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Maternal Anger: Silent Themes and 'Meaningful Digressions' in Psychoanalytic Feminism

In a recent issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis*, Jane Gallop advances an intriguing figure for the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis. Since we tend always to speak of the influence psychoanalysis has had on feminism, she suggests that we can see psychoanalysis as the analysand—the one who does the talking—and feminism as the analyst—always listening.¹ In the position of analyst, feminism can then decipher and interpret what psychoanalysis, for all its talking, has left out, what it has been unable to say. She quotes the editors of *The (M)Other Tongue*, the collection of essays her paper analyzes, who begin to imagine another story, not what psychoanalysis has been saying to feminism, but what it could not say, and what feminism must now say to psychoanalysis: "Psychoanalysis, whether it posits in the beginning maternal presence or absence, has yet to develop a story of the mother as other than the object of the infant's desire."²

My own essay starts with this particular repression of psychoanalytic discourse—the story of maternal subjectivity, as feminism (or, preferably, as women) might tell it. In so doing, however, I find that I need to place (psychoanalytic) feminism *itself* in the position of analysand and to look at the stories it cannot tell. At issue is the process of revision—at this moment, not the revision of psychoanalysis from the perspective of feminism, but the revision of feminism from the perspective of other "others," women of color and the historical/political awareness they bring to a feminism which is situated in a psychoanalytic framework. The problem I see in Jane Gallop's figure and in the editor's introduction, is their singular nouns—"the mother" and "feminism"—which in themselves have the effect of repressing "other" stories which cannot therefore be heard. I do not want to give the impression that in placing feminism in the place of analysand, I myself take on the role of analyst—on the contrary, what I propose to do here is to revise my own reading of one particular short text, Alice Walker's essay "One Child of One's Own," posing the question that a psychoanalytic frame of reference has heretofore prevented me from asking.³

I first came to Walker's essay in an effort to define the contours of maternal subjectivity, to find texts written in a maternal voice. More specifically I searched for texts voicing maternal anger which I perceived

as a particularly pointed assertion and articulation of subjectivity. Anger, Marilyn Frye has said, is an "instrument of cartography."⁴ To be angry is to claim a place, to assert a right to expression and to discourse, a right to intelligibility. "By determining where, with whom, about what and in what circumstances one can get angry..., one can map others' concepts of who and what one is" (p. 94). Using Frye's definition, I looked at cultural representations of angry mothers and at mothers' own narratives of their experiences with anger. In particular, I focused on the prevailing taboos against mothers' expression of anger *at* their children. I concluded that the discourse of psychoanalysis and even of psychoanalytic feminism is permeated with desires for maternal approval and with fears of maternal power. It thereby colludes in silencing and repressing any form of maternal anger which is not restricted to the protection of children but is directed *at them* and is therefore perceived as profoundly threatening and dangerous even by mothers themselves.

Alice Walker's "One Child of One's Own" provided an especially interesting corroboration of my point. The essay is written in the voice of a young black mother who traces her (pilgrim's) progress through the white patriarchal and feminist world of the 1960's and 70's, through civil rights struggles, draft avoidance and anti-war protests, through the beginnings of the women's movement, through college teaching and the early days of feminist scholarship, through discussions with black women and men about racial identity. When I read this essay from the perspective of the question of maternal anger in relation to Walker's short story "Everyday Use"⁵ and her earlier essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," I only vaguely remembered hearing her give it as a paper at one of the first National Women's Studies Association Meetings in 1979. I only vaguely remembered the large lecture hall in Lawrence, Kansas, filled mainly with white feminist women high on the discovery of common concerns and the sense of shared oppression in the academy. (In fact I'm not sure now that I even noticed the composition of that audience). I only vaguely remembered the anger in Alice Walker's voice as she delivered her paper in that room and I hardly dared recall the profound discomfort her anger caused in many of us who did not want to perceive the challenge that her angry voice posed to the developing and exhilarating sense of sisterhood in struggle in which I participated. At that time, I was not concerned with Walker's maternal voice; I heard her black female voice accusing feminism of silencing the words and ignoring the bodies of black women. But when I came to the essay in its written form, that aspect of it receded into the background as I admired its effort to resolve a different question—the cultural opposition between writing and motherhood. This question, I believed, was common to black women and white. And I thought that this commonality was underscored by Walker in her reference to *A Room of One's Own*, to Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, and to writers whose impediments she appeared to share: Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, Jane Austen, the Brontes, as well as Zora Neale Hurston.

I was especially intrigued by the strategies which enabled Walker's speaker to assume the voice of both mother and writer. She articulates her own maternal voice through a radical break from her own non-writing mother who, as a representative of "women's folly," counsels her to have several more children. The speaker rejects her mother's voice and the life it represents, proposing "a plan of life that encourages *one* child of one's own, which I consider a meaningful—some might say *necessary*—digression within the work(s)" (p.362). In a strong alliance with her own daughter, she boldly sets *herself* up as the mother, exploring, in great detail, the insights that a maternal perspective on the world offers her, the ways in which it might inform rather than hamper her writing. That perspective is filled with anger: at "women's folly" which has imprisoned previous generations of black women, at the white pediatrician who coldly and distantly touches the body of her ailing child, at the white feminist who erases the words and fears the bodies of black women, at the black women who identify with their men and therefore abandon their responsibilities to women across the world. Her ability to write her anger forcefully makes it possible to strengthen the voice she has adopted; it enables her to see that in "the racism and sexism of an advanced capitalist society" which would "deny (her) the untrampled blossoming of (her) existence" her child is "only the very least of her obstacles in her chosen work" (p. 371).

In my reading of this essay, I puzzled for a long while over this particular formulation which seemed to reveal the existence of a great deal of unacknowledged anger at her daughter Rebecca. The suppression of her anger at her child emerged with greater clarity as I thought over other details of the essay: the speaker's memories of her own harassed mother as she tried to get five children ready for church, her own memories of the unpleasantness of pregnancy and the excruciating pain of childbirth, her discomfort with the changes in her body caused by pregnancy and birth, her fear that having a child had changed her irrevocably, that it would prevent her from writing, and most powerful, perhaps, her actual experience of the child as "a giant stopper in [my] throat" (pp. 381,2). I concluded that not only was Walker's speaker unable to write as a mother without separating in anger from her own mother and her "women's folly," that is, without making the break that Freud's classic psychoanalytic plot demands of daughters, but that she also adhered to a pervasive cultural taboo: her anger can never be openly and directly aimed *at* her child: its very existence must be repressed.

A question by Mary Helen Washington has prompted me to attempt to rethink this conclusion and to add this coda to my essay. When I read this paper in the fall of 1986 at the Boston Area Colloquium on Feminist Theory at Northeastern University, Washington asked why I focused my analysis on only one aspect of Walker's essay, her anger at her mother and her possible anger at her daughter, thereby ignoring "what the essay is really about," her anger at white feminists. Was I in fact ignoring "what

the essay was really about” or was there another question I should have asked: why the particular conjunction of these two themes in this essay? Why frame an essay about black women’s anger at white feminists with suggestions for the optimal reproductive choices open to women writers? And why interrupt her discussion of ways to resolve the opposition of writing and motherhood with an analysis of the absence of black voices and bodies from the important monuments of the (white) feminist movement?

Re-reading the essay with these questions in mind reveals meaningful repressions in the psychoanalytic feminist methodology I had been using in my analysis. Specifically, it glosses over the political dimensions of the anger expressed in Walker’s essay and to the relationship between motherhood and politics. Is it significant, for example, that the speaker conceived a child so that her husband might be able to avoid being drafted before he turned 26, so that they might not have to move to Canada? Is it important that her pregnancy was dominated by feelings of rage against the Vietnam War, by feelings of anxiety, depression and violence? Is it important that her writing constituted the only possible protection against her violent anger? “When I didn’t write I thought of making bombs and throwing them. Of shooting racists. Of doing away—as painlessly and neatly as possible...—with myself. Writing saved me from the inconvenience of violence” (p. 369). The essay documents how Walker’s speaker moves from the depression that comes with the suppression of anger to the forceful expression that makes anger into an effective political force. And that move, that transformation is intimately connected to her motherhood.

In an essay entitled “The Politics of Anger: On Silence, Ressentiment and Political Speech,” Peter Lyman asserts that “anger becomes a political resource only when it is collective.”⁶ In isolation, anger is privatized and neutralized, unrecognizable. This is the problem with an exclusively psychological approach to anger, Lyman suggests, and he envisions a psychology more attuned to the historical reality of our century: “A psychology of suffering would have to understand guilt, anxiety, depression, or hysteria as suppressed social relations. Psychology without this sense of social relations ‘mythologizes’ human suffering, treating it as essentially individual and as a problem of ‘personality.’ Psychology serves the interests of the hegemony when it strips human experience of its collective and active character, and conceals oppression by blaming the victims for their symptoms” (p. 58,9). Throughout her essay, Walker explores the possibilities of turning her anger into a political force by finding the collective that would recognize its legitimacy. This search constitutes a complex and tortuous process of identity-formation. And throughout this process, throughout what she refers to as her pilgrimage, the speaker finds it necessary to separate in anger from the groups she encounters and with whom she tries to bond. She finds she has to reject her maternal ancestry, the representatives of women’s folly, even while she feels the pain of that

rejection. She rejects the feminists who are incapable of seeing her as both black and a woman, and she rejects the black women and men who are incapable of seeing her as both a woman and black. How, in the face of her ensuing isolation, does Walker's speaker manage to avoid the internalization of her anger and its resultant depression?

It might now be possible to suggest that what allows her instead to speak her anger is her unquestioned alliance with her child. Walker's is a journey of forever changing allegiances, charting a heterogeneous, shifting and often self-contradictory identity.⁷ In conceiving of identity in this manner, we move beyond a Freudian model of a family romance in which the developing individual shifts her cathexes from mother, to father, to husband and then to her own child. If we confront, beyond the family, the claim of racial, class, linguistic, ethnic, gender and cultural affiliations and assimilations, and the clash between culturally dominant and subordinated groups, and if we grant, to members of each of these groups, the right to subjectivity and the access to the symbolic, we need to develop a more complicated model of identity and self-consciousness. Such a model would have to reflect a more tortuous process of adopting, and continually refining and redefining a sense of selfhood. That sense of selfhood would have to balance the personal with the political, subjective experience with a cognitive process of identification with various group-identities. It would have to include a consciousness of oppression and political struggle.

If Walker is tracing in this essay the process of identity as a process of shifting affiliations, she may be suggesting that in the course of such a process one bond would need to remain unproblematic and thereby consistently empowering. "I began to see," Walker's voice suggests, "...that her birth and the difficulties it provided us, joined me to a body of experience and a depth of commitment to my own life hard to comprehend otherwise" (p. 369). It is perhaps this sense of commitment and self-regard that makes it possible for the speaker to develop the sense of righteousness, self-protection, and self-assertion that is the precondition of a forcefully political anger. And the alliance with Rebecca may well give her both a personal sense of affirmation and a collective sense of identity. "It is not my child who has purged my face from history and herstory and left mystery just that, a mystery; my child loves my face and would have it on every page, if she could, as I have loved my own parents' faces above all the others, and have refused to let them be denied, or myself to let them go" (p. 382).

The speaker's refusal or inability to acknowledge her anger at her child may well corroborate a pervasive cultural taboo to which all women, whether white or black, are subject, as I suggested above. Yet clearly, more is at stake here. Taking Marilyn Frye's suggestion and viewing Walker's anger as an "instrument of cartography" which could help us to chart who, in this essay, she represents herself as being, we can now begin to appreciate difference—the specificity of her situation as a black, woman

writer, writing at a particular moment of feminist consciousness. We can see her anger, her various forms of anger, as strategies of self-assertion. And the self she asserts may be multiple in its adherences and divided in its alliances, but, Walker seems to suggest, it cannot be an isolated one: "We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but *sisters* really, against whatever denies us what we are" (p. 382). Such a formulation suggests, as well, that this model of identity as process is not, for Walker, an antihumanist, post-modern one of an alienated subject divided in language and against itself. If my reading is valid, Walker asserts the need for affiliation, bonding, and connection, as well as a sense of affirmation, as basic to the process of identity.

After finding in Walker's essay a model of identity and a form of anger that moves beyond a privatized psychology to political significance, I find I cannot close my reading here, but have to place it, once again, under analytic scrutiny. I find this reading also leaves something unsaid. In particular, I am still bothered by what I have referred to here as the speaker's unquestioned, unproblematic bond with her child and by the place of the child in the essay. "One Child of One's Own"—the possessive in the title is in itself disturbing. And so is, finally, the erasure of the child, as person, from the entire body of the essay. Although at times Rebecca feels like a barrier to writing, "a giant stopper in my mouth," she is most often presented as an asset, as the child who "by the age of seven, at the latest, is one's friend and can be told the fears one has, that she can by listening to one...help allay" (p. 382). When the daughter becomes "the sister" in political struggle, I worry that she disappears as daughter, as child, as person. As she loves her mother's face and would have it on every page, I worry that her own face disappears from the pages of the essay. Could this perhaps be the form that the speaker's unacknowledged anger at Rebecca takes—the form of erasure? Does anger in getting diverted from the personal and psychological to the political erase love and recognition of the individual child?

In answer to these questions, I can only suggest that Walker's speaker makes, in the essay, not a definitive but a provisional bond with her child, a bond motivated at the time by pragmatism and need—by the child's dependence on her and, conversely, by her need for one bond that will allow her to call the other allegiances in her life into question. In another context, other bonds may remain unquestioned and this one may emerge as problematic. Of all the relationships in her life, it makes eminent sense at that moment to choose this one as the one that provides the background for all the others. Yet in suppressing her anger at her child, Walker runs the risk of idealizing motherhood, of idealizing her child, and thereby of erasing her. She runs the risk of simply reversing an all too familiar relationship, that is, of turning the child into an adoring nurturing "maternal" figure, the object who enables the growth of her subjectivity. Most importantly, perhaps, through this gap in her text, she runs the risk of

going backwards, from the political back to the personal and psychological.

Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that in feminist analysis, the personal and the political must be allowed to coexist, in tension, without being collapsed (p.9). By providing us with an opportunity to understand how difficult and tenuous that coexistence is and perhaps has to be, a reading of Walker's painful, fractured and self-contradictory essay is, I hope, more than a digression, however meaningful.⁸

NOTES

¹"Reading the Mother Tongue," Vol. 13, 2 (Winter 1987), 314-29.

²Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether, eds. *The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.

³Walker's essay is in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). My own larger study on maternal anger is contained in a book manuscript, *Speaking for Her: Mothers, Daughters and Narrative*, forthcoming at Indiana University Press.

⁴*The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), p. 94.

⁵In *In Love and Trouble* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

⁶*Socialist Review* 11, 3 (1981), 69. See also Naomi Sheman, "Anger and the Politics of Naming," in Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman, eds., *Women and Language in Culture and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1980) and Elizabeth Spelman, "Anger and Insubordination," unpublished paper, Smith College.

⁷For a particularly helpful discussion of such a notion of identity derived from feminist self-consciousness and practice, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms, Contexts," in her volume *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁸I wish to thank Mary Helen Washington for her incisive questions offered with characteristic humor and trust.