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Double-Consciousness Squared during Black Pride Movement: Self-Determination and Maternal Activism in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Although the Black pride movement encouraged a singular identity, Alice Walker's novel Meridian, *recognizes the faultiness presented in singular identities. Black women were not able to identify fully with Black movements because these movements were male centric. Similarly, the feminist movements of the era were concerned primarily with issues of white women and did not address the issues of women of colour. Because of this lack of complete belonging to either movement, women of colour understood that their doubly marginalized identities depended on the success of both movements while not being able to expect personal progress from either. Walker explores how the movements of the 1960s and 1970s sought to differentiate themselves from the civil rights movement of the 1950s. The expressed questions "What does a movement require?" and "What should a movement do?" encourage Walker's protagonist, Meridian, to explore her own understanding of activism. Because there are no clear answers to these questions regarding the movement, Walker, by way of Meridian, is free to create a new understanding of activism, which becomes Meridian's sacrificial performance of maternal activism. And very similar to how she seeks to redefine activism, Meridian pursues a new concept of the maternal that pushes beyond the requirement and/or expectation of physical motherhood.*

> "Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness."
>
> —W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

"Double-consciousness"—a term introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1897 essay, "The Strivings of the Negro People," and later, more famously, in *The Souls of Black Folk*—is a complicated identity doubleness that Du Bois defined exclusively as an African American complex. Du Bois presents three parts of double-consciousness: (1) problems of self-definition beyond white American perspective; (2) the exclusion of African Americans from the mainstream United States (US); and (3) the warring identities of race and nationality. Du Bois is progressive in naming the phenomenon of double-consciousness, yet he never moves to the place that eliminates dependency on white perspective to determine identity. In fact, double-consciousness propels Black people into a type of consciousness slavery: White perspective becomes the master while Black perspective is slave to the white master perspective. Therefore, although Du Bois identifies the effects of the institution of American slavery on Black people's consciousness, he is clearly noting a continued slavery of consciousness.

According to Du Bois's narrative in *Souls*, we can identify the process of racial identity formations during the beginning of the twentieth century as follows: (1) One is made aware of one's race and/or made aware of racism; (2) one sees oneself from the perspective of white Americans and suffers from double-consciousness; and (3) one undoubtedly responds with self-hatred that manifests either as anger towards one's race, hatred of all things white, or sycophancy. Here is where Du Bois's process ends—stuck in the damning result of double-consciousness that leaves persons of colour essentially hopeless and dependent on the white majority to determine their identity. The race pride movements of the 1960s and 1970s radically changed the process of racial identity formations to include self-determination: (1) One is made aware of one's race and/or made aware of racism; (2) one sees oneself from the perspective of white Americans and suffers from double-consciousness; (3) one recognizes the control white Americans hold through double-consciousness; (4) one unites with members of their own race (and possibly other racialized and marginalized people, regardless of race); and (5) the group collectively self-determines their own racial identity. Therefore, I read the Black pride movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a focused attempt to undo double-consciousness and to self-determine a singular identity for the Black race.

However, as double minorities in the Black pride movement, African American women experienced moments of exclusion and abjection from both the mainstream US and their own group and movement. This fact highlights the second precept of double-consciousness: the exclusion of African Americans from the mainstream US. This article explores how this exclusion is comparable to the experience of women in the Black pride communities. Although the movement attempts to create a singular identity in response to double-consciousness, misogynous aspects of the movement then trap Black

women into a new type of double-consciousness. Similar to how Black communities feel ostracized by the US, the women in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s were excluded. Black women share the same concerns of racial progress with Black men, yet their concerns that are unique to their gendered experiences (such as sexual assault, birth control and abortion, motherhood, and physical abuse) are often issues created and reinforced by their male counterparts specifically and heteropatriarchal society in general. Moreover, the reassessment of double-consciousness I present in this article considers Du Bois's focus on manhood in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and argues that the idea of double-consciousness is a male-centric complex. Furthermore, I consider how if we read double-consciousness as a gendered term, one might define a double-consciousness specific to Black women. As people excluded from society for being both of colour and female, it seems that Black women take on the weight of being liminal participants of both racial movement and feminist movements. Because of this double exclusion, or double-consciousness squared, the women are forced to self-determine their own identities separate from Black men and exclusive to female activists of colour.

Gendered Double-Consciousness

This article's epigraph presents one of the many moments in *The Souls of Black Folk* in which Du Bois speaks specifically to the distressed construction of Black "self-conscious manhood" in connection to double-consciousness (17). In fact, Du Bois generally writes without concern of lumping all Black people—men, women, and nonbinary folk—into Black mankind. Instead of talking about Black people, Du Bois speaks specifically about Black men. This, along with his concern with strength, weakness, and power—words that might define or undo a man's masculinity—suggests that Du Bois is in fact only speaking to Black men. Similar to what is demonstrated in this epigraph, there are several moments in *Souls* when Du Bois distinguishes between the Black man and a weaker, emasculated version of the Black man. In essence, Du Bois defines double-consciousness not only as a complication to Black identity formations but also as the US's refusal of Black masculinity.

Du Bois presents evidence of the US's repudiation of Black masculinity: "What need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the Nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men?" (21). Here there is a very clear connection between domestic work, "half-men," and emasculation. The quotation creates a conversation between Black men and the United States. While Black men long for educational and employment opportunity, they are rejected. In fact, Du Bois suggests that the power to

choose and move beyond the designated station of domestic work is a man's right, yet when Black men are refused this right, it is a clear disallowance of their masculinity. In extension, Du Bois seems to suggest that the domestic space, if not a space for men, is a space exclusively for women, a thought in keeping with the time of *Souls*' publication.

More alarming and shocking is Du Bois's reaction to the sexual violence enacted upon Black women as merely a threat to Black male paternity: "The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home" (20). This quotation takes the argument of double-consciousness into extreme androcentrism. When discussing the sexual violation of Black women, instead of acknowledging the very real and lasting trauma of rape, Du Bois only considers the effect miscegenation will have on Black men and, consequently, the entire race. Note the red stain he speaks of is not blood from the raped and abused women but rather the children without Black fathers. His perception highlights how Black men are publicly cuckold by the rape of Black women; their defilement and the children produced by such acts are further emasculations of Black men. Furthermore, Du Bois equates the plight of the Black man to the plight of the race, and this direct nexus between men and the race ignores the experiences of women.

So, what about the women? Generally, we see that there is no concern for women when considering the construction of a Black consciousness in *Souls*. Yet during the period I consider in this article, women are definitely present—combating racial oppression while combating gender oppression within their own movement. Although Alice Walker is only a single representation of women writing during these movements, she presents a unique protagonist, Meridian, who makes attempts at self-determination while transforming previous concepts of activism to better fit her perspective.

While the Black pride movement encouraged a singular identity, Meridian, while claiming the term identified in the movements (especially Black instead of "Negro" or "Coloured"), understands the faultiness presented in singular identities. Black women were not able to identify fully with Black movements because these movements were male centric. Similarly, the feminist movements of the era were concerned primarily with issues of white women and did not address the issues of women of colour. Because of this lack of complete belonging to either movement, women of colour especially understood that their doubly marginalized identities depended on the success of both movements, even though they could not expect personal progress from either. Meridian places emphasis on the success and wellbeing of her immediate community and interprets this racial identity movement, instead, as a personal quest for

selfhood. In other words, Meridian's individual identity requires the success of the civil rights movement as well as Black people's ability to thrive. Walker explores how the movements of the 1960s and 1970s sought to differentiate from the civil rights movement of the 1950s. The questions "What does a movement require?" and "What should a movement do?" encourage Meridian to explore her own understanding of activism. Because there are no clear answers to these questions regarding the movement, this article argues that Walker, by way of Meridian, is free to create a new understanding of activism that becomes Meridian's sacrificial performance of maternal activism. This article also argues that, very similarly to how she comes to maternal activism, Meridian pursues a new concept of the maternal that pushes beyond the requirements and/or expectations of physical motherhood. I interpret how literature represents sociological happenings of communities during the periods in which they are written. With this in mind, Walker's protagonist, while fictional, is a literary manifestation of the period, the women of the period, and their Black community.

Alice Walker's Conceptualization of the Maternal

The traditional understanding of maternal upholds gender expectations created by patriarchy. The term suggests nurture, a sense of belonging to child and family, and, in many instances, sacrificing the self for the sake of others. Scholarly contributors to maternal studies often challenge, critique, and redefine this notion of the maternal. Sara Ruddick, for example, coined the term "maternal thinking" and noted its "unity of reflection, judgement, and emotion" (348). Adrienne Rich argues in *Of Woman Born* that "the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" and critiques the notion that motherhood is a woman's "sacred calling." Through her body of work, Walker undoes the patriarchal definition of maternal by moving away from the biological understanding that requires parentage to a more conceptual notion. For Walker, the concept of maternal emphasizes creation and celebrates things traditionally assigned female by patriarchy because of female ingenuity and self-preservation.

In her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Walker presents the first clear definition of her notion of womanism, which emphasizes a recreation of the notions of "female" and "woman":

> A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength…. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist…. Traditionally capable. Loves

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

With this definition of womanism, Walker encourages a paradigm shift of what patriarchy has previously defined as female. Whereas patriarchy identifies female emotion as irrational and erratic, Walker praises it as "flexible" and whereas patriarchy connects female emotional erraticism to menstruation, Walker demands the love of all things cyclical just as a womanist "loves the moon," and whereas patriarchy privileges things manufactured by men in factories, Walker prefers more folksy creations, which she identifies as "women's culture," including music, dancing, and food. So although most maternal scholars might cringe at the essentialism that reduces women's culture to things created by women in domestic spaces, Walker sees this as a point of female celebration, especially since for most of modern history, this was the space for Black female artists to thrive before the opportunity to create what many might call traditional art arose. The celebration of women's culture also places value on creations that patriarchy often chooses to devalue.

Walker carries this notion of women's culture and womanism over to her display of maternal activism in her 1976 novel *Meridian*. Although *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* was published after *Meridian*, it is important to note that the essays and other writings included in the collection go as far back as 1966, proving that Walker was formulating this womanist perspective prior to the publication of both *Meridian* and *In Search*. If part of Walker's ideology on repurposing the notion of women's culture relies on traditional gender roles dictated by patriarchy, then her concept of maternal activism conceptualized and demonstrated in *Meridian* continues this essentialized perspective of the maternal. If the traditional definition of maternal expects or requires the self-sacrifice of a mother for the salvation of her children, then the novel's protagonist, Meridian, exemplifies this maternal stereotype. The novel, for example, begins with Meridian staring down a tank in defense of a group of Black children's civil rights. However, Walker undoes the requirement of motherhood that mandates a child be born of one's body and, instead, generalizes that maternal instincts can come from sacrificial love beyond the traditional understanding of motherhood. For Meridian, her maternal obligation is to equality, and her bodily sacrifice will be for the progress of civil rights. With this in mind, for the purpose of this article, when I use language that genders actions, instincts, or behaviour, it is my attempt to honour Walker's lead of reclaiming female and maternal things from patriarchy as not only positive but also powerful. It also seems as if Walker, in her presentation of maternal activism, hopes to defend it against traditional, patriarchal, and mainstreamed understandings by presenting examples of maternal existence contrary to the typical narrative.

Alice Walker's *Meridian*

In her 1986 article "*Meridian*: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution," Karen F. Stein argues that *Meridian* is a revision of her previous belief that the civil rights movement was valuable. Regarding Walker's first published essay titled "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" Stein states: "While [Walker] wrote of the Civil Rights Movement with unreserved approval in 1967, she would later contend that it continued to oppress women and so failed in its mission of human liberation. In *Meridian,* she rewrites her attitude toward '60s activism, and substitutes for the concept of revolution the more powerful ideal of transformation" (122). Although I agree with Stein that Walker "reaches for a new definition of revolution" in *Meridian*, I do not agree that she is redefining the civil rights movement (130). *Meridian* was published after the heights of both the civil rights and Black pride movements and considers the in-between periods of the two.

Meridian Hill begins her activism during the civil rights movement. However, as Stein points out, "Walker suggests that a primary reason for the Movement's failure was its lack of a sustained sociopolitical critique" (131). Moreover, Stein fails to more than mention a defining moment of the book, when Meridian comes face to face with a revolutionary group that employs violent tactics: "To join this group she must make a declaration of her willingness to die for the Revolution, which she had done. She must also answer the question 'Will you kill for the Revolution?' with a positive Yes. This, however, her tongue could not manage" (Walker 14). Meridian's inability to say "yes" haunts her throughout the book. Specifically, the fact that Meridian cannot completely commit to a part of the activism signals that this particular activism is not for her. In fact, this might be the reason for her unwavering commitment to nonviolence and, perhaps even more relevant, her frustration with a "society that kills the feeling of self, and most especially women's selfhood" (Stein 130). Additionally, her commitment to nonviolence demonstrates a need to belong to any activism before she fashions maternal activism.

Stein's point that the novel indicts "activists [who] merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality" references the Black pride movement's dependency on a united self for the sake of a self-determined identity. By not dealing with this place of in-betweenness, Stein, much like other scholars, only acknowledges *Meridian* as a book critical of the civil rights movement and not critical of both the civil rights and Black pride movements. Yes, Meridian Hill seeks to create a new type of revolution, but this creation is based on the in-between space in which she lives.

In her essay "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the

Civil Rights Movement," Roberta M. Hendrickson considers this space briefly, although her article's focus is on the civil rights movement:

> With Meridian, Walker raises a difficult question, both political and philosophical, the question of how to create a just and peaceful or nonviolent society from one that is both unjust and violent. This question was raised but left unanswered by the Civil Rights Movement. By creating Meridian divided against herself on the question of nonviolence, Walker challenges the abandonment of nonviolence that followed the Civil Rights Movement. Though Meridian agrees with her friends that "nonviolence has failed" to free black people, she cannot, like them, proclaim herself ready to "kill for the Revolution."

Hendrickson notes that she is a divided self, stuck in between movements. Meridian is then forced to create an activist's perspective all her own—a perspective mostly created through her experiences as a woman in the movements and her commitment "to survival and wholeness of entire people" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*).

Meridian is an especially interesting and progressive character. She becomes a pregnant teenager, bride, and then mother all while remaining quite uninterested in the roles she quickly takes up. She neglects these identifiers and ultimately gives up her child to become active in the civil rights movement and to attend a fictional university, Saxon College. In both situations, she is urged to simply become a part of a whole. The university hopes to shape her into a Saxon woman—"chaste and pure as the driven snow" (92)—a feat that is impossible considering her past marriage and motherhood. So although Meridian enjoyed being at Saxon her first year, she knew that she would never be a woman the school expected her to be—a woman accepted "as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social rules." Meridian knew that society refused her equality because of her Blackness and femaleness (94). Similarly, although she was fully committed to the work of the Civil Rights Movement, she began to explore a version of revolution all her own, maternal activism.

In order to better understand this concept of maternal activism, I would like to turn to Alan Nadel's essay, "Reading the Body: *Meridian* and the Archeology of Self." In it, Nadel first identifies the double-consciousness of the time: "It is not surprising … that in the fictional world Walker presents, Blacks as a result of this oppression often repress their desires and sublimate their frustrations in ways that enable them to accept the status quo and/or even adopt their oppressors' values" (55). We see this adoption of white perspective, for example, with Truman, a former lover of Meridian, and his marriage and sexual desire for white women as well as his exoticism of Black women through his art. Of course, Truman's rejection of Black women for his overwhelming

preference of white female ideals affects Meridian, but what affects her the most is how a white American perspective requires women to be wife and mother first and foremost. This frustration leads her to search for a new understanding of the maternal altogether.

The novel reaches all the way back to Meridian's great-grandmother, a maternal figure with whom Meridian especially connects. Her great-grandmother creates an identity outside of a white American perspective, appropriating American Indian spirituality and walking Native burial grounds nude in worship of the sun. Nadel comments on Meridian's great-grandmother's level of independence, which "was rarely found by black women because of their enslavement to men and to maternity" (58).

In acknowledging the freedom of her great-grandmother, Meridian begins to feel guilty for trapping her mother in maternal responsibility. For Nadel, maternal enslavement also includes Meridian's struggles as a mother and how motherhood does not give her the "capacity to be active in the emotional, intellectual, or physical world" (58). It becomes apparent that Meridian cannot be both mother and activist. Nadel argues that Meridian's decision to "relinquish her role as mother" allows her to recognize a difference between her and other women enlisted in this maternal history: "[Meridian] thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and she herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member" (58). So Meridian leaves her family in order to "[reconstitute] the existing fragments in a new context" (58). It is this gathering of the broken pieces of motherhood that allows Meridian to repurpose the drive to nurture a child to survive (the patriarchy's perspective of mothering) into a desire to nurture an entire people to survival. By choosing to mother members of her race instead of her own child, Meridian rejects the values of a white American perspective as her great-grandmother did years before. Moreover, this reconstruction of the notion of maternal guides her to maternal activism.

While Patricia Hill Collins notes the difference between "biological mothers, or bloodmothers, [who] are expected to care for their children" and "othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities," Meridian models a different type of mothering that does not require the biological and the traditional notion of mothering responsibilities in the traditional sense, for example feeding, bathing, and clothing. If, according to Barbara Christian, "the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm" (234), then Meridian's proclivity to sacrifice, and consequently to conceptually mother, is only for the Black and/or poor community.

Yet the guilt that Meridian carries for "stealing her mother's serenity, for shattering her mother's emerging self" (43) combines with the guilt she feels

for abandoning her child and squandering her obligation to mother, which makes Meridian feel unworthy to live. Hendrickson argues that "[Meridian's] readiness to die is an expression of her suicidal impulses" (115). The abuse her body undergoes as an activist operates as penance for her rejecting motherhood and betraying her mother by choosing a college education and a life as an activist. She became "capable of inner gaiety, a sense of freedom, as she saw the [police's] clubs slashing down on her from above" (Walker 97). After being beaten unconscious, she awakes with a "feeling of yearning, of heartsick longing for forgiveness" (97). Her hope and commitment to the cause bleed into her guilt and desire for forgiveness. It is as if because she did leave her family to join the movement, both the movement and her guilt are intertwined.

The last section of *Meridian*, titled "Ending," marks the conclusion of the flashbacks and forces a resolution of Meridian's self-determined style of activism. Specifically, the section begins with the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. The mood is originally somber, respectful of the "great dead man" both inside the church, where dignitaries, politicians, and celebrities mourn, and outside the church, where "the pitiable crowd of nobodies" gather and "[clear] their throats repeatedly against their tears" (202). Here, Walker visually signals how quickly movements might die with actual, physical death, a point with which she begins the book through the addition of a Black Elk epigraph:

> I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now… I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream … the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

The funeral does not simply document the death of a movement; it also shows how quickly the mourners resume life upon the passing of both King and the movement. In many ways, King's death also signifies the death of a struggling movement and method. The death brings freedom not only to King but also to Meridian. She is now able to move past the shadow of the movement that grouped all members into one and is left to deal with remaining questions that emerge from the more revolutionary movement later in the book.

Meridian's refusal to kill for the revolution earlier in the book haunts her throughout the ten-year span from then until the end of the novel. Specifically, Meridian feels the heaviness of her position between the space and ideologies of both movements and confusion regarding her purpose as a woman in either movement. Meridian highlights not only the mistreatment of women activists

but also the overt disregard by the revolutionary movement for the maternal activism she has created—a female perspective that, as a carrier of life, refuses to take the life of anyone. Moreover, as a reflection of Walker's celebration of womanism and the notion that female identity is directly connected to creation, Meridian cannot resign herself to creation's opposite, destruction, until later in the novel.

Meridian's commitment to peace, life, and maternal activism is quite contrary to her lack of commitment to actual motherhood. Not only does she leave her child to be raised by his paternal grandmother, but she also aborts Truman's baby when she becomes pregnant and gets her tubes tied to assure that she will never birth any more children. She does all of this, arguably, because she will not allow motherhood to disrupt her maternal obligation to the race and movement. Because there is a connection between Meridian's inability to kill and her maternal activism, her question to Truman—"Is there no place in a revolution for a person who *cannot* kill?" (206)—might be interpreted as another question: Is there no place in a revolution for a mother?

Meridian's activism requires her to act alone throughout most of the novel. In contrast, revolutionary activism requires oneness with the fellow participants of the revolution. Perhaps Meridian was unable to commit murder for the revolution because she had yet to determine her own personhood and recognize the need for solidarity with other revolutionaries. Many scholars write about *Meridian*'s focus on individualization and how it is missing in the movements. This might explain why after struggling throughout the book, Meridian concludes that she could in fact kill. After watching a father suffer through the anniversary of his revolutionary son's death, Meridian recognizes a "communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence" (219) take place among the viewing church congregation. A genuine transformation happens to Meridian:

> She understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life … she made a promise to the [father] herself: that yes, indeed she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder his son again. (220)

In this moment, Meridian concludes two things—that she is worthy of life and that she will kill for others who are worthy. Moreover, Meridian's resignation to kill is in keeping with the expectation of motherhood: to sacrifice so that a child can thrive. Here, Meridian realizes that to murder is to sacrifice her moral commitment to honour life and creation; however, in the novel's end, she recognizes that this sacrifice for the life of a young person is in keeping with her maternal activism because of her assurance of preservation.

Meridian moves forwards aware of her personal transformation and renewed sense of maternal activism. Although Meridian is still registering voters at the novel's end, Walker focuses on Meridian's individualized attention to members of the community instead of generalizing her activism. Meridian touches one person at a time. And to emphasize Meridian's maternal activism, the final three stories all centre on women and their maternal identities. First, Truman and Meridian visit Agnes, a dying woman who prays to be buried on Mother's Day. Her husband, Johnny, registers the Monday after Mother's Day, presumably after she passes. Then they meet Miss Margaret Treasure, a woman of sixty-nine who believed, after a love affair with a younger man, she was pregnant. Finally, they visit a thirteen-year-old mother who is in prison for killing her daughter. Meeting this venomous child brings Meridian to tears, hoping to feel tenderness for her own son. However, "her heart refuses to beat faster, to warm, except for the girl, the child who killed her child" (235), demonstrating to whom she feels most motherly.

These final missions serve many purposes. First, we are given varied perspectives of motherhood that broaden the limiting biological notion of motherhood. Although we begin with the story of Agnes—a biological mother who, on her deathbed, chooses Mother's Day as her day of burial—the story demonstrates that her maternal identity is only a tiny piece of who she is. In fact, so much of Agnes's joy comes from gazing upon her husband instead of from any interaction with her son. Through the story of Miss Margaret Treasure, Walker introduces the caging narrative that equates sexual intercourse exclusively with procreation. The elderly Miss Treasure is so overwhelmed by the "hurting brightness" she experiences in her love affair that she is certain the pleasure is a "sin for which she would be punished," a punishment that initially seems will be pregnancy (232). Second, we see Meridian's performance of maternal activism. Although her and Truman's purpose is to register voters, their visits include moving furniture, rolling newspaper logs, bringing sacks of groceries, and orchestrating a visit to the doctor. These services are extended without the assurance of people registering to vote; they are immediately performed without second thought. Again, the level of sacrifice here, while in a space of activism, is maternal through its service.

Finally, the story about the girl who killed her child depicts the extreme contradictions that exist in motherhood. On the one hand, the girl has killed her child, and on the other, she equates her child as her heart and wonders: "Why am I alive, without my heart?" (234). Moreover, the peculiar case of this young mother emboldens Meridian's conceptualization of maternal activism into a space of understanding, benevolence, and forgiveness. As if penning a manifesto, Meridian writes a poem upon leaving the prison:

i want to put an end to guilt
i want to put an end to shame
whatever you have done my sister
(my brother)
know I wish to forgive you
love you
it is not the crystal stone
of our innocence
that circles us
not the tooth of our purity
that bites bloody our hearts. (235)

Meridian recognizes the physical separation that comes from guilt and shame and hopes to return the community together through forgiveness and love. It is only after Meridian forgives herself for her failed attempt at biological motherhood that she is able to create and perform maternal activism. She then alludes to biblical verse John 8:7—"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"—by acknowledging that it is never the pure or innocent who chooses to condemn another person. Guilt and shame can destroy, whereas forgiveness and love can heal. Walker suggests by the juxtaposition that the method of destruction previously used by all by default (the prison system in the case with the child who kills her child and Mrs. Treasure's judgmental sister) contradicts the maternal's desire to heal and unite.

After Truman witnesses Meridian on her personal missions engaging mothers of varying kinds, he becomes like her—"intensely maternal"—and their realized method inspires a poem that praises individualization as a method "to heal and re-create" themselves (236). Truman's sudden urge to self-identify as maternal demonstrates the ways the concept is not attached to sex or gender, as Alice Walker intends though her conceptualization defined in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Instead, maternal honours the act of creation (beyond the notion of childbirth and rearing but rather innovation and folklore), preserves things created (folklore, including artifacts, stories, and Walker's notion of womanist existence), and heals one's people (as demonstrated through maternal activism). Of course, this thinking relates not only to Meridian and Truman but also to the revitalization and the freeing of Black and poor people alike.

Walker has written a female character who creates a personal identity in order to exist in her racial, androcentric world while trapped in a larger world controlled by a white American perspective. Meridian could easily subscribe to the requirements of her community to be a wife and mother, yet she isolates herself in order to create a more fitting identity that allows her to be a better

and more effective woman for her larger community. Ultimately, Walker wrote a perfect womanist text even before she published such an idea. Defined by Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as "a black feminist, or feminist of color," womanism celebrates women and, essentially, identifies the unique position of women activists of colour and their need to create spaces that allow for their activism. Walker creates a protagonist that surpasses the gendered expectations placed on women and upends the negative connotation associated with traditional gender roles (especially concerning women) by celebrating, embracing, and recreating the strength of women's culture through the application of maternal activism in *Meridian*. Interestingly, Walker removes Meridian from her personal domestic space to apply those traditional gender roles on her community, which, in turn, becomes the early stages of maternal activism.

Endnotes

1. I use the term "minority" based on one's access to civil rights and one's representation in power systems, such as the political stage. In this sense, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, women, though more than half of the US population, were indeed minority voices.
2. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* considers the journeys of specific women through these movements.
3. To find more perspectives dealing with *Meridian* as a Civil Rights Movement novel, please see Barbara Christian's book *Black Women Novelists: the Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976;* Melissa Walker's book *Down from the Mountaintop;* Susan Danielson's essay "Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Feminism, and the 'Movement'"; and Norman Harris's book *Connecting Times: The Sixties in Afro-American Fiction.* Madhu Dubey considers the self-determination of Black women in the more patriarchal Black nationalist revolution in her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic.*
4. Valeria Harvell argues that the humanist position of African American activism comes from was instated by female activists. See "Afrocentric Humanism and African American Women's Humanizing Activism."
5. There are also several articles regarding *Meridian* and motherhood. See Barbara Christian's "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*." Christian also discusses motherhood considerably in her essay "Novels for Everyday Use."
6. Anne Downey discusses the connection between this epigraph and *Meridian* in her essay "'A Broken and Bloody Hoop': The Intertextuality of *Black Elk Speaks* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*."

7. In his 1976 review of *Meridian*, published in *The New Yorker*, Greil Marcus connects the novel to *The Rebel* by Albert Camus. Marcus quotes at length from the final chapter of the book titled, "Thought at the Meridian," "For it is now a question of deciding if it is possible to kill someone, whose resemblance to ourselves we have at last recognized and whose identity we have just sanctified. When we have only just conquered solitude, must we then re-establish it definitively by legitimizing the act which isolates everything? To force solitude on a man who has just come to understand that he is not alone, is that not the definitive crime against man?" (qtd. in Marcus 11).

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