A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE 1960S: 
ALICE WALKER’S *MERIDIAN*

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Alice Walker’s second novel, *Meridian* (1976), testifies to the end of the era of the Civil Rights movement and Black Aesthetics at the same time as it stands for a new way of understanding literature and racial politics. In this paper, I will study the ways in which *Meridian* functions both as a revaluation of the historical turmoil that the 1960s meant for the United States in relation to the “race issue”, and as a magnificent critique to the black nationalist discourse of the time. Furthermore, I will focus on how this work advances the literary revolution of the 1980s protagonized by African American women writers who claim their place in the world of art and literature.

The decade of the 1960s was to be crucial for the struggle held by African Americans to be considered equal in a country that regards herself as the bastion of Democracy. This decade celebrated the Civil War Centennial. It was a time for African Americans to look back at a period of one hundred years during which their Civil Rights had been first granted in the age of Reconstruction that followed the civil war (1861-1865), only to be quickly lost after the withdrawal of the federal troops in 1877 and the brutal suppression enforced by the Ku Klux Klan since its creation in 1866. The end of the nineteenth century was characterized by the total erasure of the progressive laws that proclaimed African Americans equal, and it would not be until the second half of the twentieth century that laws started being reversed again in favor of equality.

[1] The Constitution was amended outlawing slavery (13th amendment, 1865), granting equal protection to African Americans under the law (14th amendment, 1868), and suffrage to black men (15th amendment, 1870). However, the Constitutional amendments were never uniformly enforced nor recognized in all parts of the country.

[2] In 1883 the Supreme Court outlawed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 by upholding the Jim Crow laws of Tennessee that enforced segregated public transportation and buildings. In 1896 the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision declared the legality of the “separate but equal” ideology that would rule for more than half a century, until 1954 when the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional (Brown v. Board of Education). It is then when a definite change of attitude among African Americans takes place as they become resolved to protest their situation collectively and demand that their rights be respected.
The decade of the 1960s would be characterized by the social upheaval caused by the reaction against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement that developed from it. Martin Luther King would mark the decade of the 1960s with his appeals to Christian brotherhood and American idealism. His creed of nonviolent, direct action to protest segregation was followed by the majority of the black population as well as by many whites, constituting the Civil Rights movement. But the violent white response to black direct action discouraged many blacks who had believed in King’s dream of pacific integration. When, despite their activism, their dream was not achieved, they had to look for strategies to readjust their lives. And they did so by either changing the focus of their activism, which gave impetus to the Black Power movement\(^3\), or by undergoing a tremendous and painful revisionist process that would help them to assess the consequences of their activism and the point from which to advance in the struggle for equality.

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This is the background of Alice Walker’s second novel. *Meridian* (1976) manages to evoke not only the atmosphere of the decade but, especially, the moral and psychic consequences that the Civil Rights movement—and the historical events it propitiated—had both on the black community and on individuals\(^4\).

Besides, the novel is both a consequence of and a reaction against the Black Arts movement that dominated the African American literary scene until, approximately, 1974\(^5\). A consequence because, despite the correction and criticism of Black Arts the novel offers, *Meridian* would not have been possible without the space open by that movement. The independence of Black Arts, and its insistence on valuing one’s own culture and background set the example for feminist and ethnic groups in the country\(^6\). Undoubtedly, Walker is in debt with Black Arts in her search for the roots of African American tradition, in her valuing of African American folklore and language, although she repudiates the sexism, exclusionism, and homophobia that came to characterize the movement.

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\(^1\) “Black Power” emerged as a slogan in 1966 and was understood as a repudiation of the nonviolent doctrine of the Civil Rights movement. The nationalist Black Power movement called for separatism, armed self-defense, and pride in blackness.

\(^2\) The Civil Rights movement is also a crucial period in Walker’s life. She was actively involved in it from 1965 to 1968, participating in voter registration drives in Georgia and campaigns for welfare rights and children’s programs in Mississippi. In 1967 she married Melvyn Levanthal, a white civil rights lawyer, and they worked together to desegregate the Mississippi schools. At a time when interracial marriage was illegal in Mississippi, Walker and Levanthal lived in that state and had a daughter, which forced them to face the problems some of the protagonists of *Meridian* must fight to overcome.

\(^3\) The Black Arts movement formally begins in 1965 when LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) moved uptown New York to found the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School. In 1968 critic Larry Neal defined Black Arts as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept”, insisting thus in the political dimension of it. For the first time in American history a literary movement is inherently political.

\(^4\) As Ishmael Reed declared in a 1995 interview, “what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. Moreover, there would be no multiculturalism movement without Black Arts ... Black Arts gave the example that you do not have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture” (Gates 1997: 70).
As a reaction against the Black Arts movement, Walker chose to write a novel, instead of a poem or a play, which were the favorite genres with the Black aestheticians. This responded to the goal of black mass communication: drama and especially poetry were ideally suited to the felt immediacy of struggle, and they required less time to compose than the novel or the short story, becoming as a result a weapon in the campaign to liberate the black nation. Poetry and drama were blazingly simple in language and virtually impossible to misunderstand. In contrast, the complexity woven in *Meridian* concerning both content and structure is far from the simplicity promulgated by the Black Aesthetic.

Although firmly grounded in history, as the Black Aestheticians would wish, the story focuses nevertheless on the inner life of its protagonist, Meridian, and those closer to her. The novel becomes thus an introspective psychological study that scorns linearity of time. The different episodes that make up the novel seem to respect no chronological order whatsoever. The story is framed by the present time of narration, which could be the time when the novel was published, but the characters are indiscriminately thrust into different moments of the past. The order of the different episodes could be altered without affecting the novel at all, as the focus of history is continuously redirected towards the past rather than the future, making this novel incompatible with black nationalist discourse once more (Dubey 1994: 134). The author assimilates the novel’s structure to that of a “crazy quilt”:

A patchwork quilt is exactly what the name implies—a quilt made of patches. A crazy quilt, on the other hand, only looks crazy. It is not ‘patched’: it is planned ... A crazy-quilt story is one that can jump back and forth in time, work on many different levels, and one that can include myth. It is generally much more evocative of metaphor and symbolism than a novel that is chronological in structure, or one devoted, more or less, to rigorous realism (Tate 1983: 176).

The discarding of a linear narration, together with the psychological point of view, and the open ending of the novel, make of this work a complex one, as it has already been announced. The reader must participate fully in the reading in order to get the messages conveyed. And even then, we may be mystified by the end of the story. Alice Walker is very aware of this reaction, and concludes: “when people tell me they just read it once, I do have to smile, because I just don’t see how you can read it once and understand anything” (Tate 1983: 178).

*Meridian*’s structure is not the only element in conflict with the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s. Its content is also a clear correction of those parameters.

To begin with, *Meridian* lacks the exhortative tone of much of the literature product of the Black Aesthetic. Far from calling for a militant stance, the protagonist is tormented by her doubts and her inability to cope with violence and murder as a weapon in the struggle for freedom and justice. She is, however, an activist who remains faithful to her ideals of non violent protest and resistance even after the hub of the Civil Rights
movement has passed. The tension between the collective and the individual is one of the major characteristics of the novel.

The novel also distances itself from the Black Aesthetic because of its focus on a feminine character, a black woman who becomes both self-aware and aware of a larger historical context in the difficult times of the Civil Rights struggle. Walker breaks with a tradition that relegated black women to secondary roles, if they had a role at all.

Thus, *Meridian* inscribes itself in the literary tradition that black women writers have fought to consolidate since the 1970s. Its intimate character, along with the focus on women’s perspectives of life allow Walker to explore themes which are absent in the prose by male authors. The female body, for instance, becomes both a catalyst for Meridian’s experiences and also the text in which history is written (Nadel 1993; Wall 1993). Also, Walker fights the stereotypes about African American women prevalent both in literature and in society at the time, creating new spaces for them. What follows is a study of the heroine Walker devises in this novel and the ways she subverts expectations of traditional womanhood and female sexuality.

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At the opening of the novel Meridian is found in a quite deteriorated state. She is dressed in old, smelly overalls, she is losing her hair, which she covers with an old cap, and suffers from a kind of epileptic fits that leave her unconscious and unable to move until a long while after having recovered consciousness. The consequences of her struggle for civil rights are engraved all over her body and mind. Her portrayal is the opposite to traditional womanhood, not only because of her physical appearance, but because instead of being restricted to the domestic sphere, she has adopted a public activist role in the little town where she presently lives.

Traditional womanhood is represented in this first scene by the mummified body of a white woman who was killed by her husband years ago. The murderer, having been forgiven by society—it is understood that if your wife is unfaithful you are right to kill her—ears his bread exhibiting her dead wife from town to town as if her body was a circus curiosity. Implicit is Walker’s criticism is the use of women to enforce racist practices. Blacks are allowed to see Marilene only a prescribed day in the week. Meridian is there to disrupt the official order, confronting armed men in a tank and letting black children go into the tent and look at the mummy.

So, the beginning of the novel shows how, years after the end of the Civil Rights movement, nothing seems to have changed. To many, the movement, like Meridian’s behavior, had been a “meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere” (Walker

However, Meridian is there, “volunteering to suffer” for the salvation of all people (25). She is led to such a behavior because of a deep feeling of guilt whose roots are manifold. One is her incapability to commit revolutionary murder.

There are other reasons which lay deeper in Meridian’s consciousness. Meridian feels guilty, for instance, for having been born, “for stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self” (51), contributing thus to the erasure of her mother’s autonomy. Walker’s feminist/womanist agenda could not obviate the role of reproduction in women’s lives. So, the topic of motherhood is retaken in relation to several black women for whom reproduction entails suicide and murder. The stories of Louvinie, Fast Mary, Wile Chile, Meridian’s mother, Nelda, Miss Treasure, and Meridian herself constitute “a call-and-response interplay between these various episodes that inserts each woman’s experience of reproduction into a collective history” (Dubey 1994: 138). This does not mean that Meridian offers a homogeneous communal vision of femininity. Far from it, the feminine community that results from the novel is heterogeneous and encompasses different and often contradictory characters and stances. This heterogeneous, but at the same time comprehending vision of community, is a direct challenge to the monolithic view of the African American collective imposed by the Black Aesthetic.

To Meridian, reproduction entails the dispossession of her own body and will by her newborn child. When Meridian assimilates her motherhood to slavery, she considers murdering her child as the only way out but, since that thought soon frightens her, she starts thinking of killing herself instead. Eventually, Meridian would give her much loved son in adoption so that she is able to proceed with her life, go to college and participate in the Civil Rights movement. This would become one more cause of guilt and remorse (90-91).

The images of ideal womanhood are destroyed one by one by presenting the reader with a crude reality that demythicizes the tradition of ideal black motherhood.

Meridian wakes up to an outer reality when television helps her to link the violence suffered by a group of Civil Rights workers to her own town and her own life. This awakening marks a turning point in Meridian’s life and starts her particular quest for “literacy”, for knowing herself by learning to read the world. It is like a rebirth. From this point onwards, Meridian will try to help “to save the world”, and her personal history is shaped and determined by the attitudes and the socio-historical events of the period as she either rebels or adapts herself to them. In the process she acquires a knowledge of the world and of her position in it.

Against the background of a common effort agglutinated in the Civil Rights movement to fight racial discrimination, the reader is presented with only individual attempts to overcome sexual exploitation. In Meridian’s case, sexual abuse is added to her experience of racial discrimination. Sexual exploitation is presented from an ironic, even sarcastic, perspective that makes it even more pervasive and corrosive since it is minimized to the point of non-existence by Truman, the representative of the black male

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[8] All further references to Walker’s Meridian will be from the 1986 edition and will be indicated parenthetically with just the page number.
activist in the novel. He would remain unaware of the double oppression suffered by black women, who have to stand not only racism on the part of whites but also—and perhaps more difficult to face—sexism on the part of men their own race. To Meridian, her sexuality is ultimately linked to pain and disastrous consequences that may affect her life in a drastic way. Implicit in Walker’s treatment of female sexuality is a harsh criticism to the nationalist discourse about reproduction, which devalued actual mothers as reactionary obstacles to revolution while celebrating the abstraction of mythical black motherhood. This attitude is assumed by Truman when he learns that Meridian had been married before and had had a son that she had given away. At this point he is overcome by repugnance for her, not so much because she had abandoned her son but because he could not accept the idea of considering a “used” black woman as his wife.

In syntony with the changing times and the “Black is Beautiful” nationalist motto, Truman would later idealize Meridian as the abstract African woman who is the repository of superhuman strength. As Meridian tries to bridge the gap between the mythicized black mother and her own experience of motherhood as an oppressive burden, her body becomes the symbolic site of radical redefinition of black womanhood. Walker questions the definition of black femininity in nationalist discourse through the grotesque representation of Meridian’s body as a body that is lacking and unstable, and which submits Meridian to comatose trances every time she is exposed to stressing experiences.

But Meridian goes even further when she denies her body altogether, trespassing the frontier of the political revolutionary and becoming rather a saint and a martyr. Both aspects, aestheticism and politics, are therefore mixed up in Meridian’s engagement with the Civil Rights movement.

By the end of the novel, Meridian is concerned about the results of a movement that has cost so much human effort and so many lives. After M.L. King’s assassination, Meridian seems to consider the same question as Alice Walker in her essay The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It? (1983). She finds the answer when, time afterward, she is drawn to a church and is able to see how much black people’s attitude has changed since her childhood days. She considers how “the preacher was consciously keeping [King’s] voice alive” and how “the sound of the ‘ah-mens’ was different. Not muttered in resignation. Not shout in despair ... Just the ‘ah-mens’ rose clearly ... with a firm tone of ‘We are fed up’” (196).

However, Meridian’s most important concern at the end of the novel is the role of the artist. She combines her dedication to convince black people to use their votes with the tormenting question “Is there no place in a revolution for a person who cannot kill?” (189). Paradoxically, Meridian feels for the first time in her life the urge to kill, the urge...
of retaliatory murder, at church. Her evolution represents the evolution of the times, the pacifism of the Civil Rights movement yielding to the armed militancy of Black Power echoed in Nikki Giovanni’s 1968 poem “The True Import of Present dialogue” when she asks “Nigger / Can you kill”.

But since this feeling would not stay with her, she eventually accepts that she is not and will never be the kind of revolutionary able to kill and change the course of history drastically. Instead, Meridian finds that hers is the role of the African griot: 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 therefore go right ahead—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. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can only do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all (201).

Meridian, however, had moments of rage in which she felt she could do anything, even “bring the mightiest country to its knees” (201). These moments, far from being great instances of self-realization, must be moments of frustration at the thought shared by Walker herself that “Art was not enough and that my art, in particular, would probably change nothing” (In Search 226). The aspect of Meridian’s personality that impulses her to continue her labor as a Civil Rights worker, even when the hub of the movement is over, makes up for her sense of the artist’s work as a failure.

The novel closes with Meridian cleansing herself of sickness and leaving behind her few possessions. This is the inheritance left to Truman, who after understanding the conflict in Meridian’s soul, makes it his own task to live with it.

All in all, *Meridian* stands as both an excellent representation of the historical turmoil that the 1960s meant for the United States in relation to the “race issue”, and a magnificent critique to the black nationalist discourse of the time. Moreover, this work advances the literary revolution of the 1980s carried out by African American women writers who claimed their place in the world of art and literature. Walker both inscribes black women and woman-centered issues such as motherhood in literature. She also deals with the role reserved to the woman artist. This novel, which offers more questions than answers, seems to conclude that the role of the black female artist must be political, but not drastically revolutionary. The African American artist must bear history, culture and tradition with her and be able to guide her people into the future by never losing sight of the past, which is the basis of its identity.
Works cited


