

# **Alice Walker Defies Mainstream History: *Meridian* and Historiographic Metafiction**

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**Abstract** The present paper seeks to apply Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction to *Meridian* (1967) by Alice Walker. Hutcheon coined the term historiographic metafiction to refer to the tendency of literary texts to combine literature with history in order to highlight the literariness of history and the historicity of literature. Alice Walker, in her *Meridian*, yokes the idea of identity crisis to the crisis in grand narratives of history. Walker's novel adds the dimension of race to the aforementioned crisis and demonstrates how race is also an artificial narrative knitted into the texture of mainstream history. The fact that an African American novelist writes about the oppression of a female protagonist who has to endure the atrocities of a patriarchal world is the final aspect by means of which the fictionality of history is laid bare. In other words, feminine narratives in a patriarchal discourse serve as alternate possibilities to the orthodox history.

**Keywords** Narrative; Historicity; Postmodernism; Patriarchal Discourse; Linda Hutcheon

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## Introduction

In *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). Historiographic metafiction, therefore, draws attention to its own artificiality. Hutcheon continues to note the narrative that goes into the making of historiographic metafiction incorporates literature or literary narrative, history or historical narrative and theory or theoretical narrative. Hutcheon refuses to use the term postmodernism for contemporary metafiction because, she believes, it is too inclusive (*Narcissistic Narrative* 3). Her defense of the specifically literary aspect of postmodernism is expressed mainly through technical discussions of postmodern novels, one instance of which she calls historiographic metafiction.

Historiographic metafiction uses theory to comment on history. At the same time, the narrative aspect of both history and theory are highlighted. It moves on the line that divides the three modes of expression and partakes of all. It adopts the conventions used either by history, theory or literature for two purposes: on the one hand, it aims to reproduce them in order to create a structure narrative; on the other hand, it sets out to disclose the artificiality of that mode of expression and dismantle it. That is why historiographic metafiction borrows from literature, theory and history without being a subcategory of any of the three. It is not literature in that it uses actual historical data and theoretical commentary. It is not theory in that it explicitly uses narrative elements within it. It is not history since it blurs the distinction between historical fact and fiction. Historiographic metafiction manages to “problematize both the nature of the referent and its relation to the real, historical world by its paradoxical combination of metafictional self-reflexivity with historical subject matter” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 19). Historiographic metafiction serves the purposes of postmodernism. It seeks to propagate the standards of relativity and tolerance in the realm of culture and history. Historiographic metafiction deals with different truths, all of which it accepts in favor of a plurality of worlds and words:

It does not so much deny as contest the “truths” of reality and fiction—the human constructs by which we manage to live in our world. Fiction does not mirror reality; nor does it reproduce it. It cannot. There is no pretense of simplistic mimesis in historiographic metafiction. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality,

and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel. (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 40)

To deny certain truths means to have other truths at hand to which postmodernism might resort. However, it is the very notion of one truth that postmodernism seeks to refute. Therefore, the truth offered by conventional history is not denied. It is problematized through offering a series of other truths that might be true under other circumstances and conditions. Fiction does not claim to ‘mirror’ the ultimate reality that theory pretends to have access to. Instead, it offers numerous realities that are conditional and relative. Historiographic metafiction does not claim to offer the final judgment about everything, yet it does intend to appear one, among many, of possible interpretations of reality and truth. It foregrounds its own discursive nature through showing to the reader how it has been constructed, what materials it has used and what purposes it seeks to achieve. To put it in a nutshell, historiographic metafiction shows how novels occur and is interested in foregrounding the process, while at the same time it “remains fundamentally contradictory, offering only questions, never final answers” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 43). Hence, historiographic metafiction questions the strictly defined borders between fiction and history not so as to privilege one over the other, but “in order to reveal both the limits and powers of historical knowledge” (223).

Metafictional novel has been criticized as being removed from life. Jameson and other critics believe that what they call the postmodern novel, fails to reflect the concerns and complications of real life, instead busying itself with textual complexities and insubstantial ideas that are specific to a late capitalist culture. Hutcheon argues, instead, that metafiction represents a different kind of reality, one that has recently emerged. This new postmodern kind of reality requires, therefore, a new medium, form and content in order to be expressed. This type of narrative “is sterile, that it has nothing to do with ‘life.’ The implied reduction of ‘life’ to a mere product level that ignores process is what this book aims to counteract” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 5). The postmodern era has distanced itself from mere concern with the final product (realism) and has become oriented toward the process by means of which a product is created. This process, which accounts for the self-reflexivity of metafictional novels, has two main focuses: “the first is on its linguistic and narrative structures, and the second is on the role of the reader” (6).

The first focus—concerned with narrative and language—is achieved through the metafictional aspect of the novel. The novel highlights the fact that it has been fashioned through the medium of words and that it enjoys the facilitating effects

of a narrative structure. The second focus—awareness of the reader—is achieved through contents that highlight either the role of the reader in completing the fictional world, or the artificiality of the world and the discourses surrounding the reader. The most extreme form of such metafictional structure is “an explicit thematization—through plot allegory, narrative metaphor, or even narratorial commentary” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 23). In other words, the novel overtly directs reader’s attention toward the process of its own creation. This attempt at shattering the long-held beliefs about narrative structure and offering new formal and thematic elements is not totally new though.

Patricia Waugh uses the linguistic terminology of Saussure in order to discuss the metafictional novel. According to Waugh, “each metafictional novel self-consciously sets its individual parole against the langue (the codes and conventions) of the novel tradition” (11). This definition is significant in that it does not exclude metafiction from the spectrum of fiction and novel, but considers it a continuation, an offshoot or a reworking of traditional novelistic material into something new that reflects recent social, political and economic concerns. She goes so much as to call metafiction “not so much a subgenre of the novel as a tendency within the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (Waugh 14). In other words, metafiction does not coin new terms, techniques and methods, but takes the previously used techniques and re-appropriates them for the world of postmodernism.

### **Meridian and the Postmodern Historiography**

The present article investigates the novel *Meridian* (1976) by Alice Walker in the context of historiographic metafiction. Although the paper does not seek to be a biographical analysis of Walker, an approach that takes certain highlights of her life into account can reveal the specific meaning of words such as history and literature at the time of writing the novel. Moreover, it emphasizes how Walker passed through the veneer of traditional definitions of such concepts before redefining them. The two most important elements that have long influenced her understanding of the phenomena around her are her gender and her race. Being marginalized on account of these two, she gains access to an outsider’s perspective on official history and literature. Second, the relation between her other works/ theories and the revision of history can yield a fresh outlook upon the concept. Womanism, a term coined by Walker to refer to her specific brand of feminism, illustrates her struggle to challenge the oppressions of both racism and sexism.

### **Alice Walker's Second Sight**

Alice Walker's childhood and certain life events provided her with the double consciousness in an American context which yields one "no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 8). Du Bois maintains that in such an environment "one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (8).

Walker's position within the aforementioned context can serve two constructive purposes for her despite its undeniable painful and destructive effects: on the one hand, it offers her the outsider position through which she can revise the inherited narratives of history through her novels and arrive recount what has been silenced and left unsaid by official history. On the other hand, and on a related note, she gains access to creativity through her newly found outsider's position and is able to express the unsaid in influential ways. The idea of womanism, which results from both positions, is the notion that radicalizes Walker's fiction and bestows upon them a revisionary perspective on history.

### **Womanism**

In *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker* (2011), Walker maintains that womanism is first of all "feminist, but it is feminist from a culture of color. So there's no attempt to evade the name 'feminism,' which is honorable" (260). Walker added that she has inherited the term from her African American culture "because when you did something really bold and outrageous and audacious as a little girl, our parents would say, 'You're acting womanish'" (260). As a result, and opposed to the white culture, "womanism affirms that whole spectrum of being which includes being outrageous and angry and standing up for yourself, and speaking your word and all of that" (260).

Womanism, in other words, is an attempt to correct the essentialist aspects of feminism as a discourse traditionally voicing the problems of white, middle class, European women. A womanist analysis takes into account all the ways through which women of color live, communicates, create and interact with the world. Womanism seeks to dwell upon the positive ways through which women and men contribute to a healthy society. It also concentrates on the oppressions women struggle against.

This paper uses the term womanism as an anti-foundational aspect of feminism.

In other words, it aims at investigating the correlation between *Meridian*, a novel that “weaves together civil rights, feminist, and religion-and-literature discourses” (Wingard 98), and history by focusing both on the idea of metafiction and through detecting womanism as the element which enables the writer to offer an alternative version of history. Womanism here is against feminism in two senses: first, unlike the word feminism which (as Walker makes clear) comes from a French root, Womanism openly uses the word “woman” as its title. This both shatters the taboo of bringing women before public eyes and disrupts the technical aura implicit in the word feminism which can alienate illiterate, marginalized women. Clenora Hudson-Weems discusses another aspect of the difference between womanism and feminism by noting the ambiguous nature of the latter: “The term ‘woman’, and by extension ‘womanism,’ is far more appropriate than ‘female’ (‘feminism’) because of one major distinction—only a female of the human race can be a woman. ‘Female’, on the other hand, can refer to a member of the animal or plant kingdom as well as to a member of the human race” (cited in Phillips 46).

Womanism is, thus, more capable of offering a more fluid definition of women of color. As Paula Gunn Allen says about American Indian culture, “American Indians are not merely doomed victims of western imperialism or progress; they are also the carriers of the dream that most activist movements in the Americas claim to be seeking” (17). Similar to American Indian culture, African American culture is more than a tragic history of slavery and domination. *Meridian*, which Walker would later on call a womanist novel, “combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement” (Hendrickson 113).

### **History/ Literature in Walker’s Novels**

Memory and history have a liberating *emotional affect* attached to them that is heightened in the process of writing. However, one should be aware of the sense that history is used by Alice Walker in her writings. Walker adopts a large-scale view of history, in the sense that her version is not one of specific facts and events related to specific periods and epochs. Her history, as she asserts, is a general record of past experience, from the most ancient times to the present; from the most personal concerns to the most public ones:

You have to take the very long view of history. If, in fact, the first people were Africans, if all of us are Africans, and if, in fact, worship is innate, and if, in fact, the ancient people were just as clever as the modern people, and if, in fact, you can say the woman’s body, in the way that it gives birth and replenishes

people, is a sort of symbolic earth in that the earth also gives birth and peoples the world with trees and flowers—they're connected, I think, in the psyche, in the ancient psyche. (Walker, *The World Has Changed* 383)

Walker's ancient, archetypal psyche highly resembles Jung's collective unconscious. In this sense, we can argue that what happens to a black, female protagonist in one of Walker's novels is on a par with what has happened to the archetypal black female all through the centuries, from the most ancient civilization of Egypt to modern Africa. Walker's version of history is synonymous with 'the ancient psyche' of the black race, which keeps manifesting itself via several forms in civilization. There is yet another difference between Walker's history and mainstream history.

While mainstream history consists of the official record of what has happened to the victorious throughout the ages and omits the voice of the underdog, the history that is told through the pages of Walker's novels is the unofficial account of the voiceless whose narrative has so far been left untold. *Meridian* opens with a quotation from *Black Elk Speaks* that highlights the importance of untold history: "I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now... I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young" (1). Anne M. Downey contends that one of the defining aspects of the intertextual relation between the two works is the "image of a history being murdered" (44).

The voice speaks about looking back on the past that has formerly been unavailable to him (I did not know then how much was ended) and finds new significance in it. History, in this sense, consists of re-encountering events that has befallen one and regarding them through the new light of the knowledge of the present. The history that goes into the making of *Meridian* is of this kind. The writer adopts the history of a certain period with the intention of shedding light in the marginalized aspects of that period. It tells the story (or the stories) of a revolutionary period through a novel perspective: neither that of the official culture and government which opposed the revolutionary tendencies of the nonconformists, nor the mainstream revolutionaries who had adopted the policy of total antagonism toward the existing order. Her account is that of a black woman that is twice marginalized and banished. On the one hand, she is rejected by the official society because she belongs to the revolutionary ideology, and on the other hand she does not fit into the ideology of the freedom fighters. Here is another spot where Walker's womanist perspective finds voice and outlet through the character of Meridian.

Walker offers a series of definitions for the word Meridian that are divided into

nouns and adjectives. Among the numerous definitions offered, what is most fitting to the protagonist of the novel is the concept of loftiness and high altitude (both figurative and literal) that is common to most of the definitions. *Meridian*, represents the radical, ambitious character of Meridian Hill that moves against the grain of any mainstream trend. This radical quality along with the outsider position of Meridian turns her into a defragmented subject with a split identity.

### **The Split Identity: Alice Walker and Defragmentation of History**

It is noteworthy that the notion of the fragmented self and the split identity enters Walker's writings through her personal, direct encounter with the world. Melanie L. Harris maintains that Walker's endless quest in the world of fiction as well as in the real world is a reflection of her inner search for a unified, whole self: "Walker explains that her constant search for wholeness as an adult is directly tied to the sense of fragmentation that she experienced as a child. Answering her mother's question about why she so often travels back to the South, after having explored different parts of the world, and what exactly she is looking for, Walker replies, 'a wholeness'" (61).

Here again, the remarkable role of history and past experiences in shaping the present is highlighted. Fed up with conventional interpretations of historical events and disappointed with failed sporadic attempts to offer a comprehensive view of the past, Walker seeks to write her way out of a fragmented world. The 'holeness' she is looking for is not found, of course, which is why the search never stops. The gap that she finds in the inherited tradition ("history, literature and people" (61)) needs to be filled with the silenced voices of people who are able to come up with alternative, liberating versions of history. This is what Walker attempts to carry out through her characters, plot structure and themes. Harris maintains that "Walker demonstrates her awareness of how racist ideology renders the history and stories of black people invisible (63).

The history that has been rendered 'invisible' comes to the fore in Walker's writings and turns into the reliable account that has the capacity to turn down the formerly acceptable accounts. A writer, in Walker's opinion, is one who is capable of identifying the unheard voices within the mainstream history through a totally human glance that can observe the narrative of those who have been forced to remain silent.

The narrative of *Meridian* focuses on the life of a marginal yet controversial character. Such a debatable theme is coupled with certain narrative and fictional techniques and figures that can disrupt traditional process of narration. Such



techniques, most of which associated with postmodernism, defamiliarize the genre as well as the process of literary comprehension, thereby allowing the reader to understand the perspective of the silenced more fully.

### **Meridian and Metafiction**

It can be argued that Alice Walker's fiction is the account of the silenced voices throughout history. Her plots, consisting of marginalized characters and events, shed light on darker corners of history and enable the reader to see recorded, mainstream history from a new aspect. In other words, Walker sets out, consciously and intentionally, to create unconventional narratives that disrupts the taken-for-granted order of events and offer alternative versions of history. This does not happen by manipulating or changing the actual historical facts in any way, but via telling history from the point of view of those who have mainly been either victimized or neglected.

The writing style and the method that go into the making of a liberating narrative function on two levels: content and form. At the level of content, the novel's protagonist and the time period in which she has been situated are chosen in a way so as to underline the marginality and voicelessness of certain people and political inclinations. Meridian Hill, the protagonist of the novel, is alienated from her contemporary mainstream society in several ways. First, she is a black person in a white society. This works toward widening the gap between her and the society. Secondly, Meridian is a woman in a patriarchal, masculine society. In other words, Meridian has to absorb and accept the patriarchal ideology of her time that dictates her to accept her position as a minor member and be content with serving the men. Thirdly, and due to the previous two points, Meridian is even estranged from her own community since she leads a bohemian unconventional life. Finally, Meridian fails to be inducted into the field of the Civil Rights Movement since she refuses to attach her worldview to the pro-violence policies that are beginning to sprout especially toward women; instead, "her only rebellious recourse is silence" (Pifer 51).

In this final sense, Meridian Hill serves as a perfect example of Walker's womanist criteria. As Nah Dove asserts, "from antiquity, as spiritual, military, and political leaders, women's roles have been critical in the effort to take control of lands, resources, and energies from alien occupation. Not surprisingly, few scholars have brought this to light" (532). And *Meridian* is an attempt at offering a revised version of this history and rewriting it in a way that "points out that the Civil Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism" (Stein 130). Far from being a one-way indictment of the white society in favor of an angelic

black community, writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also speak of how “the physical and mental abuse of African women is condoned not only by European women and men but also by African women and men” (Dove 534). The revisionary historiographic aspect of the novel gains significance in a protagonist who is marginalized and outcast from all communities around her. Such a position allows her not to fall into the trap of being enamored with any group or movement and instead gives her the capability to detect the shortcomings of the group with which she is affiliated.

On the level of form, *Meridian* achieves singularity and independence through resorting to techniques of postmodern literature and metafiction. Janelle Collins opines that “the nonlinear structure and fragmented narrative reflect and refract the multiple discourses which inform the novel” (161-162). The protagonist “is introduced to the reader as a focused personality at the end of her quest. The flashbacks that give the novel its particular rhythm show Meridian beginning her journey on the periphery of the road, attracted to the distractions, unaware of any pattern to her life” (Brown 21). Moreover, the novel defamiliarizes the genre of the novel and attracts the audience’s attention toward the fictionality of the text they are reading. In other words, in an attempt to foreground the textual nature of official history (and consequently its lack of access to absolute truths), *Meridian* sets out to divulge its own artificiality.

One way by means of which *Meridian* distances itself from a conventional narrative and draws attention to its fictional nature is the way it constantly flouts the boundaries between genres and offers a unique version of various genres such as poetry, fiction and drama. At various stages throughout the novel, we are offered short poems that both serve as shedding light on the action of the characters and, in some cases, function as independent chapters by themselves. The following short poem that starts a chapter called “the driven snow” recapitulates what the chapter narrates through prose in a poetic manner: “We are chaste and pure as/ The driven snow./ We watch our manners, speech/ And dress just so:/ And in our hearts we carry our/ Greatest fame/ That we are blessed to perpetuate/ The Saxon name! (Walker 89).

The chapter begins with how Meridian finds a discrepancy between the pureness and beauty of Saxon and the ugliness and sin that she hides in her heart. Yet as she becomes more and more familiar with her new life and surroundings she realizes that the contrast she had found earlier is, in fact, a harmony. The poem begins with an assertion that ‘we’ are as innocent as snow. The next two lines ironically question the innocence of the first two lines. In other words, they

highlight how voices of the poem have to ‘watch’ their appearance and align it with their inner purity. Their chastity is dependent upon their appearance that has to be monitored carefully. The fifth and the sixth lines further underline the discrepancy that might exist between the appearance and the heart. The poem ends with ‘the Saxon name’. The reader is led to believe that it is a name worthy of maintaining and upholding. However, the hints at contrasts that exist between the appearance and inner heart are brought into the open through the chapter: “Meridian, the former wife and mother, already felt herself to be flying false colors as an ‘innocent’ Saxon student. The scenes she personally witnessed in the Atlanta streets, combined with this, caused the majority of her waking moments to seem fragmented, surreal” (92).

What Meridian had perceived as a contrast between her guilty self and the innocent atmosphere surrounding her was not contradictory at all. Atlanta streets are just as mean, depraved and guilt-ridden as Meridian believes herself to be. On a deeper level, the contrast is reasserted. This time, however, Meridian and Saxon change places. While Meridian’s conscience is moral enough to make her feel guilty, the community where she has entered is characterized by no such thing as conscience. Poems that appear at several places throughout the novel reiterate the narrative told through the prose, yet give it a second, deeper level which is characterized by poetical defamiliarization. This serves to distance the novel from a merely conventional, realistic rendering of a series of events and turns it into a combination of different texts, genres and modes of writing.

Another formal feature that serves to blur the generic boundaries is that in some parts of the novel, the text resembles more and more that of a play. One point that directs us to this conclusion is the fact that dialogues abound in the novel. A large portion of the process of characterization and plot development occurs through dialogues between characters. Dialogues in themselves cannot adequately disrupt one genre in favor of another. Therefore, extra factors are needed in order to prove that the genre of the novel has been disrupted through adoption of dramatic techniques and conventions. In *Meridian*, certain parts closely resemble stage description common in dramatic works:

*Lynne*: She is sitting on the porch steps of a battered wooden house and black children all around her. They look, from a distance, like a gigantic flower with revolving human petals. Lynne is the center. Nearer to them Truman notices the children are taking turns combing her hair. Her hair—to them lovely because it is easy to comb—shines, held up behind by black and brown hands as if it is a train. (127)

While the present tense, along with the matter of fact manner of describing the scene, serves to turn the paragraph into a dramatic stage description, there are elements that do not allow a new genre to take over a previous one. Here, for instance, some of the descriptions are highly poetic (like a gigantic flower with revolving human petals), unlike what is normally found in stage descriptions of plays. Certain other sentences (the part on Truman or children's feelings when watching Lynne) offer information unavailable to the objective glance in a stage description.

Intertextuality, defined by Julia Kristeva as “the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (15), is another feature of *Meridian* that gives it a postmodern, metafictional aspect. The mixture of different systems of signs occurs first through the combination of various genres (as discussed above) and, secondly, through the combination of various texts. One example is the chapter called “The Recurring Dream” which begins in a manner that reminds one of is reminiscent of the famous public speech, “I have a dream”, which was given by Martin Luther King, Jr. that called for terminating racism in the United States. The beginning of the chapter is metafictional since it foregrounds the process and the act of writing and creating fiction: “She dreamed 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 at the end” (Walker, *Meridian* 115). This beginning short paragraph, which is repeated three times, reminds one of Luther King's speech where several paragraphs begins with the phrase “I have a dream”. This rhetorical device which is called Anaphora is used to attach emphasis to a certain concept, sentence or structure. In *Meridian*, however, it has been used to direct attention toward the application of such a technique and structure in another important text about freedom and racism. Reference to the process of reading and writing novels and fiction is again found after the three identical paragraphs, when the audience is informed that “even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution—and Nearly all of the them did—the dream did not cease” (115). Here again, we can detect a remote intertextual reference to Emma Bovary and her reading of novels. Several other instances of intertextuality can be found in the novel. In fact, one of the factors that turn the novel into a metafiction is the abundance of such references that serve to undermine the authority found in and expected of classic, realistic novels. Here, we encounter a text that is greatly dependent upon the cultural, political, historical and ideological context from which it has sprung. Another chapter called “Truman

Held” consists only of a poem by Anna Akhmatova, the famous Russian poet:

The Last Toast

I drink to our ruined house,  
 To the dolor of my life,  
 To our loneliness together:  
 And to you I raise my glass,  
 To lying lips that have betrayed us,  
 To dead-cold, pitiless eyes,  
 And to the hard realities:  
 That the world is brutal and coarse,  
 That God in fact has not saved us. (Walker, *Meridian* 125)

Another factor that undermines the conventions of realism and turns the novel into a meta-text is the fragmentary nature of several chapters. The plot of the novel is far from being a direct rendering of its story. Instead, the reader is presented with numerous digressions that shed light on the history of the times and provide glimpses into the lives of minor characters and offer descriptions of locations that have played significant roles in central historical upheavals. The chapter called “Gold”, for instance, highlights the conventional nature of the value system that governs the society. Beginning with an account of how Meridian, as a child, finds a piece of precious metal, the chapter goes on to show how what is considered unimaginably priceless in one culture, may turn out to be of little or no value in another. The chunk of gold is covered with dirt to the extent that its shiny surface cannot be detected at the beginning. The piece of gold is, therefore, found in a state of neglect. Meridian cleans the piece of gold and shows it to her family:

But her mother was not impressed. Neither was her father or her brothers. She took her bar of gold and filed all the rust off it until it shone like a huge tooth. She put it in a shoe box and buried it under the magnolia tree that grew in the yard. About once a week she dug it up to look at it. Then she dug it up less and less... until finally she forgot to dig it up. Her mind turned to other things. (Walker 43)

The conventionality of social norms and criteria is revealed in this short chapter. Gold is not precious in itself, but it is regarded as valuable only because people treat it as so. When Meridian realizes that her family does not care about the gold and

does not attach any significance to it, she begins to treat it as something worthless and finally “her mind turned to other things.”

One final factor that turns the novel into a metafictional rendering of the historical period of the Civil Rights Movement is the criticism of media and the discrepancy between reality and fiction. In *Meridian*, Walker “enacts a literary analysis of the *interaction* between the media and the public as dramatized through the character of Meridian Hill” (Barker 134). On several occasions during the novel, the reliability and centrality of official media is pitted against the minor narratives of marginal characters who reject their authority. In a brilliant criticism of conventional and traditional outlooks upon women, the novel shows how media actually reproduce such beliefs and ideas rather than attempting to undermine and reject them:

She read *Seppia*, *Tan*, *True Confessions*, *Real Romances* and *Jet*. According to these magazines, Woman was a mindless body, a sex creature, something to hang false hair and nails on. Still, they helped her know her marriage was breaking up. Yet the break, when it came, was not—as she had feared and sometimes hoped—cataclysmic. In fact, in a way she hardly noticed it. It did not come at once, with a heated argument, fighting, packing or slamming doors. It came in pieces, some larger or smaller than others. (Walker, *Meridian* 65)

The beginning of the excerpt shows how clichéd understanding of women is encouraged in mass media. Woman, far from being a complex human being with complex needs, is something “to hang false hair and nails on”. The next sentence seems, initially, to reaffirm the reliability of mass media after having rejected them as baseless and false. However, at a closer inspection, it becomes clear that the purpose of the sentence is not to confirm the validity of media, but to show their central role in and influence upon the lives of the masses. The next sentence sets out, again, to undermine the acceptability of media. Meridian whose idea of a divorce has been shaped and distorted by images given to her through media, realizes, through her own divorce, the discrepancy between reality and what the media shows to its audiences. While she expects slamming of doors, shouts and insults before the breakup occurs, she realizes that it resembles more a process than a sudden and violent revolution. Mainstream media exerts a powerful influence on the lives of people in the novel, nonetheless:

Years ago when he was dating the white exchange students she had asked him, the words blurted out in so thick a shame he knew she intended to forget she'd ever asked—"But what do you *see* in them?"

And he had replied cruelly, thoughtlessly, in a way designed to make her despise the confines of her own provincial mind:

"They read *The New York Times*." (Walker, *Meridian* 141)

What the narrator calls 'the confines of her own provincial mind' is pitted against those who "read *The New York Times*." *Meridian* is compared, and compares herself, with more modern students who read fashionable newspapers and possess cosmopolitan minds. Yet the tone of the paragraph is highly derogatory which directs the reader toward the undertones of criticism toward the mass media.

### **Meridian and Revision of History**

As mentioned earlier, Walker's fiction is a response to the exclusiveness of mainstream history that remove from the general picture the suffering and vicissitudes of the disadvantaged. According to Harris, Walker, "notes how racist ideology can be sewn into college and university curriculums simply by ignoring or not teaching the history, literature, and work of marginalized peoples, including writers of African descent" (65). Thus, racism is not restricted to taking military action against the people of color. Walker's discussion of universities is significant in this regard. As centers of knowledge that have the responsibility to propagate knowledge, universities are presumably the objective, impartial circulators of knowledge.

Yet in the process of implicitly attaching value to the white culture while ignoring the black one, they serve the purposes of racist ideology. What she calls 'true' history is not what is found with history books and records, but what can be found between the lines of folk songs, stories and anecdotes. The idea of superior knowledge is rejected on the basis that it neglects the achievements of women, blacks and any other group or community that is simply situated beyond the borders of the mainstream society. Therefore, Walker's own narratives turn into anti-histories that provide a more accurate account of history. The brilliance of *Meridian* is that it focuses the narration on a female black activist who is doubly banished from the society. In other words, Meridian Hill is a marginalized figure who is even banished from the margins to which she originally belongs. In an exchange between Meridian's mother and her father, Indians occupy center stage and turn into the topic of the conversation. Yet the reader sees how irreconcilable the ideas of two equally

marginalized people (Meridian's mother and father) on a single issue can be:

"The Indians were living right here, in Georgia," said her father, "They had a town, an alphabet, a newspaper. They were going about their business, enjoying life... it was the same with them all over the country, and in Mexico, South America... doesn't this say anything to you?"

"No," her mother would say.

"And the women had babies and made pottery. And the men sewed moccasins and made drums out of hides and hollow logs."

[...]

"It was a life, ruled by its own spirits."

"That's what you claim, anyway."

"And where is it now?"

Her mother sighed, fanning herself with a fan from the funeral home. "I never worry myself about those things. There's such a thing as progress. I didn't invent it, but I'm not going to argue with it either. As far as I'm concerned those people and how they kept off mosquitoes hasn't got a thing to do with me." (Walker, *Meridian* 16)

Meridian's father attempts to show how impressive the Indian civilization was before it was eradicated by Europeans. He shows that the Indians had everything that has been considered as valuable by the western civilization, while they also had something more; a life 'ruled by its own spirits'. In other words, the father attempts to reject the absolute validity of western civilization at the same time as showing how equally valid can the civilization of the Indians be. When mentions the special spirit of the Indian civilization, he is hinting at how relative and flexible words such as civilization can be. He attempts to say that although the Indian civilization might have been different from the western, European civilization, it was nonetheless valid in its own right and deserved to be respected and realized.

Another factor that turns *Meridian* into a revisionary history is its constant allusion to historical characters and incidents. The characters and events that have been inserted in the text of the novel serve two purposes: first, they provide the necessary background for the action and motivation of the characters. Secondly, the sum of such historical references creates a second, deeper layer that turns the novel into a critical commentary on a history of injustice: "Why, Che Guevara," she said dreamily, then blinked her eyes. "Truman?" He had popped up too often in her life for her to be surprised. "You look like Che Guevara. Not," she began, and caught



her breath, “not by accident I’m sure.” She was referring to his olive-brown skin, his black eyes, and the neatly trimmed beard and moustache he’d grown since the last time she saw him (Walker, *Meridian* 10).

When Meridian Hill finds similarities between Truman Held and Che Guevara, she is bestowing upon her certain roles that she expects him to live up to him. However, as the novel shows about every character, narrative line or historical fact, the gap between expectation and reality is too wide to be bridged.

The fragmentary nature of the novel that was described in the previous section appears here to, pursue a different purpose. A book that includes an official record of the history of any era is consistent and reliable and starts from point A and moves to point B in an order (usually chronological) that serve the purpose of making the discourse the writer advocates seem valid. The structure of *Meridian*, however, is far from consistent and direct. In the novel, the revolutionary era is depicted through a series of seemingly irrelevant chapters that describe certain events or characters. While they are unrelated to the main storyline on the surface, however, on a second deeper level, they represent the fate of the revolution and the revolutionary forces at the time. In other words, if these scattered characters and events are put together like the pieces of a giant puzzle, the result will be a huge panorama of narratives that have all been left out from the mainstream history books. The chapter called “The Wild Child” is one such example that ends as follows: “The next morning, while Meridian phoned schools for special children and then homes for unwed mothers—only to find there were none that would accept Wile Chile—The Wild Child escaped. Running heavily across a street, her stomach the largest part of her, she was hit by a speeder and killed” (Walker, *Meridian* 25).

Here, Wile Chile represents the third position the best representative of which is Meridian herself. “Schools for special children and [...] homes for unwed mothers” (28) comprise the safe, closely defined margins that the official power structures have allowed to exist. Such places, however, does not accept Wile Chile whose nature is too revolutionary and ground-breaking to be included in them. The fate of Wile Chile is determined by her extremely radical nature. Similar to rare marginalized figures who did not feel at home in neither pole (neither the extreme belonging to the activists of the Civil Rights Movement nor the white America); Wile Chile has no choice but to be altogether eliminated from the scene. Her sin is that she cannot be defined by any criteria whatsoever. So she must be killed in order for the scene to continue undisturbed. *Meridian*, however, revises history by foregrounding exactly such characters who have been altogether removed from any account.

## Conclusion

The present paper investigates the power of narrative in Alice Walker's *Meridian* to study its endeavor to unveil the truth hidden beneath historical facts. While history turns into an official account that silences or leaves out minor accounts in favor of the bigger picture, the kind of fiction Alice Walker writes—especially in *Meridian*—focuses on the minor cases and the omitted historical characters and events: “In her own country in West Africa she had been raised in a family whose sole responsibility was the weaving of intricate tales with which to entrap people who hoped to get away with murder” (31).

Just as the tales woven by native African had the power to ‘entrap’ the wrongdoers, the tale woven by Alice Walker in *Meridian* sets out to give voice to the real victims left out from the pages of mainstream history. As a revision of history, *Meridian* manages, both through the special use of postmodern and metafictional narrative techniques, and through an unprecedented encounter with historical material, to retell the history of a specific era that focuses on the silenced margins. As Lauren S. Cardon states in her study of the Jewish character Lynne Rabinowitz, *Meridian* is not limited to the concerns of the African American women, but it celebrates all the efforts by ethno-racial groups and movements who “publication, had initiated nationalist movements to advocate for civil rights, foster cultural awareness and pride, and resist dominant culture conformity” (159).

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