

**STRATEGIES OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN
TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*
AND ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN***

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***Abstract:** Marginalized cultures regularly seek strategies for supplanting the norms of the dominant culture in order to survive the encroaching sovereignty of its hegemonic discourse. This article aims to identify African-American underlying strategies for resisting the “white” culture, as represented in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. The subalterns in these novels use faultlines to destabilize the nodal points on which an overarching culture’s field of discursivity is installed. The dissident culture ultimately opens up spaces for residual and emergent signifiers to redefine the existing signs in the supposedly fixed field of discursivity.*

***Keywords:** dominant discourse, faultlines, field of discursivity, nodal points, residual and emergent elements, dissidence*

1. Introduction

Subaltern cultures constantly look for the best way to survive, despite the overarching presence of the hegemonic discourse, and try to find strategies to confront or assimilate the dominant culture’s norms. Therefore, reading ethnic novels would help us realize that the search for the roots of one’s own culture and the struggle to assimilate different cultural codes are not issues specific to one culture. As cases for this analytical study, we will turn to *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Meridian* by Alice Walker, each written at a different stage of emancipation, but pregnant with strategies for resisting the encroaching white culture. Here we attempt to see what strategies the marginalized communities adopt to show cultural resistance.

To develop resistance strategies, initially, we need to study the discourse that regulates the marginalized cultures. Discourse is a network of different sources of powers wherein meaning is fixated, and the interests of the dominant ideology are often secured. In discourse, the articulation cannot simply be practiced and confined to linguistic phenomena and involves various sources, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 109), “pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discourse formation is structured.” Correspondingly, Althusser explains that ideology is a system of interconnected ideas devised to control the masses. And the ideological beliefs are given credit and receive widespread approval with the help of what Althusser (1968: 701) calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) - the institutions that help

language fixate the meaning of fluid signifiers and naturalize the meaning assigned to the signs by the dominant power.

Meridian and *Beloved* portray people and societies that attempt to construct counter-discourses which usually put in suspense and then reformulate nodal points –privileged signs around which the other signs are ordered (Laclau, Mouffe 2001: 112) – of the dominant culture. These novels demonstrate how the dominant white discourse could reach what Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 111) call “a partial limitation of a surplus of meaning”; residual elements’ bombardment of the dominant discourse opens up space for articulating the already existing cultural elements.

In theoretical terminology, “as the surplus of meaning constantly overflows society, one can always find elements that have not yet been articulated, and around which there can be conflicts of meanings. This means that society is constantly being subverted and thus cannot determine itself as a ‘sutured totality’” (Grange 2014: 57). In this sense, the banished signifiers in the field of discursivity begin to subvert the dominant discourse. Consequently, the possibility of fixating the meanings and abandoning other significances is ruled out as “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (Laclau, Mouffe 2001: 112). Stephan Greenblatt (2010: 252) posits that “moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement.” He states that resistance is inherent in any social system. Therefore, we can explain how the African American writers develop counter-hegemonic discourses by articulating elements residual to their ethnic cultures.

A discourse always claims fixity, and within it, a wide range of predictable possibilities is available and interconnected. A discourse “stop(s) the sliding of the signs in relation to one another and hence [...] create[s] a unified system of meaning” (Jorgenson and Philips 2002: 27). There are “some privileged discursive points of this partial fixation” of meaning within a discourse which are called nodal points (Laclau, Mouffe 2001: 112). And in our argument, these belong to the white culture around which the marginalized cultures and discourses, such as the African American ones, are defined. The marginalized cultures consciously or subconsciously attach new significance to the already existing signs. This process delegitimizes and denaturalizes the supremacy of the white culture over other ethnicities. Contradictions create what in Sinfield’s (1992) terminology are called *faultlines*, which can be regarded as some specific points in the text “at which the hegemonic surface may crack and reveal the writing forces underneath” (Bertens 2013: 203). Besides, the faultlines can destabilize the nodal points of the dominant discourse.

2. *Beloved*: The shameless beauty and the clash of meanings

Morrison’s strategy for resistance is articulated through the resisting characters of the novel: Baby Suggs started her resistances by constructing and unearthing the emergent residual elements of the past and thus subverting the official version of religion and the white church. She articulates her African slave religion in her outdoor preaching in the Clearing. Throughout her secret outdoor preaching, holy Baby Suggs redefines African American identity, teaches the members of her community to look at themselves from a different point of view,

and remember the past in order to reconstruct it following their African tradition. She abandons the white church for it does not address the lives and concerns of African Americans: "I ain't set foot in one [of the white churches] in ten years. [...] wasn't none. I dislike the place I was before this last one, but I did get to church every Sunday same kind of way" (Morrison 2014: 146). When the norms of the dominant discourse suppress minority groups, dissidences will develop and grow in the form of some faultlines, e.g. "wasn't none", and also they will construct alternative strategies to defy the official version; for instance, Baby Suggs worships, but in "some kind of way." In this sense, the meaning of worship is systematically changed by Baby Suggs, who articulates it as a way of relocating the nodal point in her African American discourse. Dwight Hopkins believes that the religion constructed by the enslaved African Americans is capable of generating cultural resistances:

Assembled deep in the woods [...] African Americans found worship space in which to thrive by maintaining moral in situations they seemed hopeless; preserving mental sanity in the face of the irrational white world [...] synthesizing memories of African religious structure and practices with reinterpreted Christian beliefs to build a unique African American theology under slavery, organizing and plotting slave political and cultural resistance. (2003: 824)

Enslaved African Americans will learn throughout their religious gatherings that the word "irrational" can also be attached to the white world/people. In the Clearing gatherings, the dominant discourse's socio-cultural and economic oppression is resisted and negated. In this sense, Baby Suggs' creation of a specific religious consciousness and cultural awareness can be seen as an emergent element articulated in the African American discourse. Enslaved African Americans' meetings in the Clearing apply floating signifiers in the field of discursivity to redefine the blackness of enslaved African Americans and construct a space in which the oppressed community can resist the dominant culture. Floating signifiers, such as the Ring Shout dance, and Call and Response preaching, and also redefined elements, such as the unusual invitation to laugh, dance, and sing, are all incorporated into her preaching:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing man, crying women and then it got mixed up. [...] In the silence that followed Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meeks or its glory- bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. (Morrison 2014: 87-88)

The dominant discourse is negated throughout the above faultlines by dissident voices urging the enslaved African Americans to laugh, sing, and dance. Even the language of the white sermons is abandoned in the above Clearing sermon. The white definition of God is deconstructed; God's grace is no longer a divine gift, but a human creation invented by human imagination, and liberation is not just that granted from above, but a human possibility.

Baby Suggs' preaching redefines the fixed meanings in the white discourse. As a result, deconstruction is at the heart of Baby Suggs' resistance strategy. She aims at deconstructing the hegemonic nodal points of the dominant discourse: "Black consciousness is an attempt to recover a past deliberately destroyed by slave masters[...] There is only one course of action for the black community, and

that is to destroy the oppressor's definition of blackness" (Cone 1986: 12-13). In the following sermon, Baby Suggs replaces the hate and contempt for the black of the dominant white discourse with that of love and respect:

"Here", she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back [...] And o my people, out yonder, hear me, they don't love your neck unnoosed and straight. (Morrison 2014: 88-89)

The assumption that what the white discourse considered natural is culturally, racially, and ideologically constructed underlies Baby Suggs' deconstructive strategy. Baby Suggs prepares the ground for new alternative meanings.

Both Sides, the white and the black, try to define and attach meanings to the signifiers. On the one hand, the white people try to construct a discourse that justifies their imperialism. On the other, the African American people's counter-discourse exposes the dehumanizing aspects of the hegemonic discourse. Accordingly, discourse construction would seem to be the main factor/player in resisting the dominant ideology.

Baby Suggs's sermons open up the closure already imposed on black consciousness for centuries. As Patricia Hill Collins (1991: 59) states, "self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance." What Baby Suggs says in her sermons can be regarded as "self-defined standpoints," which the oppressive discourse does not tolerate and tries to suppress. Seeds of resistance will flower in such ground: self-definitions, self-love, self-affirmation, and hope. In this sense, when an oppressed group tries to define itself according to its rules/regulations, closures in the oppressive discourse's meanings will no longer have enough space for articulation.

Deconstructing the hegemonic discourse would also be followed by other dissenting characters' language use. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1992: x-xi) states that "language [...] can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people [...] we have to] free up the language from its almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains". Sixo's silences open up gaps/faultlines within the text, asserting reconsideration of the racially constructed language.

Defining actions, behaviours, words, and the whole world of signification belonged to whites, while blacks had nothing to do with assigning and fixing meanings. Sixo resists the predetermined constructions and redefines the situation. In this sense, the word "taking" takes the place of "stealing" and Sixo is no longer a thief but an active subject who can own property.

In *Beloved*, a character like Sixo can destabilize the dominant discourse and redefine himself as a human being: "what's important," Taylor-Guthrie (1994: 223) maintains, "is the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it. [...] to explore how a people [...] absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something that is indigestible and absorbable, completely". It seems that Morrison re-territorializes the field of discursivity by introducing new elements into it. In other words, *Beloved* aims at deconstructing the official version of reality articulated by the white and constructing a new one applicable to the African American people. When power-relations are shaken by individual acts of resistance, the floating signifiers, which become visible to the disempowered, offer an unofficial version of reality and fight for room in the field of discursivity.

In order to dismantle the process of cooption, Morrison devises some strategies which aim at constructing alternative representations. Listening to others and remembering the past – which she calls *rememory* – are two effective weapons by which she negates white hegemony and deconstructs its discourse. In *Unspeaking Things Unspoken*, Morrison (1989: 29) believes that the text's faultlines can be filled with other significances:

Into these spaces [faultlines] should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowings. The reader as narrator asks the questions the community asks and both reader and "voice" stand among the crowd, within it, with the privileged intimacy and contact, but without any more privileged information than the crowd has. That egalitarianism [...] places us all (reader, the novel's population, the narrator's voice) on the same footing.

Listening to/ reading Morrison's text is not like receiving some finished stories and living in a kind of isolated capsule. She tells us about invented or emergent elements and recollected or residual ones, which are actively present and participate in articulating alternative voices. Morrison's stories stimulate the listener to reconstruct in a new light what has been told. Listening to the characters' past can transform the present and reshape the future. Thus, the past is not just a mere shameful archive but is actively reconstructed following the discourse of the repressed.

3. *Meridian*: Silence as a strategy in negating the hegemonic discourse

Walker's *Meridian* places the basics of resistance in her transformations, which have gone through some unfamiliar processes starting from silence. *Meridian*'s refusal to affirm the dominant discourse's rules can be interpreted as civil disobedience. She negates the hegemonic cultures' ability to use her as a tool fulfilling its needs. Her silence is launched against the white discourse in school, church, and college and the patriarchal violence of the revolutionaries (Walker 2011: 9-11). Here, Walker opens up another door on dissidence; her strategy is silence in the face of the totalitarian discourse. She grounds her novel in civil disobedience.

Meridian opposes nodal points, as she disobeys what has been firmly articulated and inculcated in the masses as natural. She turns to the strategy of storytelling to dismantle the fixed hegemonic meanings of the dominant. She uses folktales – as residual elements – that remind her people of the floating signifiers in their culture. Stories, folk songs, and May dances are reconstructed. It is significant here that the remembered elements are reconstructed with reference to emergent elements; they are about women who perform dissidence and civil disobedience.

In the section "Sojourner," a large tree called *Sojourner*, located in the center of the college, can be seen as the generator of many such stories:

So many tales and legends had grown up around the Sojourner that students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept. [...] It was the only time in all the many social activities of Saxon that every girl was considered equal. On that day, they hold each other's hands tightly. (Walker 2011: 18)

Here, Walker's strategy to bring unity to her community is storytelling; with the help of stories, one can subvert the hegemonic discourse. Stories carry the

floating signifiers back to the field of discursivity. As a result, with the help of folk songs and tales, the alienated or marginalized subjects find moments to articulate their elements and tilt the fixity of the nodal points.

Louvinie is a storyteller whose stories frightened her Master's children. Her white Master severely punished her for this and had her tongue cut out from the root. She buried her tongue under the tree, and it is under the Sojourner that different stories grew: "other slaves believed it possessed magic. They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision" (Walker 2011: 17). In fact, Louvinie's power was transferred to Sojourner, and now it is the tree that can generate stories that challenge the dominant discourse, unite the African American students, and pay homage to the blacks. Willis (1998: 114) states:

Named the Sojourner, the Magnolia conjures up the presence of another leader of black woman, who, like Louvinie, used language in the struggle for liberation. In this way, Walker builds a network of women, some mythic like Louvinie, some real like Sojourner Truth, as the context for Meridian's affirmation and radicalization.

Walker's web of women reminds us of how discourse can be made, articulating a web of related meanings which signify the culture's interests. Louvinie and Sojourner Truth have weaponized language in their struggle for freedom.

Another notable instance of resistance is Meridian's great-grandmother, Feather Mae, who rejects all organized religions. Her refusal represents the community with alternative meanings and can stand as an excellent example of defiant characters resisting the dominant. By generating questions about the validity of the dominant discourse's rules and regulations, the text aims at reconstructing a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Throughout the novel, the production of meaning is hugely grounded in the readers' consciousness, who must actively participate in constructing meaning. Instead of chapters, readers are confronted with several not chronologically ordered episodes. And the readers can shuffle the episodes in any order without affecting the text's meaning. In fact, as a character in the novel, Meridian creates faultlines within the dominant discourse. Readers are compelled to repeat different sentences that invite them to think and rethink the discursive constructions. In "The Recurring Dream," the reader is urged to repeat sentences referring to an insoluble problem - that of her black existence: "She dreamed 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" (117). This quotation, constantly repeated throughout the text, urges the readers to pause and think, decoding its fixed meanings and constructing new ones.

Another narrative that has the same function of creating a faultline is the story of Wild Child, whose antisocial behaviour marks her as the antithesis of the standards dominating society. The Wild Child story is embedded in that of the Sojourner Tree, which would also play the same role of constructing a faultline. The Sojourner story is more harmful to the dominant discourse because it is about the power of storytelling in subverting the hegemonic discourse. Walker's emphasis here is on the power of storytelling as a vehicle for constructing a discourse rather than on the violence of revolutionary forces. The embedded narratives portray diversions in the novel's text and represent an alternative

discourse. Such a counter-discourse uses racial and gendered elements, which are disruptive to the totalitarian discourse.

In her attempt to construct a counter-discourse, Walker targets the traditional conceptualization of motherhood. She questions this nodal point, causing a crisis, by directly addressing its validity to the life of every woman. Moreover, she addresses the whole community of women – regardless of their skin colour – to situate her discourse into a larger context. After reading about Mrs. Hill's rejection of her role as a matriarch, which Christianity and the patriarchal white discourse had articulated, the readers are presented with Meridian's rejection of her roles as daughter, wife, and mother (69-70).

By applying residual and emergent elements of African American cultures, Walker portrays them in a new light, using them for political resistance. Residual elements originating from race, gender, and nature are turned into sites of political and cultural reformation. She also applies African spirituality from the field of discursivity to suspend the white bourgeoisie discourse, as it is filled with fixed meanings referring to African American women as sexual beasts. In other words, the African American spiritualization of nature as a residual element creates faultlines and becomes a source of energy, with political dimensions negating the oppressive policies of white discourse. In this sense, Walker's use of the Sojourner Tree and the Sacred Serpent Indian Mound can be analyzed as politically devastating to the hegemonic discourse (19). The Sojourner Tree can be regarded as the community's means of reclaiming and regaining the African American oppressed culture. The sacred tree becomes a source of discursivity for the whole community, whose political rebellion is fueled by the floating signifiers coming from the Sojourner.

The Sojourner tree and the Sacred Serpent Indian Mound, "sites of memory," contain what the dominant discourse has banned and denied. In an episode called "Indians and Ecstasy," Meridian overhears her parents talking about a piece of land called the Sacred Serpent:

"But the land already belonged to them [Native Americans]," her father said, "[...] That Mound is full of dead Indians. Our food is made healthy from the iron and calcium from their bones. Course, since it's a cemetery, we shouldn't own it anyhow."

[...]

"But to give our land to a naked Indian"

"Naked? He ain't naked. You believe all that stuff they put on television. He wears a work shirt and blue jeans. His hair is the only thing that looks like Indians look on TV. (23)

What has disappeared from the face of the earth is recalled in order to challenge the white supremacy propagated on TV as an inevitable and natural way of the world. The mound and the tree bring back lost and banned histories, as the writer-archeologist narrates incidents concerning the two. Moreover, Walker subverts the dominant discourse's articulation of African American women as beasts of burden. As a result, the western objectification of enslaved African American women as beasts of burden, sexual beasts, and breeders loses its validity and stability as a nodal point in the white patriarchal discourse. Various issues have been articulated around such a nodal point: treating blacks as human "cattle," the conflation of the blacks with apes, the close relationship between African American women and nature, as they were forced to do field labour. In addition, African American

women are also held responsible for having animalistic sexual desires, even by African American male standards. The Assistant's words clarify the point: "The Assistant said later that the girl was his now, whenever he wanted her, because he had discovered a secret few men knew: how to make a woman come by using nothing but his penis and his beautiful voice. There were his gifts" (31). African American women were used as property and tools; they were reduced to the status of lecherous animals that must bear children, work in the fields and gratify the sexual pleasure of both black and white men. But as Walker works on deconstructing the dominant discourse, tracing the words articulated by the novel's male characters sends the dominant discourse into a crisis. When the Assistant tries to seduce a girl, the words create faultlines in the text, and the readers can see that the sexual beast is not the girl but the Assistant (30-31).

Comparing men to sex machines who use women for sex and articulating the word "voice" with capital V signify faultlines in the dominant discourse. Walker portrays females who seek solace in the arms of men and security coming from the words articulated by them. Such purposeful acts of subversion are at work throughout the novel, whose readers are compelled to question the validity of the dominant discourse's norms.

In subverting the dominant, Native and African Americans take sides with each other through one character, who is Meridian's great grandmother, Feather Mae. The residual elements collected by Meridian around the legends of Feather Mae enable her to present the blacks and the Natives as victims of the same hegemonic process. Feather Mae's spiritual experiences at the Sacred Serpent mound are transmitted to Meridian through her rememory of Feather Mae, thus, transforming her from a sexually exploited object to a politically active individual.

As Feather Mae merges into the spiritual experiences of Sacred Serpent, her objectivity as a sexual tool turns into a kind of subjectivity whose power can control even her husband. In this sense, Feather Mae, gaining power by living among the residual elements, becomes Meridian's model for resistance. Meridian comes to understand that women can have their subjectivity. She veers her way and heals herself through acts of political resistance, civil disobedience, discourse construction, and service to her people in different towns in which she chooses to live.

4. Conclusion: A strategy for cultural resistance

Beloved and *Meridian* were written during the years of turbulent transformations in the lives of African Americans. Acts of resistance and dissidence of African American communities hugely transformed the dominant discourse at that time. One of the most fundamental transformations was a new recognition of what had been eliminated from the field of discursivity. After centuries of adoring beauty and power and decades of longing to look like white bourgeois people and thinking that it was appropriate to do so, African Americans began to push in new signifiers in the field of discursivity, to redefine the significance of the already existing signifiers, and re-territorialize the meaning of the nodal points in the culture of a nation. In an afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes:

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could his beauty

not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? (Morrison 2014: 212)

Morrison's and Walker's novels aspire to "racially benign inclusiveness" of the banned signifiers. But the dominant discourse wants the resisting voices to be contained within its own parameters. As the dominant discourse holds the hegemonic social order in place by reinvigorating the nodal points fixated in the field of discursivity, the subaltern cultures seek ways to dispel the illusion of balance the hegemonic representations give us. When the subaltern people are entangled within the web of articulated moments, initially, they presume that it is the natural way of the world. But because the hegemony is constructed by fixating several limited significances for the signs and because the signs have unlimited alternative significances, characters who try to articulate elements in the field of discursivity will become a menace to the pretensions of stability, naturalness, and fixity of the dominant discourse. Also, they question the accepted social order in two different forms: either by unearthing residual elements like folktales, folk songs, and folk dances, or by producing new cultural elements, which might or might not be in any way related to the traditional values of an ethnic people and are used only to disempower the dominant discourse.

Story-telling has been regarded as one of the main strategies by which one can give life to the residual and emergent elements. The resisting characters' narratives generate faultlines in the text and help us check the legitimacy of the dominant. Thus, counter-narratives subvert the hegemonic web of meanings. Morrison's and Walker's novels reveal the use of residual and emergent elements to create faultlines within the field of discursivity present in their texts. When alternative articulations destabilize the nodal points on which the field of discursivity is installed, the possibility of having new moments becomes strong. Storytelling has the power to help the communities reappraise their cultural signposts and catalyze the process described above. Storytellers reintroduce floating signifiers, already banished by the dominant discourse. By the time the listeners take into account the floating signifiers, the official version of history, which claims naturalness, is weakened and dislocated, and this opens up the path for counter-discourses to come into existence.

Both novels follow a relatively similar pattern of resistance. The resisting agents begin to consciously or subconsciously introduce residual and emergent elements into the dominant culture. Consequently, they will create faultlines in the con-text, which claims universality and naturalness. The nodal points on which the dominant discourse places the field of discursivity, are rusted away by the faultlines created by the elements articulated by the resisting agents. Thus, new possibilities of interpreting the signs become possible.

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