Coming to Voice in Alice Walker's Meridian: Speaking Out for the Revolution

Lynn Pifer


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_African American Review_ is currently published by St. Louis University.
In Alice Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, Meridian Hill has been conditioned by her community’s patriarchal institutions to repress her individuality and, above all, not to speak out appropriately. But when she finds that she cannot conform to authorized notions of appropriate speech (public repentance, patriotic school speeches, and the like), her only rebellious recourse is silence. Because of her refusal to participate in authorized discourse, Meridian fails to fit in with a succession of social groups—from her church congregation, to those at the elite college she attends, to a cadre of would-be violent revolutionaries. She begins a process of personal transformation when she sets out alone to fight her own battles, through personal struggle and Civil Rights work.

Walker posits Meridian’s struggle for personal transformation as an alternative to the political movements of the 1960s, particularly those that merely reproduced existing power structures. As Karen Stein writes,

... the novel points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution. Her hope for a just society inheres not merely in political change, but in personal transformation. (130)

Even the revolutionary cadre that Meridian tries to join insists that she perform an authorized speech, declaring that she would both die and kill for the revolution. When she silently considers whether she could kill another human being, the group becomes hostile towards her and finally excludes her. Walker realizes that would-be revolutionaries must avoid reproducing the power structures that they combat. Killing, for Meridian as well as for Walker, is an act of tyranny, even if one kills in the fight against tyranny.

Meridian’s life is shaped by those moments when she remains silent although those around her demand that she speak. She could not publicly repent, despite her mother’s urgings; she could not utter the patriotic speech she was assigned in high school; and she could not proclaim that she would kill for the revolution when her comrades expected her to. She is tormented by her peers’ hissing, “‘Why don’t you say something?’” (28), and by the memory of her mother pleading, “‘Say it now, Meridian . . .’” (29). Meridian’s silence short-circuits the response expected by patriarchal discourse. Her refusal to speak negates the existing order’s ability to use her as a ventriloquist’s doll, a mindless vehicle that would spout the ideological line. But Meridian’s strategy
does not prevent her from feeling guilt both for not conforming to the standards of her family and friends, and for not being able to speak out effectively against these standards.

Meridian lives on her own, separated from her family and the cadre that has rejected her. Alone, she performs spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion, such as carrying a drowned black child's corpse to the mayor's office to protest the town officials' neglect of drainage ditches in black neighborhoods. She accomplishes more than the would-be revolutionaries, who move on to live yuppie lifestyles. Stein writes, "Walker's novel affirms that it is not by taking life that true revolution will come about, but through respect for life and authentic living of life . . . gained only through each individual's slow, painful confrontation of self" (140). Only Meridian, who struggles with questions that other characters gloss over, completes this personal transformation. Her confrontations with her personal history, family history, and racial history shape the way she chooses to live.

Meridian's struggle for personal transformation echoes June Jordan's definition of her duties as a feminist:

I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect . . . and . . . I am entering my soul into a struggle that will most certainly transform the experience of all the peoples of the earth, as no other movement can. . . . because the movement into self-love, self-respect, and self-determination is. . . . now galvanizing. . . . the unarguable majority of human beings everywhere. (qtd. in Hernton 58)

One of Meridian's most difficult struggles is to forgive herself for her perceived failings. If she can learn to love and respect herself, she can see her moments of silence as legitimate acts of rebellion against a system that would deny her individuality. Otherwise, she can only view her silences as examples of the times she has failed her family and friends.

In the course of the novel, Meridian learns to turn to folk traditions (stories, songs, May dances around The Sojourner) for expression and inspiration. Reluctant to depend on her own words, Meridian relies on stories of defiant actions by women who went before her. The large magnolia tree known as The Sojourner, located in the center of Meridian's college campus, is also central to many subversive tales. With The Sojourner's story, we receive a more thorough description of Saxon College and its goal of conferring "ladyhood" upon its students. On the property that had been a slave plantation, young black women learn "to make French food, English tea and German music" (39), and "are blessed to perpetuate / the Saxon name!" (93). These new Saxon women will spread the name, just as surely as the Saxon slave women were forced to increase Master Saxon's stock of slaves. But, irony of ironies, the new women are endowed with the elements of traditional white ladyhood, including its first requirement, virginity: "It was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins. They were treated always as if they were thirteen years old" (94). And just as Saxon slaves were kept on the plantation, Saxon students are trapped within the campus's ornate fence.

The Sojourner is the only complex and meaningful centering point on this otherwise artificial campus. Generations of students have handed down stories and folk practices concerning The Sojourner. The first is the story of Louvinie, the slave woman who planted Sojourner. A skilled storyteller, she unintentionally frightened her master's young son to death with a tale he and his sisters had requested. As punishment, Master Sax cut off her tongue at the root. Louvinie buried her tongue under So-
journer, and, as the story goes, the tree grew miraculously. "Other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed it could talk, make music . . . . Once in its branches, a hiding slave could not be seen" (44). According to the slaves' folk beliefs, Louvinie transferred her capacity for powerful speech onto The Sojourner. Susan Willis writes:

Named The Sojourner, the magnolia conjures up the presence of another leader of black women, who, like Louvinie, used language in the struggle for liberation. In this way, Walker builds a network of women, some mythic like Louvinie, some real like Sojourner Truth, as the context for Meridian's affirmation and radicalization. (114)

Louvinie and the conjured image of Sojourner Truth serve as positive examples of women who use their tongues as weapons in the struggle for liberation. Master Saxon's punishment, however, is an equally instructive example for Meridian. While it is possible to use your tongue to combat a racist patriarchy, that system will endeavor to silence such a tongue, even if it must cut it off at the root. At those moments when Meridian is expected to reproduce patriarchal discourse—in the form of public repentance during a church service, for instance, or a patriotic speech at her high school—, Meridian chooses to withhold her tongue as both a symbolic rupture of patriarchal ideology and as a means of preserving her tongue, preventing it from being cut out. Louvinie's burial of her severed tongue, and the subsequent creative transferral of her power, proves to be a more practical alternative for Meridian to follow than images of black women speaking out.

Early in Meridian, Walker links the contrasting strategies of silence (withholding one's tongue as opposed to having it forcibly removed) to the politics of racism and patriarchy. In the opening chapter, Walker crystal-
Many of the children became emotionally upset when they had to identify with the doll they had rejected. These children saw themselves as inferior, and they accepted the inferiority as part of reality. (Williams 20)

The children of Chicokema have been negatively socialized to believe that they are inferior to other children. And since the “smell of guano,” or the color of their skin, does not “wash off,” they cannot better their situation.

Meridian comes to Chicokema to help these children, not by making speeches or typing up flyers, but by silently lining them up to see the Marilene O’Shay exhibit on a “whites only” day. She places herself at the front of the line and marches across the square. With a style similar to Flannery O’Connor’s, Walker demonstrates the ridiculousness of the white town’s reaction to Meridian: “‘This town’s got a big old army tank,’” a young boy tells a Northern visitor, “‘and now they going to have to aim it on the woman in the cap, ‘cause she act like she don’t even know they got it’” (18). Walker presents the entire situation in the absurd. The small town bought the tank to fight outside agitators, painted and decorated it, then smashed the leg of their Confederate Soldier Statue (an obligatory symbol of the Old South) in an attempt to park their latest weapon in the town square. Now they find themselves faced off against a hundred-pound woman leading an army of school children.

Meridian waits for the police to arrange themselves—“. . . two men were crawling into [the tank], and a phalanx of police, their rifles pointing upward, rushed to defend the circus wagon,” (21)—before she steps in front of the tank and leads the children to see Marilene O’Shay. Not prepared to open fire on this woman and her band of children, the defenders of the Old South simply stare at Meridian in disbelief. Without speaking a word, Meridian succeeds in desegregating the O’Shay exhibit.

The act of facing up to the town’s white segregationalist army and entering the forbidden circus wagon will become a more important memory for the children than the exhibit itself—or its patriarchal message.

Three of the titles painted on the Marilene O’Shay trailer sum up the narrow possibilities for women in a patriarchal society: “Obedient Daughter,” “Devoted Wife,” and “Adoring Mother” (19). The fourth, “Gone Wrong,” indicates the perceived tragedy involved when a woman rejects these roles: “Over the fourth a vertical line of progressively flickering light bulbs moved continually downward like a perpetually cascading tear” (19). Walker portrays, with maudlin kitsch, patriarchy’s imperative that a woman accept her “place” (see Stein).

“The True Story of Marilene O’Shay” has been preserved for future generations on cheap mimeographed fliers which tell us how Henry O’Shay had lavishly provided for his lovely wife, Marilene, and how she had rebuked the role of Perfect Wife by having an affair with another man. An old black townsman’s interpretation of Marilene O’Shay’s story provides us with patriarchal society’s view of the situation:

Just because he caught her giving some away, he shot the man, strangled the wife. Threw ‘em both into Salt Lake. . . everybody forgive him. Even her ma. ‘Cause the bitch was doing him wrong, and that ain’t right! . . . years later she
washed up on shore, and he claimed he recognized her by her long red hair. Though since she was so generous herself she wouldn’t mind the notion of him sharing her with the Amurican public. (22)

As Stein writes, “A living woman may resist her husband’s domination, but the mummy, static and reified, may be completely possessed. O’Shay, like the sinister Duke of Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess,’ has reduced his wife to permanent, if frigid, fidelity” (132). But Stein here reads only half the story: Not only has Henry O’Shay “mummified” his wife into a “frigid fidelity,” he has also turned her body into a profitable specular commodity. According to this community’s standards, her transgression was not simply adultery, but thievery: She was caught “giving some[one else’s property] away.” If Marilene B’Shay was objectified and privatized while alive, she is commodified and marketable once dead. A better analogy would be to the corpse of the Grimms Brothers’ Snow White, displayed in her shining glass casket, with Prince Charming telling the dwarves he must have “it,” no matter what the cost.1

Although Henry O’Shay shoots the man who cuckolds him, he does not turn the gun on his wife, choosing instead to strangle her with his own hands. In so doing, he dislodges her tongue and prevents her from speaking out while she dies. O’Shay’s method avenges his pride and punishes his wife, literally choking off her voice. Conveniently for Mr. O’Shay, choking leaves Marilene’s body intact and, therefore, more easily preserved for later viewing.

If Marilene O’Shay is patriarchy’s perfect, petrified, and commodified woman, The Wild Child is nature’s uncivilized answer. Barbara Christian writes that the main struggle in Meridian is the fight between a natural, life-driven spirit and society’s deadly strictures:

... though the concept of One Life motivates Meridian in her quest toward physical and spiritual health, the societal evils that subordinate one class to another, one race to another, one sex to another, fragment and ultimately threaten life. The novel Meridian ... is built on the tension between the African concept of animism, “that spirit that inhabits all life,” and the societal forces that inhibit the growth of the living toward their natural state of freedom. (91)

The Wild Child, so removed from civilization that her language consists of swear words she picked up in the alleys, fits most closely the natural state of freedom Christian describes. Her pregnancy, however, arouses the neighborhood’s concern, and demonstrates that she has been excluded from not only the negative restrictions of society, but the help and love of a community as well.

The first sight of this pregnant thirteen-year-old induces one of Meridian’s corpse-like trances. Meridian feels compelled to try to help the wild girl, and sets out to trap her and take her back to her room at Saxon College. Unkempt, unpredictable, loud, and independent, The Wild Child embodies the opposite of every Saxon ideal and demonstrates the falseness of Saxon’s social codes to Meridian: “Wile Chile shouted words that were never uttered in the honors house. Meridian, splattered with soap and mud, broke down and laughed” (36). In the midst of Saxon’s tradition of proper attire and social etiquette, this wild pregnant girl protests in the only language she knows. And Meridian is delighted by the girl’s free use of inappropriate language.

Unfortunately, no one else appreciates The Wild Child’s natural state of freedom. A showdown between The Wild Child and the house mother becomes a life-and-death confrontation that death wins. The house mother, whose “marcel waves shone like real sea waves, and ... light brown skin was pearly under a mask

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of powder” (37), is the only person in
the honors house that Wile Chile trem-
bles and cowers at. Like the Dean of
Women (aptly nicknamed “The Dead
of Women”), the house mother exem-
plifies proper behavior for a perfect
lady: “‘She must not stay here,’ ” the
house mother tells Meridian. “‘This is
a school for young ladies’” (37). The
Wild Child’s display of natural man-
ners cannot be tolerated at the honors
house, no matter what moral responsi-
bility Meridian may feel towards the
girl. Frightened by the house mother,
Wile Chile bolts from the unapprov-
ing house, only to be struck and killed
by a speeding car.

There is no survival for the unre-
strained independent female. It
should come as no surprise, then, that
the authorities of Saxon College will
not allow its students to have a fu-
neral service for The Wild Child.
Saxon may treat its girls like thirteen-
year-olds, but it has no use for real
ones, especially if they are homeless
and pregnant. The Wild Child is so
dangerous to Saxon’s reputation that
she cannot be allowed on campus, even
as a corpse. Saxon College’s official reac-
tion to the students’ attempted funeral
for The Wild Child confirms to Merid-
ian and to the other students that the
goal of this institution is the proper
socialization of its young ladies, not the
education of their minds. Although her
fellow students are overwhelmed with
the urge to rebel, they are already so far
along the road to ladyhood that they do
not know how to do it.

The fate of The Sojourner exempli-
ifies the kind of destruction that can
take place when this revolutionary
anger has no effective outlet. The
most beautiful and potentially subver-
sive object on campus is destroyed by
frustrated student rioters who would
avenge The Wild Child. Their initial
acts of rebellion seem childish and in-
effectual: They throw their jewelry
(symbols of ladyhood) on the ground
and stick out their tongues (proof that
they still have them). Their ultimate
act of revolutionary violence, how-
ever, is directed towards their most
beloved part of the campus: Despite
Meridian’s protests, they chop down
The Sojourner.

Another piece of Sojourner folk-
lore concerns the horrible effects of
Saxon’s demands on the outward ap-
pearance of its “girls.” This gory tale
tells of a Saxon student so ashamed
by her unwanted pregnancy that she
tries to hide it, and who later resorts
to chopping her newborn to bits,
which she flushes down the toilet.
After being caught and severely pun-
ished—locked in a room with no win-
dows—, Fast Mary hangs herself. She
remains not just a grotesque warning
to future Saxon students, but also a
symbol that brings them together:

There was only one Sojourner cere-
mony . . . that united all the stu-
dents at Saxon—the rich and the
poor, the very black skinned (few
though they were) with the very
fair, the stupid and the bright—and
that was the Commemoration of
Fast Mary of the Tower . . . .

Any girl who had ever prayed for
her period to come was welcome to
the commemoration, which was
held in the guise of a slow May Day
dance around the foot of The So-
journer . . . . It was the only time in
all the many social activities at
Saxon that every girl was consid-
ered equal. On that day, they held
each other’s hands tightly. (45)

The students’ folklore allows them to
form a community as they band to-
gether in a practice that subverts the
conventional behavior at Saxon Col-
lege. They relish the story of a girl
forced to go to terrible lengths to
maintain the college’s demands re-
garding outward appearance, and it is
clear that the unsympathetic authori-
ties, not Fast Mary, are the villains of
the story. Susan Willis writes: “Fast
Mary’s inability to call on her sister
students and her final definitive isola-
tion at the hands of her parents raise
questions Meridian will also confront:
Is there a community of support?”
(113). Mary’s story reveals the injus-
practices of this “civilized” college, which seeks to separate its students from their folk community by forcing them to follow a notion of proper behavior that is merely a careful imitation of the white middle class.

Despite Saxon’s training, favorite stories among its students feature heroines who dare to step out of line. Louvinie and Fast Mary received horrendously painful punishments for their deeds, but such penalties only reflect how intrepid they were; the more those in power tried to suppress them, the more popular they became with their peers. The folk tales and practices that surround The Sojourner work to subvert the strictures of the social systems that surround it. According to Willis, “As a natural metaphor, the tree is in opposition to the two social institutions—the plantation and the university” (114). The folk practices surrounding the tree allow the slaves, and later students, to oppose these institutions as well.

While images of women like Louvinie and Sojourner Truth provide Meridian with significant strategies for creative living, her own mother does not. Instead, Mrs. Hill carefully exhibits the attributes of the proper wife and mother in the eyes of her community. She has a clean house and attends church, but we learn that she is actually incapable of loving her children and will not forgive them for being born:

It was for stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self, that Meridian felt guilty from the very first, though she was unable to understand how this could possibly be her fault.

When her mother asked, without glancing at her, “Have you stolen anything?” a stillness fell over Meridian and for seconds she could not move. The question literally stopped her in her tracks. (51)

As far as we know, Meridian is the only child in the family who feels this guilt. Later she will resent her own pregnancies, and like her mother, she will also resent the fact that no one allows her to acknowledge her negative feelings. In this patriarchal community, the woman who would reject a pregnancy clearly does not know her place.

Although Mrs. Hill fulfills her duty as a religious woman and prays for her children’s souls, she seems to have no understanding of her children or their struggles. Like Saxon College, Mrs. Hill only considers appearances. She devotes herself not just to the care of her children’s bodies, but also to something even more superficial—the washing and ironing of their clothes: “Her children were spotless wherever they went. In their stiff, almost inflexible garments, they were enclosed in the starch of her anger, and had to keep their distance to avoid providing the soggy wrinkles of contact that would cause her distress” (79). Mrs. Hill’s children grow up feeling “stiff, almost inflexible,” and they learn not only to keep their distance from their distraught mother, but from other human contact as well.

Meridian, in fact, has been emotionally starched shut. Her mother has refused to tell her anything about sex, and Meridian only learns about it when she gets molested in a local funeral home. Meridian begins her relationship with Eddie mainly because she wants a boyfriend to protect her from all the other men around. And the demise of their relationship comes about when Eddie finally notices that Meridian does not enjoy having sex with him.

The chapter entitled “The Happy Mother” examines maternity’s effects on Meridian. Now that she is a young wife and mother, everyone thinks of her as a “perfect woman.” She is, in fact, nearly dead. Whereas they assume she is concentrating on her child, she is actually considering different ways to commit suicide. She spends her time at home, reading women’s magazines: “According to these magazines, Woman was a mind-
less body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on" (71). Here Meridian’s awareness of patriarchy’s desire to “encase” her, to “process” her according to the specular code of the media, becomes most acute.

Walker’s poem “On Stripping Bark from Myself” sums up Meridian’s situation at this point in the novel: “I could not live / silent in my own lies / hearing their ‘how nice she is!’ / whose adoration of the retouched image / I so despise” (Good Night 23). Meridian rejects the “nice” role of the “happy” mother, recognizing that “happiness” is merely an empty sign that accompanies the equally empty role of young, pregnant wife. Happiness does not apply in any way to Meridian’s emotional state, but the conventional (and therefore seemingly logical) association of “happiness” with “motherhood” precludes her ability to state otherwise.

In her essay “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?,” Walker writes, “If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I get from a ‘freedom movement,’ it is better than unawareness, forgottenness, and hopelessness, the existence that is like the existence of a beast” (Gardens 121). This, too, is the bottom line for Meridian. The knowledge of her condition, and of the condition of women in general, gives her hope. Perfect women in this community, as Meridian well knows, are perfectly mindless, nicely dressed, walking corpses.

At age seventeen, Meridian is left on her own to consider what to do with her life and her child’s. When Meridian says no to motherhood, she offends and loses her own mother, her family, and her community. She feels guilty for leaving her baby, and cannot adequately explain why she must. But by shedding her prescribed “happy mother” role and standing up for her own needs, Meridian takes the first steps toward becoming a “revolutionary petunia.”2 She stops living by others’ standards, learns to bloom for herself, as she must in order to survive, since her rebellious acts will alienate her from the rest of society.3

The battle fatigue Meridian encounters as a result of working in the Civil Rights Movement turns into emotional fatigue brought on by the endless guilt she feels for putting her child up for adoption. Even though she knows her child is better off without his seventeen-year-old mother, Meridian cannot forgive herself for giving him away. She feels that she has abandoned both her son and her own heritage:

Meridian knew that enslaved women . . . had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from “Freedom” was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with her precious child? She had given him away. She thought . . . of 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. (91)

Barbara Christian writes of the danger of the myth of Black Motherhood, noting that, according to this tradition, only stories of strong, successful mothers are passed on:

. . . that tradition that is based on the monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children . . . is . . . restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of Black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed. (89)

Meridian is full of victims of this tradition of Black Motherhood. Meridian’s own mother, for instance, is an unhappy mother who manages to conform to the tradition only by suppressing her own emotions. She feels that she has been betrayed by other mothers because they never “warn[ed] her against children” (50); i.e., that there is no secret inner life or euphoria in motherhood, but a loss of
one's independence. Meridian's girl-
hood friend Nelda is another victim: Nelda wanted to go to college, but since she became a mother at age fourteen, she never finished high school. Fast Mary's pregnancy leads to her suicide, and the heavy belly of the pregnant Wild Child limits her ability to move out of the path of the car that kills her. Meridian herself belongs to the "worthless minority" of mothers excluded by the tradition. Her own sacrifice—of giving up her child—is as painful and trying as any of the legendary sacrifices, but according to the code of the tradition, Meridian's is not a sacrifice but a case of willful neglect.

Meridian's attempts at personal growth through a love relationship also fail. Truman Held appears as Meridian's lover in a chapter that Walker aptly titles "The Conquering Prince." This clichéd role would be more appropriate in a fairy tale, but it is the role Truman would most like to play. True/man, called "True" by Lynne, is in fact, quite false: a black would-be revolutionary who loves to dress well and speak French. He paints strong black women, earth mothers, yet he finds himself attracted to white virgins. Meridian notes that, despite his revolutionary slogans and liberal education, Truman really wants a quiet little helper that would look good while hanging on his arm. Truman "did not want a woman who tried . . . to claim her own life. She knew Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie's wife . . . an attractive woman, but asleep" (110). Meridian is too independent to be the clinging vine Truman desires.

With the failure of her romance, Meridian finds that she is haunted by a recurring dream: that " . . . she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death in the end" (117). Meridian's reflective moment creates, for the reader, a reflexive moment in the text. While Meridian's dream suggests a truth that she can never "know"—that she actually is a character in a novel—, the significance of the dream lies in another, fictional direction. For Meridian, the problem of being a character in a novel is a problem of limitation and constraint, of definition and expectation bound to a clichéd way of reading and writing, one that privileges the death of a character as the most climactic (and therefore desired and inevitable) moment in a narrative. Death, however, solves nothing but the problem of how to end a plotline. Meridian's dream also reminds us that this "insoluble problem" is one that Walker herself must face in the creation of her narrative; having offered us a "revolutionary" character whose struggles have transgressed the boundaries of racism and sexism, Walker must find a way to end Meridian successfully without the expected end of its protagonist. If, as Walker states in an interview with Claudia Tate, Meridian is a novel "about living" (185), the conventional melodramatic death scene is out of the question.4

To her credit, Meridian has managed to escape the symbolic death of being killed by patriarchy's standards and petrified into a perfect woman—she leaves behind "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," and "Adoring Mother." She even goes a step further and escapes becoming "Enchanted Lover" to Truman's "Conquering Prince." But Meridian cannot be sure that she is not destined to die at the end of a novel, as someone's "Tragic Heroine." In order to avoid this unwanted role, she must accept the sacredness of her own life. Barbara Christian writes that Walker works with traditional and feminist perspectives on motherhood, attempting a compromise that would allow her protagonist to live:

As many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women's lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman, Walker insisted
on a deeper analysis: She did not present motherhood itself as restrictive. It is so because of the little value society places on children, especially black children, on mothers, especially black mothers, on life itself. In the novel, Walker acknowledged that a mother in this society is often “buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick.” Yet the novel is based on Meridian’s insistence on the sacredness of life. (90)

Meridian does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but to the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother. According to this role, a mother, particularly The Mythical Black Mother, should sacrifice her individual personality and concerns in order to live for her children. Unfortunately, the only way Meridian can escape this unwanted role is to leave her child and family, accepting her own mother’s disapprobation. And to do so she must first learn to shed the guilt this action produces.

Meridian’s cumulative guilt becomes so great it prevents her from seeing or moving freely. She slips into a petrified trance, and it takes an act of sisterhood by Miss Winter to bring her out of it. Miss Winter had tried to help Meridian once before when Meridian found she could not utter the mindlessly patriotic speech at her high school graduation. (The capitalist/patriarchal hegemony perpetuates itself when each year a high school girl recites this speech, providing ritual evidence of woman’s position as subject to society’s ideology, and all the other women participate by listening attentively and applauding the performance.) Miss Winter is the only member of the audience who truly understands Meridian’s struggle against the hegemonic discourse of the speech:

She told her not to worry about the speech. “It’s the same one they made me learn when I was here,” she told her, “and it’s no more true now than it was then.” She had never said anything of the sort to anyone before and was surprised at how good it felt. A blade of green grass blew briefly across her vision and a fresh breeze followed it. She realized the weather was too warm for mink and took off her coat. (122)

Miss Winter breaks the custom of accepting this speech by admitting to Meridian that, although she had once recited the words, she had not believed they were true. This is the first time that an older woman has given an honest, useful piece of advice to Meridian, and Miss Winter is rewarded immediately for her good act with a pleasing feeling that allows her, for a time, to shed a layer of woman’s prescribed respectability, the heavy mink coat.

Miss Winter’s first words of kindness, however, go unnoticed by Meridian, who at the time is obsessed with her mother’s disappointment with her performance. Meridian feels completely weighed down by guilt for not living up to her mother’s standards: “It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother’s endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match” (124). Miss Winter’s second message comes through because she poses as that perfect (and perfectly dead) woman, and pulls Meridian out of her near-coma by saying “I forgive you” (125) at the right moment. Relieved of her guilt, Meridian recovers.

Gloria Steinem writes of the progress Walker has made for her heroines since she wrote her first story:

Her first short story, unpublished, “The Suicide of an American Girl,” describes a friendship between a young black American and an African student. Attracted and angered by her independence, he rapes her; as a kind of chosen sacrifice, she doesn’t resist. But after he is gone, she quietly turns on the gas and waits for death. It’s a conflict that
Meridian will not give up and resolve her problems by dying. As she tells Lynne, martyrs should walk away alive instead of acting out the melodramatic last scene: "King should have refused. Malcolm, too, should have refused. All those characters in all those novels that require death to end the book should refuse. All saints should walk away. Do their bit, then—just walk away" (151).

Earlier in the novel, Walker lists people assassinated for taking part in a "revolution": "MEDGAR EVERS/JOHN F. KENNEDY/MALCOLM X/MARTIN LUTHER KING/ROBERT KENNEDY/CHE GUEVARA/PATRICE LAMUMBA/GEORGE JACKSON/CYNTHIA WESLEY/ADDIE MAY COLLINS/GENE MCAFARNE/CAROLE ROBERTSON/VIOLA LIIUZZO" (33). To the names of famous political and spiritual leaders, Walker adds the names of lesser known Civil Rights workers such as Viola Liuzzo, a white housewife from Detroit killed by Klan members after participating in the Selma March, and Cynthia Wesley, one of four girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. The placement of slashes and spaces makes the names slide into one another. "EVERS/ JOHN" seems more of a unit than "JOHN F. KENNEDY," and the entire list appears to meld together, blurring the identities of this group of martyrs who have become names mentioned on the nightly news. But the significance of the list, as Walker implies, involves the loss of modern people's ability to grieve collectively, as a community. And the agent of that loss is television, now "the repository of memory" (33).

In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely. For 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. . . . indeed she would kill, before she allowed anyone to murder [the guest speaker's] son again. (200)

Instead of adopting the murderous philosophy of the would-be revolutionary cadre, Meridian has transcended it. She will not kill, or die, "for the revolution" or any other abstract ideology. If forced to, she would kill to preserve life. And when unable to prevent a murder, she can gather together with other mourners to grieve that death publicly.

Thadious M. Davis writes that Meridian "divests herself of immediate blood relations—her child and her parents—in order to align herself completely with the larger racial and social generations of blacks" (49), and
she seems to have achieved this alignment as she unites with the congregation. By the end of the novel her personal identity becomes part of their collective identity: "Meridian is born anew into a pluralistic cultural self, a 'we' that is and must be selfless and without ordinary prerequisites for personal identity" (Davis 49). As a collective group, this congregation can mourn and remember together. The repository of memory has returned to the community.

When Meridian opens her mouth to sing with the congregation, she at last finds her voice and moves beyond her method of strategic silences:

... perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black...—and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. (201)

By turning to the songs and stories of her cultural heritage, she finds a way to serve her people. And, finally, she can speak out against racist patriarchal hegemony, rather than standing silent and alone in the margins.

Notes
1 "Let me have the coffin, and I will give you whatever you like to ask for it" (Grimm 220).
2 I take this term from Walker’s poem "The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom": "Rebellious. Living. / Against the Elemental Crush. / A Song of Color / Blooming / For Deserving Eyes. / Blooming Gloriously / For Its Self. / Revolutionary Petunias" (Petunias 70).
3 In Walker’s character Meridian, we are able to see her admiration for women such as Rebecca Jackson, of whose "remarkable general power" Walker writes: "a woman whose inner spirit directed her to live her own life, creating it from scratch, leaving husband, home, family, and friends, to do so" (Gardens 79).
4 "What happens when I write is that I try to make models for myself. I project other ways of seeing. Writing to me is not about audience actually. It’s about living" (Tate 185).

Works Cited