Naming and a Black Woman's Aesthetic

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Unlike that of most modern and post-modern writers, the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker lacks "meaningful names." This is contrary to expectations; we would expect names, like those in the fiction of Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara, that either claim black or matrilinear power or protest against black women's double unempowerment in a white, patriarchal society. However, opaque names in the fiction of Hurston and Walker may be seen as resisting colonization and/or penetration by a critical analysis that appropriates or transfixes their meanings by a white, patriarchal methodology.

Naming, as is well known, is power, and so it would seem particularly interesting to observe the names that black women writers, doubly unempowered in a white, patriarchal society, give to their fictional characters. It might be expected that such writers would choose character names that reflect a desire for or seizure of power, names that would resonate African and/or matrilinear ancestry or that would incorporate paranomasic or etymological sigilia of power, such as the wish-fulfillment name Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *A Native Son*. Alternatively, one might expect the silent protest of namelessness such as Ralph Ellison's narrator-protagonist in *Invisible Man*, who, not revealing his given name, tells us to call him Jack-the-Bear (9; cf. James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name*). In novels and stories by Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor, the expectation of finding "meaningful" names is fulfilled, but in the cases of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, character names are as ordinary,

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realistic, and "opaque" as the names of real people in Maya Angelou's autobiographical writing. This discontinuity from what is expected warrants investigation.

First, let us look briefly at some works containing "meaningful" names. In Gloria Naylor's "Luciela Louise Turner," for instance, the sorrow, hurt, and anger of the dispossessed is imaged by Ciel's loss of one baby by abortion, another by accidental electrocution, and a husband by desertion. And yet, as her mother Mattie rocks her in her arms, as if re-enacting the spirituals "Safe in the Arms of the Lord" and "Lying there fo' to heal," and bathes her so that she is "baptized now," Ciel gains peace: "And morning would come" (1235). Ciel "turns" away from her husband Eugene (whose limited role seems to be summed up in his nickname "Gene") with the help of religion (Mattie's name evokes that of the gospeler Matthew). Even though she has lost her baby Serena, her hoped-for peace, Ciel seems to find a kind of heaven that echoes her name. A peripheral character, Ben, Eugene's friend, also has a name from the Bible that evokes the dispossession of Benjamin, who was betrayed by his brothers and experienced exile.

Character names in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* have already been analyzed by Ruth Rosenberg, but in her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* we can also find "meaningful" names. In *The Bluest Eye*, Rosemary Villanucci, the white neighbor friend of the black MacTeer sisters Freida and Claudia, has a name that evokes all the sweetness that life in a (white) villa might mean for the militantly (and mannishly) named girls. Villanucci might remind readers of penuche, a fudge-like candy made with brown sugar, and Rosemary comes up roses and a fragrant herb. The MacTeer girls' names testify to the wished-for freedom (Frieda, which also evokes the name of D.H. Lawrence's unconventional wife) and power (Claudia, evoking the Emperor Claudius) that their tearful last name seems to deny. Other characters, such as Cholly Breedlove (who is neither jolly nor loving) and his daughter Pecola (pea-coal or cola for her color and ordinariness?) also have names that invite analysis. In *Tar Baby*, the wealthy whites Valerian and Margaret Street and their son Michael have names that represent the Philadelphia aristocracy that Valerian

comes from (interestingly, his name is used for a Valentine-like candy that only blacks enjoy eating). Half of the name of the Uncle-Tomish butler Sydney Childs also evokes the aristocracy, but 'Childs' indicates his real power in the house. The names of Sydney's wife Ondine and niece Jadine evoke the sensual mystery that attracts the black protagonist Son into a passionate affair with Jadine, whose jewel-like hardness leads to her leaving him. Son, whose multiple dispossessions are reflected not only in the anonymous and child-like name he normally uses but also in the equally anonymous multiplicity of other names he has gone by — William Green, Herbert Robinson, Louis Stover, Billy, Paul, Rastus, Harvey, Henry — is left at the end of the novel still anxiously seeking the woman and the sense of belonging that he has lost.

Finally, Toni Cade Bambara also practices the art of "meaningful" naming. In her story "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" from *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, her narrator and protagonist Candy Peoples says, "Either you should call a person a name that says what they about or you call em what they call themselves, one or the other" (708). Candy and her friend Madeen delight in making up names for people, calling a feisty customer Fur Coat and the blond chemist (whose real name is Hubert Tarrly) Herbert Tareyton or Nazi Youth. But the narrator also calls her characters "what they about." The made-up Madeen, for instance, dresses in such skimpy clothes and shows such interest in men that she would seem to aspire to be *made* everyone's Dalilah except that of "ole man Sampson," who is always "sneaking around trying to jump Madeen in Housewares" (700). Madeen, like Miz Della in Cosmetics (another Dalilah who betrays her people by "passing" and dating whites), Mrs. Johnson the proprietor, and the narrator herself, is primarily interested in George Lee Piper in Tobaccos, who "be fine" and *generally* calls the women's tune. Candy, named after her Grandma Candestine (whose name, lacking the phallic "I," seems to be clandestinely hiding a multitude of things), seems to represent the good-flavored "people" who are drawn, as Candy is at the end of the story, to the African heritage represented by the intelligent druggist Obatale, who invites her to the Kwanza feast. This

heritage, as implied by Obatale's telling Candy "you can call me Ali Baba if you want to" (712), seems to hold out the promises of riches originating in Africa but now stolen back from the whites. Candy Peoples, therefore, gains power from her foremothers, her African ancestry, and her people (including a caring father whom she loves but cannot speak to).

Names as used by Naylor, Morrison, and Bambara fulfill readers' expectations by encoding hopes and angers, statements of triumph and of dispossession, and by distinguishing between the white Streets and the black Sons and Ciels. This makes it all the more remarkable that two other black women writers, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, do not follow this method but instead give their characters names that are indistinguishable from the names "they call themselves." Of the 70 character names in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 65 are of the type represented in the following list: Janie Mae Crawford (who through marriage becomes, in succession, Janie Killicks, Janie Starks, and Janie Woods), Logan Killicks, Joe or Jody Starks, Vergible Woods (whose nickname "Tea Cake" also puts him in the second list), Johnny Taylor, Pearl Stone, Jim Stone, Lee Coker, Tony Taylor, W.B. Jackson, Henry Pitts, Oscar Scott, Jeff Bruce, Matt Bonner, Charlie Jones, Daisy Blunt, and Annie Tyler. Some of the names of this type are represented by only a last name, usually with a designating title, as in Mrs. Sumpkins, Mr. Lawrence, Mrs. Bogle, Mr. Galloway, Mrs. Tully, Rev. Redmond, Dr. Simmons, Mrs. Turner, and old lady Davis. I have deliberately not distinguished between black and white characters in this list to show that they are indistinguishable by name alone. The remaining fourteen names are nicknames, similar to those listed by Rosenberg in her discussion of *Song of Solomon*, given jokingly and sometimes satirically by blacks to other blacks, but not always to "point out flaws and foibles, ...ridicule weaknesses, ...expose failures, ...shame and embarrass" (219). These include Tea Cake, Ham-bo, Bootsie, Teadi, Big 'Oman, Who Flung, Double-Ugly. Sop-de-Bottom, Motor Boat, Nunkie, Stew Beef, and Muck Boy, plus the doubtful Coodemay and the familially named Nanny. These names show a mixture of respect and ridicule: Tea Cake is a treat for women and, it turns out, a loving husband who makes friends

easily; Big 'Oman is sexually attractive and Double-Ugly is physically powerful; Who Flung, though blamed for having "flung" away Annie Tyler, is grudgingly respected for the same act; and Nunkie is a sturdy, sexy girl. Although these latter names have lexical (or semi-lexical) meanings and some of the names in the former group — Vergible Woods, Pheoby Watson, Tripp Crawford, Hezekiah Potts, and Mrs. Bogle, for instance — might submit to onomastic analysis, no patterns emerge and too little is known about most of the named characters to make analysis fruitful. The effect, instead, is to provide readers with an array of normal human beings whose names are simply "what they call themselves." Gilbert and Gubar, to be sure, see Janie Mae Crawford Killicks Starks Woods's nickname "Alphabet" as reflecting "not only the primary dispossession of all women from 'proper' nomenclature but also the double dispossession of black women, who have been exiled from their African heritage as well as from their matronymic." They go on to say that Hurston implies that Janie has "become no more than a character (like the letter of the alphabet) who signifies nothing for herself while facilitating the 'circulation of signs,' that reinforces communication among men" (237-38). But not only is Janie the whole alphabet (and therefore the master of signs) but she also tells her story herself, sharing it with her friend Pheoby in an epitome of womanly communication; she tells Pheoby, "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (*Eyes* 6). Hurston honors women in her novel and decries men, to be sure, but not by means of the characters' names.

The same kind of onomastic opacity can also be found in Hurston's stories. For example, in "Sweat," the protagonist and antagonist (husband and wife) are named Delia Jones and Sykes Jones. A third major character is Bertha, and peripheral characters are Joe Clarke, Jim Merchant, Joe Lindsay, Walter Thomas, Elijah Mosely, Old Man Anderson, Dave Carter, and Della Lewis, all blacks. Although Delia's patient suffering could recall that of Shakespeare's Cordelia (*King Lear*), the subtle revenge she takes on her husband does not parallel Cordelia's forgiveness of Lear, so the parallel may be fortuitous. Gilbert and Gubar have com-

mented that "Sykes' name, along with his brutality, suggests that Hurston is consciously or unconsciously revising the plot of sexual battle that Dickens constructs around Bill Sykes and his girl-friend Nancy in *Oliver Twist*" (287 n. 45). These possible "meaningful" names apart, the other names are heterogeneously realistic and opaque.

Alice Walker, deeply influenced by Hurston, uses similarly heterogeneous character names, although she seems to be more conscious of the power of names. Two of her women in *The Color Purple* repudiate their "cute," demeaning nicknames and insist on their real names. Susie Q. says that her real name is Jolentha and Squeak demands her real name Mary Agnes, saying "When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public" (173). On the other hand, Shug Avery ("sweet as sugar") is happy with her nickname and does not demand her real name Lillie (which, in fact, would be incongruous, given her far from virginal character). Walker also shows onomastic sophistication in developing changes in names. Even after she marries him, Celie (the central character) calls her husband Mr. _____, although he is Albert to his lover Shug Avery. As he begins to accept Celie's independence and to treat her as a friend rather than as a slave, he becomes Albert to her too. Similarly, the foster-father of Celie's children Olivia and Adam is at first merely the Reverend Mr. _____, but when he becomes important to Nettie, Celie's sister, joining with her first as a colleague and later as a husband, he becomes known as Samuel. This represents a double blow to patriarchal power. Not only are these men denied identities until they become important and affectionate to women, but even then they are denied their patronyms, which are also not assumed by their wives. In fact, very few patronyms are used anywhere in the text, the exceptions being Sofia Butler (who loses hers but significantly does not replace it with her husband's when she marries Albert's son Harpo); Henry Broadnax (commonly known by the unflattering name Buster, perhaps because he looks like a prize-fighter); Bubber Hodges (a white prison warden, son of Henry Hodges; Bubber's brother Jimmy, who married "that Quitman girl," is Squeak's father); Miss Addie Beasley (school teacher); Doris Baines (a briefly mentioned English missionary); Edward (or Bill) DuBoyce (an even

more briefly mentioned Harvard student); and two dubious characters, Swain and Grady, known only by what could be either a given name or a patronym. Except for Shug Avery, the remaining 48 of the 59 names mentioned are given names; the male power of naming is at a distinct disadvantage in this novel. One other case of name-changing deserves mention: Celie's son Adam, brought up in Africa by Samuel and his wife Corinne, takes the Olinka name Omatangu: "It means a un-naked [i.e. black] man somewhere near the first one God made that knowed what he was" (233). This change in nomenclature signifies his abandonment of his slave heritage — symbolically stretching back to the first man — and his adoption of his African heritage and knowledge of "what he was."

What of the majority of characters, with names like Nettie, Cora Mae, Annie Julia, Carrie, Kate, Miss Millie, Billy, Eleanor Jane, May Ellen, Hetty, Daisy, Jerene, Darlene, Odessa, Jack, Dilsey, Marion, Coco, Boo, Tobias, Margaret, and Joseph? Some of them, like Odessa and Dilsey, might echo strong black women from life or fiction; others, like Samuel, Adam, Joseph, and Tobias, have a biblical ring; but, as in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, no patterns emerge, and the result is the onomastic opacity of real life. Similarly, in her story "Everyday Use," Walker insists on "everyday" names except for two characters whose adopted African names help to make Walker's point. Mama Johnson, who narrates the story and has no other name, has two daughters, Dee and Maggie, and a sister Dicie, known as Aunt Dee or Big Dee. Other family members mentioned are Aunt Dee's first husband Henry (nicknamed Stash), Uncle Buddy, Grandma Dee, Grandpa Jarrell, and Great Grandpa Ezra. Maggie has a boyfriend named John Thomas, and Dee's former boyfriend was Jimmy T. All these names are perfectly ordinary and do not yield to onomastic analysis except for the absence of patronyms previously discussed. Since black patronyms commonly derived from the white owners of slaves, this absence could be a declaration of freedom from both white society and the patriarchy. Dee, however, has gone to college and is attempting to regain her African heritage by taking the name Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, in company with a young man named Hakim-a-barber (whom Mama, unable to get

her tongue around the unfamiliar name, calls Asamalakim). Dee or Wangero has returned to the family home in order to get a hand-carved churn lid and paddle and a hand-made quilt with scraps of her grandmother's dress sewn in. All these she intends to turn into ornaments as relics of her heritage, but Walker clearly shows that her interest in them is as phony as her adopted name and that one's true heritage is a matter of how one lives every day. The everyday names of most of the characters also reflect this message.

It is interesting to compare the names used by Walker and Hurston with the real-life names mentioned in Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Among the seventy or so people named in the book we find the same heterogeneous scattering as in Hurston's and Walker's novels and stories, although most of them are provided with patronyms. Again it is impossible to distinguish whites from blacks by name alone and again there is the temptation to analyze certain names onomastically, such as Coley Washington, Bertha Flowers, Dolores Stockland, and Mr. Freeman and Mrs. Goodman. Again, as well, there are multiple names: the author herself, originally named Marguerite Johnson, received the nicknames Ritie, My, Maya, and Mary, and her stepmother was, by multiple marriages, Annie Johnson Henderson Murphy, but nowhere does Angelou make any onomastic hay out of these variations. Again there is the mixture of "everyday" names with peer-given nicknames: Hard-hitting Jimmy, Two Gun, Sweet Man, Poker Pete, Stonewall Jimmy, Just Black, Cool Clyde, Tight Coat, and Red Leg mix in with Rev. Howard Thomas, Mr. and Mrs. Willie Williams, Pat Patterson, Louise Kendricks, George Taylor, Viola Cullinan, Henry Reed, and a host of people with only first names or last names, such as Louise, Rex, Helen, Ruth, Eloise, Joyce, Alberta, Mr. Steward, Mr. McElroy, Mr. Coleman, Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Hendricks, the Rev. and Mrs. Sneed, and Rev. Taylor. Since these are all names of real people, an attempt at literary onomastics meets a dead end; we see the same panorama of names that we might find in any address book or in the fiction of Hurston and Walker. The comparison heightens the sense that in the fiction of these women we are dealing with life, not art.

Are Hurston and Walker somehow less concerned with their double dispossession by the white patriarchy than are Morrison, Bambara, and Naylor? Or is there an alternative theory of naming that might explain their use of opaque names in terms of both black and feminist aesthetics? In 1970, critic Addison Gayle, Jr. wrote:

> The black writer at the present time must forgo the assimilationist tradition and redirect his art to the strivings within the race.... To do so, he must write for and speak to the majority of black people; not to a sophisticated elite fashioned out of the programmed computers of America's largest universities. ("Function of Black Literature" 393)

In this, Gayle was echoing sentiments earlier voiced by W.E.B. Dubois, Alain Locke, Hoyt W. Fuller, and others, who are united in speaking of the realism of most twentieth-century black writing and calling for black writers to speak to black audiences in their own language, not in the traditions and aesthetic assumptions of Europe or American whites. Dubois in 1903 speaks of the "peculiar sensation...[of] double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (quoted in Gayle, "Introduction," xxi). As a corrective to this "double consciousness," Fuller says that the black artist "is not going to separate literature from life" and condemns those black writings that "have...screened their themes of suffering, redemption and triumph behind frail facades of obscurity and conscious 'universality'" (4, 6). Alain Locke sees the change as having come: he says that "there has come the happy release from self-consciousness, rhetoric, bombast, and the hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for moral effect" (17), and he asserts that "Through their work, these younger [black] artists have declared for a lusty vigorous realism" (19). Similar comments have been expressed by other black artists and critics. In his outlined "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic," Larry Neal notes that black art uses "Non-matrixed art forms" and evinces "Black attempts to realize the world as art by

making Man more compatible to it and it more compatible to Man" (14-15). Ronald Milner urges black writers to use their own experience and details of real life: "Right there in the community are your materials..." (291). Ron Karenga adds that

> All Black art...must be functional, collective and committing..., as we cannot accept the false doctrine of 'art for art's sake.'...We have destroyed 'art for art's sake,'...and have developed art for all our sake, art for Mose the miner, Sammy the shoeshine boy, T.C. the truck driver and K.P. the unwilling soldier.... Art is everyday life given more form and color. And in relationship to that, the Black artist can find no better subject than Black People themselves.... (32-3)

In other words, according to these views of the black aesthetic, art that is too precious, that demands explication that relies on learned etymology and allusion, is not only alien to the black reality but is in league with a racist society that maintains its hegemony by defining its cultural values and methods as superior. Such a society would be unable to accept the apparent naïveté and simplicity of spirituals as being real art, to see that "what is taken as whimsical and child-like is in truth, though naive, very profound" (Locke, "Spirituals" 313). The simple, realistic opacity of names in the works of Hurston and Walker, therefore, would seem to live up to this principle of black aesthetics. These names are rebellious in their simple resistance to analysis; they say "I am who I am, no more, no less, and that's good enough for me; take me for who and what I am." By their realistic opacity, such names refuse to be "colonized" by the aesthetics of white, modernist or post-modernist culture.

A similar resistance to analysis is appropriate to women's writing. Hélène Cixous points out the patriarchal thrust of assigning meaning:

> As soon as the question of ontology raises its head, as soon as one asks oneself 'what is it?,' as soon as there is intended meaning. Intention: desire, authority — examine them and you are led right back...to the father" (561, ellipsis hers).

From the male-dominated society's point of view, she goes on, woman "is no more than this shape made for him: a body caught in his gaze.... Within his economy, she is the strangeness he likes to appropriate" (564-65). Cixous also identifies women with blacks and the "dark continent" of Africa (565-67). Applying her ideas to onomatology, one can see that assigning a "meaning" to a name, saying it means this and not that, is a form of exploitation and control: no matter who is assigning the meaning, that person is acting as an exploitive man, stamping his seal of identification on the woman and by this means domesticating her. A name that resists such domestication, that conceals its meaning inside its own identity and does not submit to the male gaze, would be an appropriate one for someone to choose who was writing from a feminist perspective.

Affirming and extending this line of thought, Julia Kristeva says

> If, in speaking of *woman*, it is impossible to say what she *is* — for to do so would risk abolishing her difference — might matters not stand differently with respect to the *mother*, motherhood being the sole function of the 'other sex' to which we may confidently attribute existence? (580-81, emphases hers)

She answers her own question "yes and no," suggesting that the Virgin Mother of the Christian church — simultaneously mother, daughter, wife, and temporal power (queen), but not penetrated by man — is an image of the whole woman. A mystery? Yes, and so is the child in the womb before birth, "a still shapeless embryo, unnameable.... Flash on the unnameable, woven of abstractions to be torn apart. Let a body finally venture out of its shelter, expose itself to meaning beneath a veil of words" (581-82). As soon as the child is born, what was one becomes two; an unbridgeable gap is created between mother and child, a duality which sends us back to the hierarchical pairs of which Cixous speaks, with the woman always in the subordinate place (Cixous 559-61). Similarly, the "meaning" of a name is like the child in the womb; as soon as it is brought forth, the name is no longer connected with the meaning. Instead, the meaning is privileged, is how the name is "read." Therefore a "meaningless" or

opaque name is a fuller representation of the "unpenetrated" mother-in-potential whose "meaning" and "being" are unified, inseparable.

That analysis is a form of penetration is made clear by Catharine A. Mackinnon. She draws attention to the fact that metaphors for knowing are sexual and represent either penetration ("incisive analysis," "piercing the veil") or the transfixing gaze that objectifies the subject. "Feminists are beginning to understand that to know has meant to fuck" (607, n. 4). Note, by the way, that what is important to this concept is not biological gender but social gender: "The acted upon is feminized, is the 'girl' regardless of sex, the actor correspondingly masculinized," says Mackinnon in a discussion of rape and battery (624, n. 36). Therefore, for a writer to name a character such that the full identity or "meaning" can only be exposed through analysis, penetration, is to create a doll for man's pleasure, and so is antifeminist. Mackinnon further says that "Feminism claims the voice of women's silence, the sexuality of our eroticized desexualization, the fullness of 'lack,' the centrality of our marginality and exclusion, the public nature of privacy, the presence of our absence" (609). The paradoxes inherent in this statement can perhaps be clarified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's comment that

> textuality can be seen not only *as* world and self, *as* the representation of a world in terms of a self at play with other selves and generating this representation, but also *in* the world and self, all implicated in an intertextuality.... Such a concept of textuality does not mean a reduction of the world to linguistic texts, books, or a tradition composed of books, criticism in the narrow sense, and teaching.... The discourse of the literary text is part of a general configuration of textuality, a placing forth of the solution as the unavailability of a unified solution to a unified or homogeneous, generating or receiving, consciousness. (637-38)

In other words, the "presence of our absence" in Mackinnon's terms could be considered, in Spivak's terms, as textuality; neither yields to the probes of analysis, and neither is ultimately subject to control by a gendered critical method.

Since the "meaning" of a name is either determined by the critic from the outside or "read" from the inside, any attempt to explicate the meaning of a name could be seen either as a form of rape or as womb-envy (see Spivak 642). Such explication would be either an attempt to impose something (meaning) on the name by force or to appropriate the birth of the meaning, which would also be a kind of rape. To invite such invasion-via-interpretation, that is, to create a character name that invites analysis, is to place oneself (and/or characters) in a subordinate position, as a kind of prostitute. And, since women and blacks are similarly oppressed in a white patriarchy, to do so is to create a kind of Uncle Tom. As black women writers, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, consciously or unconsciously, chose opaque character names as a way of making their characters unrapable and uncolonizable.

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