
Reinventing History/ Imagining the Future

History gives topic and substance to black women's writing. No one can read a novel by Toni Morrison or Alice Walker or Paule Marshall without confronting history, feeling its influence and experiencing the changes wrought by history.

Susan Willis, *Specifying*¹

The opening sentences of Susan Willis's materialist-feminist analysis of five twentieth-century black women writers challenge the contemporary critical reader to confront history. Willis is one of the leading Marxist critics of black culture, and *Specifying* now situates her as an outstanding feminist critic of twentieth-century women's writing.

Much of the critical attention paid to the contribution of black women to the formation of contemporary culture, whether as writers, entertainers or filmmakers, appears slight and superficial as if they were a passing phenomenon. But there is nothing faddish about the critical response of Willis to black women as cultural producers in the contemporary marketplace. First, there is nothing "new" about Willis's historicism: it grounds itself in a tradition of Marxist theory that has been shaped and transformed by a serious engagement with the social constructions of race and gender as ways in which experiences of class are lived. And second, she insists that economic, patriarchal and racial forms of social domination are necessarily interdependent modes of exploitation. Within this theoretical framework Willis situates issues of race, gender and class as the key to an understanding of North American history and the black female as the central not the marginalized American subject.

Willis begins by arguing that the transition from a predominantly agrarian to a predominantly urban society "defines the entire modern history of the Americas" (pp. 3-4). This is the historical context for the discussion of American black women writers whose narratives document this massive social upheaval and whose protagonists become the central figures in the American landscape. Willis refuses the usual characterization

of black people as an underclass, for it is urbanization not proletarianization that for her marks the shift from a land-based to an industrial-based economy. "Thus," she states, "American history might be better understood from a point of view that has traditionally been seen as a minority position and an economics traditionally defined as marginal or aberrant" (p. 5). In the tradition of Immanuel Wallerstein and Cedric Robinson,² Willis not only utilizes the generalized insights of "world systems" theory, but elaborates their theoretical models, extending them to encompass gender and applying them to cultural production.

"Histories, Communities, and Sometimes Utopia" is Willis's sophisticated mapping of the field. She sets up a historical paradigm in which the first level of black women's relation to history is "a relationship to mother and grandmother" (p. 5): the relation of generations is a means of access to the past and to the geography of migration. Willis emphasizes that the history of black women is the history of a labor force; because black foremothers are producers and workers, their representation enables black women writers to reconstruct history as both period and as process. The fictional representation of the geographical spaces across which migration has occurred are the means for conceptualizing history. The narrative journey is, therefore, a central analytic category of her analysis.

The relationship that obtains in black women's fiction between South and North, or between Caribbean island and Northern metropolis, or between Africa and the United States defines history as economic modes. The portrayal of the South is not backdrop, local color, or nostalgia, but precise delineation of the agrarian mode of production. Similarly, the Northern metropolis is depicted as the site of wage labor and the politics of class. Journey North is felt as the transition between two modes existing simultaneously within capitalism, but the one – the agrarian mode – is destined to pass out of existence. (p. 8)

The metaphoric use of the economic, however, Willis argues, is not merely a nostalgic rendering of a lost community but is politically radical: in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* metaphoric memory can produce utopian fantasy, and in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* migrating to the metropolis is "a metaphor for the transformation from peonage to worker alienation" (p. 11).

The narrative form that reproduces this intense sensitivity to history is derived from the black story-telling tradition, which Willis distinguishes both from mainstream bourgeois contemporary fictional forms and from postmodernism. What is important to Willis is that the teller-listener relationship, as it evolved in the oral agrarian culture, embodies the "rhythm of daily life" and a unified consciousness: "the speaking subject is at one with the narrative, as are the listeners" (p. 15). "Specifying," as it is taken from Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is an integral linguistic unit within the narrative form of story-telling which is interpreted

by Willis as speaking for what was, historically, a "non-commodified relationship to language" inherently antagonistic to the "schism between signified and signifier that . . . typifies . . . narratives and theories generated under capitalism", (p. 16). But Willis is careful not to romanticize folk cultural forms or their representation for, as she aptly demonstrates with examples from Morrison and Marshall, "the transition to the urban involves the erasure of the speaking subject" (p. 19) and leads to the representation of a plurality of stories seemingly autonomous from speaking subjects.

Willis treats the texts of black women writers as embodiments of their communities' relationship to history, a history which can be represented as complex and contradictory because their metaphoric structures are, in Freudian terms, condensed. The central figures in this fiction, which are historical in all the ways described above, are protagonists who are typical, in Lukács's theory of typicality, precisely because of their marginality. But in Willis's use of the marginal, protagonists like Morrison's Sula, Alice Walker's Meridian and Marshall's Selina move beyond the limitations of Lukácsian theories and simultaneously embody both the history and the future of the American experience.

Willis's close readings of particular texts start with Zora Neale Hurston. Unlike many critics of African American literature who situate Hurston in the generalized position of being foremother to contemporary black women writers, Willis characterizes Hurston as the precursor of modernist writers Morrison and Marshall, and distinct from realists like Ann Petry. Hurston's work is placed in "the incipient stages of modernism" and is described as using a language that incorporates the colloquialisms of "specifying" into a metaphorical structure simpler than "the highly condensed, multireferential figures . . . of Morrison's writing" (p. 32). Willis argues that Hurston's journey North and her subsequent education at Barnard created a distance between the author and the people she was to represent in her fiction, autobiography and anthropological writing. Hurston herself described this distance in schizophrenic terms: as being able to see herself "like somebody else," which Willis identifies as the process of alienation (p. 33). However, she does not discuss in any detail how Hurston's own move from a rural to an urban space and into the position of intellectual participates in the metaphorical construction of the figure of the "folk" which emerges in the work of African American intellectuals during the twenties and thirties. This is a pity because contemporary African American cultural history and criticism is re-creating a romantic discourse of a rural black folk in which to situate the source of an African American culture. Indeed, much current critical work that is concerned with the construction, reconstruction and revision of an African American literary canon has expanded the discursive category of the folk to mythic proportions, and romantic readings of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are an integral part of that mythology. Mary Helen Washington in *Invented Lives* has warned of the patriarchal nature of romantic readings of *Their Eyes* and analyzed the romantic

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limitations of the novel itself.³ Willis adds another dimension to this work by acknowledging the importance of Hurston's decision to represent a rural people rather than a people in the process of becoming an urban working class.

In describing Janie's relationship to her third husband, Hurston offers a utopian betrayal of history's dialectic. She chooses not to depict the Northern migration of black people, which brought Hurston herself to New York and a college degree and brought thousands of other rural blacks to the metropolis and wage labor. . . . By their absence from her novel, industrialization, the city, the black working class are not shown to represent the future for black people. (p. 48)

Willis argues that "the muck" on which Janie and Tea Cake live and work is Hurston's creation of a mythic space. I think that this argument could be extended to see Hurston's representation of "the muck" itself as a displacement of the urban and issues of black American migration. Florida is used as a geographic space that is outside of the present migration patterns to the northern United States but an integral part of migration patterns of the Caribbean: many of the workers on "the muck" are migrants from the islands.⁴

Hurston's mythic space is defined by Willis as a "utopian fantasy"; a far more radical response to male domination is, she argues, the killing of Tea Cake. In *Their Eyes*, she concludes, it is a vision of sisterhood that is opposed to images of a "backward, oppressed, exclusionary community," and Pheobe's recognition that relations between men and women might be transformed is "the book's most radical statement."

Specifying is structured throughout by the pattern of analysis used to explicate Hurston's work. The importance of the journey and the possibility of imagining radically alternative futures are the conceptual cornerstones of the book. Hurston's journeying is characterized in the chapter title as "Wandering"; journeys in Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones, The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow* as "Arcs of Recovery." Marshall, Willis maintains, is an example of how contemporary black women writers "define themselves against the urban while at the same time [recognizing] the significant contribution city culture . . . made to their development" (p. 56). The culture of a previous generation is recovered in journeys that reconstruct the history of black people in the New World. But Marshall's work is also seen as symptomatic of a major problem facing black writers today, a problem that Willis describes as "how to preserve the black cultural heritage in the face of the homogenizing functions of bourgeois society" (p. 72). Marshall's tracing of the arc of recovery, Willis argues, results in an imaginative set of possibilities for the future that transcends Hurston's vision of sisterhood because Marshall's women are figures for the African American community as a whole.

Willis's penetrating analysis of Marshall is followed by "Eruptions of

Funk," a powerful and persuasive reading of the fiction of Toni Morrison, an earlier version of which originally appeared in *Black American Literature Forum*.⁵ This chapter not only offers an original argument about the relations between the representation of history and sexuality and between the representation of geographic space and history, but it also utilizes Willis's knowledge of Latin American literature. She makes a brief but intriguing comparison between *Song of Solomon* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *La Casa Verde*, and concludes that Morrison's narrative methods in the former novel can be thought of "as a North American variant of the magical realism . . . [of] Gabriel García Márquez" (pp. 96, 108). The footnotes to the chapter elaborate these comparisons and add a detailed explication of the relations to and differences between Morrison's metaphorical structure and the structure of the metaphors of the surrealist poets.

For Willis the importance of acute critical analyses lies not only in how literary texts use and embody history but how they envision social transformation. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* Willis sees "a suggestion of what a nonsexist, nonracist community might be" (p. 119), and in *Meridian* she finds a protagonist who can be defined as a revolutionary woman. However, out of the climate of political conservatism in the eighties, Willis argues, has also come a much more problematic representation of political activism. Willis reads Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* as indicative of the recognition that "the political movements organized around minority oppression . . . which led the challenge against state capitalism during the late sixties, have failed to achieve the radical transformation of society" (p. 129). *The Salt Eaters* is described as a postmodern novel in which revolution seems inevitable and imminent but in which revolution or even a prescription for social change cannot be represented.

Nevertheless, Willis feels that the "most compelling aspect of black women's writing today is its ability to envision transformed human relationships and the alternative futures these might shape" (p. 159). The fiction of Walker and Morrison enables a redefinition of the family and community, Hurston uses childhood as a mode of utopian realization, and Morrison transforms images of domestic life through her varieties of a three-woman household. It is this fiction, Willis asserts, that represents the future in the present, produces utopian visions out of a transformation of daily life, and makes it possible for the reader to imagine the radical reconstitution of his or her daily life and space.

It is unusual for a reviewer to discuss the footnotes of a book under review, but what is evident from the footnotes to all Willis's chapters is that she is interested not just in the relations between black women writers but in situating their work in the broad context of the fiction of Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, in making connections across literary movements and moments, and in making the politics of various modernisms explicit. Reading the footnotes carefully allows the reader to see another critical project; one that would enable black women's writing to move out from

the ghetto of marginalization and into a comparative framework of a world literature constituted in and by anti-colonial and anti-imperialist politics. Willis offers a unique critical perspective to African American cultural criticism for she seeks for the utopian and politically transformative moments in American fiction. *Specifying* is a landmark text, for while its subject is how writers have reinvented history and imagined alternative futures, its form challenges us, as literary and cultural critics, to examine our own theoretical practices and premises and to imagine, perhaps, a radically transformed literary criticism.

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Notes

1. Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, p. 3; hereafter page references given in the main text.
2. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, New York: Academic Press, 1974; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, London: Zed Press, 1982.
3. Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*, New York: Doubleday, 1987, pp. 237-54.
4. See Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America*, New York: Avon, 1981, pp. 167-206.
5. Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," *Black American Literature Forum*, no. 16, Spring 1982, pp. 34-42.