what seems to be a black male position which sees the commodity as something that can be played with and enjoyed or subverted” (“I,” p. 195). Although Willis reluctantly admits the subversive possibilities of parody, represented in her essay by Jackson and by the black film and art critic Kobena Mercer, who argues that commodity culture heightens the radical potential of artifice, she clearly prefers the authenticity represented for her by Morrison and Walker, with whom the essay begins and ends. This preference incurs two penalties. First, Willis’s analytical inventiveness and subtlety are most impressively released by untangling the contradictions of mass cultural figures: Michael Jackson and his conservative antitype Mickey Mouse, on whose genealogical descent from the tradition of black minstrelsy she brilliantly speculates in an epilogue to a slightly different version of this essay that was published in *New Formations*. The utopian pressures Willis levies on black women writers, by contrast, simplifies her interpretation. Moreover, by pitting black women novelists against black male cultural critics and performers, Willis sidesteps an encounter with the black feminist critics who have endorsed the position she characterizes as “black male.” Although there is more of an encounter with black feminist criticism in the essay, where Willis acknowledges her differences from Carby, for example, but doesn’t theorize them, than in the book, where she lists black feminists in a general bibliography rather than engaging with them individually, Willis still doesn’t interrogate what fuels her own investment in black women writers’ representation of “social wholeness,” “the autonomous subject,” and “fullness of . . . humanity” (“I,” pp. 195, 174).<sup>37</sup>

The essay, however, does offer clues. In contrast to Homans, who invokes black women’s representations of alliances with white women to underscore the prospects of reciprocity and commonality, Willis enlists

37. Willis’s footnote to Carby painfully reveals her struggle to agree and disagree simultaneously rather than to analyze the sources of their differences. Carby’s position in general is closer to Kobena Mercer’s than to Willis’s, calling Willis’s gender analysis into question. Similarly, although Willis cites Sylvia Wynter’s essay on minstrelsy as parody (see Sylvia Wynter, “Sambos and Minstrels,” *Social Text* 1 [Winter 1979]: 149–56), she doesn’t speculate about why Wynter is so much less ambivalent about the subversive power of parody than Willis is. Wallace’s essay on Michael Jackson, “Michael Jackson, Black Modernisms and ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’” (1989) (*Invisibility Blues*, pp. 77–90), which appeared about the same time as Willis’s, is closer to Wynter’s analysis than to Willis’s, further

black women's representations of white women to suggest women's socially constructed differences. In *The Bluest Eye's* characterization of "frozen faced white baby dolls" and in *Meridian's* account of the mummified white female body exhibited for profit by her husband, Willis finds images of the reification white women suffer through immersion (both longer and deeper than black women's) in the culture of commodities. Haunting the white female consumer's version of the cogito, "I shop therefore I am" (parody is apparently a strategy available to white feminists if not to black), the spectre of the self's mortification as commodity drives the commitment to the difference of black women's texts, as the title of the other version of this essay indicates: "I Want the Black One: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" Overtly, this title replaces the voice of the white female consumer whose identity is shopping with the voice of the black female consumer manipulated into buying black replicants of white commodities, Christie dolls instead of Barbies. Yet the overdetermined referent of the first-person pronoun betrays as well (and this is presumably why this title was not used for the version of this essay in Wall's anthology) the desire of the white feminist critic who also wants "the black one"—the text that promises resistance and integrity, the utopian supplement to her own "deconstruction of commodities."<sup>38</sup> White feminists, like the frozen or mummified white women represented in some black women's texts, seem in Willis's discourse to be corpses finding political energy through the corpus of black women.

Willis's essay brings us back, through a different route, to my reading of Roberta as a site of authority and plenitude figured as a vital, integrated body. In contrast to Johnson and Homans, who locate black and white women on the same (although opposite) sides of the symbolic register's divide, Willis and I operate from a model of difference rather than similarity. The claim for sameness is enabled by, and in turn reauthorizes, belief in a subversive feminine position in language (whether the subversion operates through figuration or literality); the argument for an idealized (biological, social, or literary) difference is fueled by the perception of an increasingly compromised white feminist social position drained by

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problematizing the gender alliance across racial lines. About her resistance to grappling with individual black feminist critics in her book, Willis explains: "Taken as a whole, these [black feminist] books define the critical context for my thinking about the literature. None of these texts is directly cited in my interpretations because I chose not to speak to the criticism. Such a method would have produced a very different book" (p. 183). This "very different book" might have beneficially entailed some dialogue about differences rather than a construction of difference based on the desire for a vision of "transformed human social relationships and the alternative futures these might shape" (p. 159).

38. Willis, "I Want the Black One: Is There a Place for Afro-American Culture in Commodity Culture?" *New Formations*, no. 10 (Spring 1990): 96.

success of oppositionality. But whether argued in terms of sameness or of difference, or in terms of the symbolic or the social domains, these theorizations of reading across race are marked by white desires.

5

The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black. Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.

—Pat Parker, "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend"

How, then, should we evaluate this critical undertaking? The question incorporates two complexly interwoven ones, a hermeneutic question about difference and a political question about legitimacy, that I wish to (re)open briefly in my conclusion by returning to my starting point: reading "Recitatif."

To produce an allegory about reading and race, I omitted aspects of the story—most importantly, its own conclusion—that complicate the division between the characters and, consequently, between their readers. "Recitatif" ends with parallel recognitions by Twyla and Roberta that each perceived the mute Maggie as her own unresponsive, rejecting mother, and therefore hated and wanted to harm her. After dramatizing the differences produced by race and class, the story concludes with the shared experience of abandoned little girls who, in some strange twist of the oedipal story, discover that they killed (wanted to kill), as well as loved (wanted to love), their mothers (see "R," p. 261).<sup>39</sup> Sameness coexists with difference, psychology with politics. Race enforces no absolute distinctions between either characters or readers, all of whom occupy diverse subject positions, some shared, some antithetical.<sup>40</sup> By concluding with a psychological narrative that crosses differences (indeed, with a variant of *the* universalizing psychological narrative), "Recitatif" complicates, without cancelling, both its narrative of difference and the differences in reading that this narrative provokes.

Race enters complexly into feminist reading. The three case studies

39. I am borrowing, with thanks, Sue Schweik's insights and formulation.

40. For an powerful statement of a similar conclusion about race and reading, see Mary Helen Washington, "How Racial Differences Helped Us Discover Our Common Ground," in *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, ed. Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges (Boston, 1985), pp. 221–29. Washington decides: "I will never again divide a course outline and curriculum along racial lines (as I did in 'Images of Women') so that the controlling purpose is to compare the responses of white women and black women, because I see how much the class imitates the syllabus. I do not want to see black women in opposition to white women as though that division is primary, universal, absolute, immutable, or even relevant" (pp. 227–28).

examined in this essay do indicate certain pervasive tendencies among white feminists, who have tended to read black women's texts through critical lenses that filter out the texts' embeddedness in black political and cultural traditions and that foreground instead their relation to the agendas of white feminism, which the texts alter, or prefigure, but ultimately reconfirm. For despite Jane Gallop's account of the displacement of French men by African-American women as figures of authority for white feminists, the discourses produced by French (and German and American) men continue to shape the reading habits of white feminists, who are usually better trained in literary theory than in African-American cultural studies. There has been little in white feminism comparable to the detailed reconstructions of black women's literary traditions produced by Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington, Deborah E. McDowell, Gloria T. Hull, Nellie Y. McKay, or Margaret B. Wilkerson; or to the mapping of this literature's social and discursive contexts produced by Hazel Carby, Barbara Smith, Valerie Smith, bell hooks, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, or June Jordan.<sup>41</sup> Instead, we have tended to focus our readings on the "celebrity" texts—preeminently those by Hurston, Walker, and Morrison—rather than on "thick" descriptions of discursive contexts, and have typically written articles or chapters (rather than books) representing black women's texts as literary and social paradigms for white readers and writers. In these texts we have found alternative family structures, narrative strategies, and constructions of subjectivity: alternative, that is, to the cultural practices of white patriarchy, with which literature by white women

41. This is not an inclusive list of black feminist critical projects, practitioners, or texts; it merely calls attention to some influential examples of black feminist writing on, or collections of, black women writers, such as *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976*, ed. Christian (Westport, Conn., 1980) and Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*; Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), *Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers* (Garden City, N.Y., 1980), and *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960* (Garden City, N.Y., 1987); McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York, 1985), pp. 186–99, and *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore, 1989); the series, *Black Women Writers* (Boston, 1987– ); Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987) and *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (New York, 1984); *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston, 1988); *Nine Plays by Black Women*, ed. Margaret B. Wilkerson (New York, 1986); Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*; Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, pp. 157–75; Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'" and *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981), *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, 1984), *Talking Back*, and *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, 1990); Wallace, *Invisibility Blues*; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1984); and June Jordan, *Civil Wars* (Boston, 1981).

has come to seem uncomfortably complicit.<sup>42</sup> The implied audience for this critical venture has been white.

The critical picture is not, however, entirely black and white. As the work of Hortense J. Spillers demonstrates especially well, black feminists draw from, as well as criticize, a range of "high" theoretical discourses, including the psychoanalytic discourses that have functioned more prominently within white feminism.<sup>43</sup> As Deborah E. McDowell has powerfully argued, moreover, white feminist tendencies to construct black feminism as "high" theory's political "other" reinscribe, rather than rework, the theory/politics opposition.<sup>44</sup> White feminist criticism is itself fractured by class and generational differences that partially undo the racial divide. Some still-unpublished essays, particularly those by a new and differently educated generation of graduate students, and some essays that are published less visibly than those analyzed in this paper, more closely approximate the historical and political concerns of black feminist criticism. Yet however interwoven with and ruptured by other differences, race remains a salient source of the fantasies and allegiances that shape our ways of reading.

Difference, however, paradoxically increases the value of crossing racial boundaries in reading. Our inability to avoid inscribing racially inflected investments and agendas limits white feminism's capacity either to impersonate black feminism, and potentially to render it expendable, or to counter its specific credibility. More important, white feminist readings contribute, however inadvertently, to a project many black feminists endorse: the racialization of whiteness.<sup>45</sup> As masculinity takes shape in

42. For some recent white feminist accounts of the alternatives offered by black women's texts, see Elizabeth Abel, "Race, Class, and Psychoanalysis? Opening Questions," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York, 1990), pp. 184–204; Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), esp. pp. 176–99; Hite, *The Other Side of the Story*, pp. 103–26; Elizabeth Meese, *(Ex)Tensions: Re-Figuring Feminist Criticism* (Urbana, Ill., 1990), pp. 129–54 (and, for other women of color, chaps. 2 and 5); Roberta Rubenstein, *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction* (Urbana, Ill., 1987), pp. 125–63 (and all of part 2 for other women of color); and Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire*, pp. 164–209.

43. For some examples of Spillers's revisionist use of psychoanalytic theory, see her "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carol Vance (Boston, 1984), pp. 73–100, and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65–81. Spillers's work productively complicates the distinction Susan Thistlethwaite draws in her *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York, 1989) between the psychological focus of white feminism and the sociopolitical focus of black feminism.

44. McDowell made this argument in a paper entitled "Residues," delivered at the Wisconsin Conference on Afro-American Studies in the Twenty-First Century.

45. Carby and hooks have both written pervasively and eloquently about this need; for some recent examples, see Carby, "The Politics of Difference," *Ms.* (Sept.-Oct. 1990): 84–85, and hooks, "Critical Interrogation." On whiteness as "the metaphor for the metaphorical production of the Subject as one devoid of properties," see David Lloyd, "Race

part through its constructions of femininity, whiteness—that elusive color that seems not to be one—gains materiality through the desires and fantasies played out in its interpretations of blackness, interpretations that, by making the unconscious conscious, supplement articulated ideologies of whiteness with less accessible assumptions. Reading black women’s texts, and reading our readings of them, is one (although certainly not the only) strategy for changing our habitual perception that “race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white: it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even.”<sup>46</sup>

Articulating the whiteness implied through the construction of blackness approaches, through a different route, the goal of Toni Morrison’s recent critical project: “to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served.”<sup>47</sup> There is a significant political difference, of course, between Morrison analyzing European-American texts and white feminist theorists staking critical claims to the African-American texts that constitute a privileged and endangered terrain of black feminist inquiry.<sup>48</sup> The risks of this intervention have been circumscribed, however, by the effectiveness of black feminists in establishing the authority of their own positions and by the failure of “high” theory to secure some unproblematic grounding for white feminists by either resolving or displacing the politics of reading and race. If we produce our readings cautiously and locate them in a self-conscious and self-critical relation to black feminist criticism, these risks, I hope, would be counterbalanced by the benefits of broadening the spectrum of interpretation, illuminating the social determinants of reading, and deepening our recognition of our racial selves and the “others” we fantasmatically construct—and thereby expanding the possibilities of dialogue across as well as about racial boundaries.

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under Representation,” *Oxford Literary Review*, no. 1–2 (1991): 13. On the asymmetry of the system of racial marking, which “inscribes the system of domination on the body of the individual, assigning to the individual his/her place as a dominated person” while not assigning “any place to the dominator,” who remains unmarked, see Colette Guillaumin, “Race and Nature: The System of Marks,” *Feminist Issues* 8 (Fall 1988): 41.

46. hooks, “Critical Interrogation,” p. 162.

47. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 90.

48. In “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 51–63, Christian powerfully demonstrates the distorting effects of literary theory’s intervention in the reading of black women’s texts. Although she does not hold white *feminists* responsible for this intervention, her argument clearly applies to white feminist (as well as masculinist) theoretical discourses.