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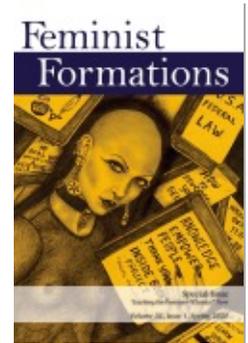
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Politics in Action: Teaching Alice Walker's *Meridian*

Lisa Diedrich

*What feminist “classics” we use to introduce the field of WGSS and how we teach these texts are examples of how pedagogy enacts politico-affective relationships. Returning to texts in different contexts is one of the pleasures of teaching for me. While my syllabus for the introductory course in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies has changed over the years, one feminist “classic”—Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian*—has remained in the mix and continues to generate enlivening discussion and often intense critical reflection and complicated emotional responses among students. *Meridian* is one of the most generative texts for exploring conceptual, historical, formal, affective, and political questions, and the interrelationship between these kinds of questions. A multi-layered question-based pedagogical approach provides the scaffolding for all my teaching and also for my analysis in this essay of both Walker’s text and my experiences teaching it. I discuss why and how I teach *Meridian* in my introductory course in WGSS, exploring the ways the text helps illuminate some key concepts in the field (including intersectionality, the personal is political, and womanism), historical examples of diverse politics in action, and experiments with form in order to tell politico-affective stories of violence and trauma, love and endurance.*

Keywords: civil rights movement / intersectionality / politico-affective pedagogy / Walker, Alice / womanism

I love the challenge of introducing students to the field of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, especially in the survey course that I have taught in different permutations, first as a graduate student in WGSS at Emory University and now as faculty in WGSS at Stony Brook University. At the risk of sounding Pollyannaish, I think this is an exciting time to teach in WGSS because the field continues to grow and become more relevant and necessary as a force to

counteract the illiberalism spreading across the globe. At Stony Brook, despite a reputation as a “science school”—a situation sometimes not perceived as hospitable to WGSS—our introductory course has always been popular, in the past mostly taken by students who consider the course an interesting way to fulfill a general education requirement. What has changed recently, however, is the number of students who take the course (and go on to pursue the major or minor) because they have come to the university with an already intense interest in WGSS, and, increasingly, feminism.

When I teach the introductory class, I have students fill out a backgrounds and aspirations questionnaire. Recently, I taught a small section of the introductory course, which happened to attract a large number of first-year students. I wasn't surprised to see students who expressed interest in the topic, but for the first time, I noticed that several first-year students had arrived at Stony Brook with the intention of majoring or minoring in the field. The increasing enthusiasm for the major and minor comes partly from a pragmatic realization that a degree in WGSS helps prepare students for almost any profession, including in the sciences and medicine,¹ as well as further graduate study in the field itself. Our relatively new doctoral program means undergraduates are now also coming in contact with WGSS graduate students who are teaching assistants in the introductory course and often teach their own classes too. The ripple effects of a new graduate program are multiple in time and space. That there has been an explosion in the growth of graduate programs in the field in the decade and a half since I did my PhD indicates to me the likelihood of continued growth at the undergraduate level too. As part of our graduate teaching practicum in WGSS, graduate students are also required to observe classes and write reports about the teaching in action they observe. When graduate students join my undergraduate classes to observe, I make sure to have them introduce themselves and tell the undergraduates about their work. These encounters help make visible our program's and the field's commitment to mentoring and serious approach to pedagogy, as well as research and professional opportunities in the field that some students find intriguing and/or inspiring.

I open this essay with a brief reflection on the current state of the field of WGSS in general and at my institution in particular because I am interested in how larger institutional structures and field formations and trajectories create the conditions of possibility for what happens in a specific classroom at a specific university in the United States in the specific historical moment of the early twenty-first century. What it means to introduce students to a field and its “classic” texts, concepts, and histories is contingent upon and nested within broader and longer institutional and ideological contexts. Not surprisingly perhaps, newer fields like WGSS tend to encourage reflection on this contingency and nestedness more than more established fields. This special issue encourages such reflection. Robyn Wiegman (2012) discusses the emergence and institutionalization of several identity fields, including American Studies, Ethnic Studies,

Gender Studies, and Queer Studies, and analyzes what she and Donald Pease call the “field imaginary” of various identity fields. Wiegman defines the term “field imaginary” as “‘the disciplinary unconscious’—that domain of critical interpellation through which practitioners learn to pursue particular objects, protocols, methods of study, and interpretative vocabularies as the means for expressing and inhabiting their belonging to the field” (14). In her work on the emergence of identity knowledges in the academy, Wiegman encourages us to meditate on “those affects—anxiety, love, fear, and faith—that accompany, whether acknowledged or not, the political desire that attends both our relationship to our objects and analytics *and* our relationship to that relationship as well” (8). This is Wiegman at her recursive best: it isn’t just that our objects matter and that we materialize objects in the work we do, but that we come into being as academic and scholarly subjects through both the objects we study and our politico-affective relationships to those objects and the fields that produce them. This, I believe, is the case for all fields, not simply those identity fields that Wiegman surveys as her own object of study.²

Feminist “classic” texts are imbued with and help transmit an aura of what Wiegman has called the psychic life of the field of WGSS. What feminist “classics” we use to introduce the field of WGSS and how we teach these texts are examples of how pedagogy enacts politico-affective relationships. Returning to texts in different contexts (different historical moments, different institutional milieus, different types of classes, with different groups of students) is one of the pleasures of teaching for me. While my syllabus for the introductory course in WGSS has changed significantly from when I first taught it as a graduate student, one feminist “classic” has remained in the mix and continues to generate enlivening discussion and often intense critical reflection and complicated emotional responses among students. That feminist “classic” is Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian* (1976). In discussing *Meridian* as a feminist “classic” in this essay, I am taking the scare quotes around the term “classic” in the call for papers for this special issue literally, in the sense that what we take to be a classic text in a field, especially an emergent field, is not obvious or straightforward, but personal, political, and pedagogical. This is apparent in the case of a text like *Meridian*, which one could easily argue is not a conventional choice, especially since there are other texts by Alice Walker that are more often taught in university classrooms, feminist and otherwise, including her oft-anthologized and taught essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” or her more popular novel *The Color Purple*. And it’s true that I have never met anyone else who teaches *Meridian* in an introductory course in WGSS. Yet, I am not claiming it as a classic based on its status as a popular text for introducing the field of WGSS. Rather, I take the designation of feminist “classic” texts as field formation in action, a performative doing over time rather than some attribute of the textual object.

Teaching *Meridian* allows me to center a more difficult story and less conventional narrative that thematizes feminist history, politics, and formal

experimentation. Part of its pedagogical appeal is precisely its difficulty. Valerie Smith (1998) makes a similar pedagogical point in her analysis of Walker's short story "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells" from the collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), a story that covers some of the same ground as *Meridian*—including a white woman telling the Black woman narrator about being raped by a Black man during their time in the voter registration movement in the South. Also, as in *Meridian*, Walker plays with form to show something about the experience and event of rape as well as tell it. Smith argues that "Advancing Luna" is more rewarding to teach than the more popular *Color Purple*, because its meta-analysis of "the inadequacy of representation" and complex formal structure contrasts with the "utopian vision with which the [The Color Purple] ends," which Smith believes "disappoints and undermines the complexity of narration and characterization that has gone before" (1998, 22). I will discuss Smith's pedagogical analysis of Walker's formal and metatextual work in "Advancing Luna" in more detail below, but for now I just want to note that I read *Meridian* as a feminist "classic" because these metatextual elements are effective pedagogically and help me demonstrate for students what Smith describes as "the practice of reading intersectionally" (xv). Because my class is an interdisciplinary WGSS class, not a literature class, I don't situate Walker's work within a longer lineage of Black women's writing. Yet, literature functions in important ways in my interdisciplinary classes, staging multiple spaces and temporalities for identification and desire, joy and sadness, confusion and affirmation. Novels like *Meridian* offer more indirect, less straightforward ways of telling politico-affective stories about gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability, especially when juxtaposed with other kinds of discourse.

Not all students like or get *Meridian*, of course, but I have found it to be one of the most generative texts for exploring conceptual, historical, formal, affective, and political questions, and the interrelationship between these kinds of questions. This multilayered, question-based pedagogical approach provides the scaffolding for all my teaching and also for the analysis in this essay of both Walker's text and my experiences of teaching it. In what follows, I discuss why and how I teach *Meridian* in my introductory course in WGSS, by describing how I embed the text in the course syllabus among other texts and situate it in relation to broader conceptual frameworks, historical contexts, and formal considerations. I explore in particular the ways the text helps illuminate some key concepts in the field (including *intersectionality*, *the personal is political*, and *womanism*), historical examples of diverse politics in action, and experiments with form for telling politico-affective stories of violence and trauma, love and endurance.

Concepts

From the opening when I introduce a course and review the syllabus with students, I encourage them to think about key terms and concepts as tools to help them understand a particular subject and the world more generally. In the introductory course, I teach *Meridian* after a unit focused on the concept of intersectionality, through a pairing of critical legal and race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (in Grewal and Kaplan, 2006) along with excerpts from Claudia Rankine's prose poem *Citizen* (2014).³ Crenshaw (1989) had first coined the term "intersectionality" in a paper on antidiscrimination law, and she would develop the concept and practice further in relation to a study of services provided (and not) at battered women's shelters in minority communities in Los Angeles. She shows how certain policies and laws make immigrant women in particular especially vulnerable to intimate partner violence, and she suggests intervention strategies that take into consideration the burdens of "poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills" for some women, including undocumented women (Crenshaw 2006, 201). In a short piece in the *Washington Post*, which I also have students read, Crenshaw (2015) describes intersectionality as "an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power." In my Introduction to WGSS class, I encourage students to take up Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as a tool to think with and beyond throughout the semester.

I move from Crenshaw to an even more contemporary exploration of identity and its relationship to power in Claudia Rankine's generically hybrid *Citizen* (2014), which examines everyday racism in the United States and artistic (formal and performative, affective and conceptual, verbal and visual) responses to racism by people of color. Rankine's chapter on Serena Williams and different types of anger offers a brilliant opening into conversations about bodies, media, affect, and forms of resistance, all of which are themes that we build on throughout the semester.⁴ From Crenshaw's challenge to the limits of the law and legal forms of writing and Rankine's to the limits of citizenship and poetic forms of writing, we move back to an earlier moment of struggle for legal and political rights as presented in Walker's novel *Meridian*. Published in 1976 and about young people—white and black, men and women—participating in the voter registration efforts in the South in the 1960s, the novel dramatizes the complex racial and sexual politics of the civil rights movement. I find that it also provides an excellent historical doorway into a discussion of current youth-led social justice activism. My aim in juxtaposing Crenshaw, Rankine, and Walker is to put Black feminist thought at the conceptual, political, and affective center of WGSS. I also want this combination of texts to get students thinking about what the interdisciplinarity of the field looks like in action in different domains. Although Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality emerges from

a legal context, Walker's novel written before Crenshaw coined the term and Rankine's prose poem written after, help elucidate the meaning and uses of the term, providing a genealogy that connects the concept with history, politics, and formal experimentation.⁵

Through both the lecture and teaching assistant–led discussion sections, I encourage students to compare and contrast the activism portrayed in *Meridian* with contemporary feminist, antiracist, and queer activist movements. For example, in one of those rare moments when the pedagogical stars align, I was teaching the unit on intersectionality when Beyoncé released the song and video “Formation” and performed it at the Super Bowl with homage to the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Black Panther Party. In recitations, the TAs showed the “Formation” video, along with the *Saturday Night Live* spoof horror film trailer, “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black,” as a way to engage questions about the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in political activism both in the present moment and historically. In all of my classes, I try to give students analytical tools to more fully analyze experiences and events both near to and far from their own lives. I teach theory as something that emerges out of experiences and events in the real world, abstracts them, and then becomes a prism through which we can view these experiences and events anew. The abstraction that theory performs does not move us beyond the world of “real” experiences and events, but becomes a more or less useful explanatory model for describing the world as it is or imagining it otherwise. This is precisely the point of a concept like *intersectionality*—the concept itself provides a prism through which to explore a multiplicity of complex topics. It can also be exciting for students to think about “theory” as emerging not only from academic spaces but from the spaces of music, performance, art, literature, and everyday life.

I was first drawn to *Meridian* as a book to teach because it offered a complex representation of the South and the encounter between Northerners and Southerners in the South. In an important early analysis of Walker's first two novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Meridian*, Barbara Christian describes Walker as a quilter-writer who combines “bits and pieces of used material rescued from oblivion for everyday use,” and she notes that the materials and Walker, the quilter-writer sewing them together, “originate in the South” (1980, 180). Christian argues that “Walker is the significant black woman novelist of our generation to concentrate on the sensibility of the South as a way of perceiving the perennial conflict between the human spirit and societal patterns” (180). As someone who grew up in the South,⁶ left for several years, returned to do my PhD at Emory, and has since taught at a state university in the Northeast, I appreciate the novel's portrait of racial politics through the different perspectives of characters, like Meridian, who are of the South, and others, like Lynne and the other white exchange students, who come South to participate in the civil rights movement.

In getting students to consider the many encounters across differences that the text enacts, Walker's biography is also a helpful way in, and I introduce *Meridian* by first introducing Walker.⁷ I am clear that the character Meridian is not Walker, but I want students to think about the milieu out of which a book like *Meridian* emerged. Born in Georgia as a child of sharecroppers, Walker attended the historically black women's college Spelman on a scholarship and, as a student, participated in the civil rights movement in Atlanta. Saxon College in *Meridian* is loosely based on Spelman in the early 1960s. The novel becomes a space in which Walker can explore questions about the purpose of education for women, especially Black women, during this time. She scathingly portrays Saxon as a conservative place removed from the world and as prioritizing the importance of black women learning "proper social rules" rather than acquiring knowledge and analytic and political tools for transforming society into a more just and inclusive place (1976, 93). I like to teach books that take up questions about knowledge and learning explicitly. This allows students to reflect on what knowledge and education are for, to study how and what we study as part of the meta-analytic work of WGSS *as study*.⁸ Indeed, my syllabus for the introductory course begins with a quote from Walker's novel, in which Meridian tells Truman, "I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don't see it as handing down answers" (187). This sets the tone for the approach we will take in the class as a whole and challenges them to read with a questioning skepticism, yet not cynicism.

Walker went North to escape the sort of education she fictionalizes and critiques in *Meridian*, transferring to Sarah Lawrence in New York, where she began to work seriously on her poetry, mentored by Muriel Rukeyser. In 1965, she returned to the South, moving to Mississippi to teach and join the civil rights movement and work to register black people to vote. I also like to mention that, in New York, she married Mel Leventhal, a white Jewish civil rights lawyer, and that they would become one of the first legally married interracial couples living in Mississippi. They had a daughter, Rebecca, who would follow in her mother's footsteps and become a writer and third-wave feminist activist, but would also write about the difficulty of being raised by two activist parents and about conflicts with her mother that have apparently continued into the present.⁹ Walker and Leventhal divorced in 1976 not long after the publication of *Meridian*. Although I don't spend a lot of time on Walker's personal life, I do use her personal history to help amplify our discussions of how the *personal is political*, another key concept that *Meridian* elucidates so provocatively, for example, in telling the story of the love triangle between Meridian, Truman, and Lynne. I want students to understand that Walker and her characters in *Meridian* are college students not so unlike them, coming of age in a world that they are determined to analyze and act in. I find emphasizing that Walker herself and her characters are imperfect can make the story *Meridian* tells more, not less, relatable.¹⁰ Walker's personal story of struggling to find her voice also

helps introduce another theme of the course, that writing and activism can be tools for struggle and means of survival.¹¹

I follow this brief discussion of Walker's personal history by highlighting another key concept coined by Walker (1983) herself: "womanism." Although Walker appears to have coined the term after she wrote *Meridian*, discussing the definition of the term and reasons for its coinage allows the class to consider how the term has circulated in contrast to other terms like "Black feminism" and "intersectionality." Womanism, as philosophy and practice, becomes another useful framework through which to encounter a text like *Meridian* and the racial and sexual politics it represents. In her analysis of and proposal for Black feminist love politics as a post-intersectionality practice of freedom, Jennifer C. Nash notes,

In the years that followed its publication, Walker's definition would become the subject of vibrant interdisciplinary debate as scholars routinely asked: what is womanism? How is it different from feminism, and from black feminism? What is the value of a new name for black feminism? Does womanism contain a viable and distinctive politics? (2013, 8)

I have found that, even thirty-five years after its coinage, Walker's definition continues to create vibrant discussion and debate, even in an introductory course in WGSS. By looking closely at the components of the definition, as Nash does in her essay—beginning with its derivation from a "black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'you acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman" (Walker 1983, xi) and its meaning as in opposition to girlishness, frivolity, irresponsibility, and a lack of seriousness—students are easily able to grasp the difference the term seeks to enact, even without familiarity with different feminist genealogies in general and debates about the term in particular. This is the affective power of Walker's neologism. Students tend to appreciate the image of a willful Black girl who wants "to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for [her]." The term also helps provide insight into and discussion about the performativity of identity, as Walker's definition links acting and being, and acting as means to becoming, or, as the definition succinctly puts it: "Acting grown up. Being grown up" (xi).¹²

Love is central to womanism. The word "love" is repeated eleven times in Walker's definition, beginning with what we might read now as a protoqueer formulation that a womanist is a "woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). And, in the third definition, the repetition of the word becomes a kind of spiritual incantation: "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (xii). As Nash notes, Walker's womanism is "one of the clearest articulations of love as a black feminist politics" (9). Discussing Walker's womanism as a Black feminist love politics in my introductory WGSS course shifts affective gears and the tone of the class from the focus on

structural vulnerability in our reading of Crenshaw's work and different types of anger in our reading of Rankine's work. What is enacted in the movement between these texts, then, is a multiplying of the feelings associated with the practice of Black feminist politics. In this sequence, vulnerability, anger, and love become different affective portals into feminist politics, and these examples also put pressure on an impression some students may have that feminism is or has been a white women's movement. Bringing these texts together in this way also allows for the formulation of an essay question for an exam or other kind of writing assignment on affect and the performance of feminist politics. I find teaching these texts together demonstrates the importance of the affective turn in feminist thought in a way that is accessible even to students new to the field.

History

Love, vulnerability, and anger become affective portals into our reading of *Meridian* and the wider historical context of the civil rights movement—and specifically the voter registration movement—in the South in the 1960s and 1970s. I explain that *Meridian* shows the integrationist moment, when Black and white people attempted to work together, as well as conflicts around race, and the failure of the integrationist dream.¹³ *Meridian* also highlights conflicts between Black men and Black women and between Black women and white women, demonstrating the politico-affective relationship between race, gender, and sexuality. The text stages many difficult conversations: about mothering, not wanting to mother, and abortion; about interracial relationships and rape; about religious and spiritual traditions and movements for social change. Barbara Christian calls *Meridian* a “novel of ideas” (1980, 205) and Deborah E. McDowell places it in the “tradition of the *Bildungsroman*” (1993, 168); for me, this mix of genres is partly what makes the novel so teachable. The novel is packed with ideas—philosophical, political, and spiritual, yet it is relatable to college students because, as McDowell argues, it “chronicles the series of initiatory experiences which *Meridian* . . . undergoes in an effort to find her identity, or her own moral center, and develop a completeness of being” (168). Although students are sometimes confounded by the experiences and events Walker chronicles, nonetheless, most usually relate to the struggles of the main characters to find their place in and make a mark on the world.

We discuss how *Meridian* presents multiple histories: personal and movement histories of politics in action, as well as longer histories of slavery and settler colonialism that expropriated land from and committed genocide against Native Americans. The novel also explores multiple tactics and strategies of protest and struggle, and I encourage students to keep in mind that *Meridian* does not give us a singular story of the civil rights movement in particular or activism more generally. I ask them to consider how the civil rights movement is shown through multiple lenses. We discuss how the novel shows the movement through

the perspectives of the main characters—especially Meridian, Truman, and Lynne—but also through the eyes of minor characters, including, for example, Mrs. Turner, the woman Meridian and Lynne meet canvassing voters, who “doesn’t believe in votin’” (1976, 102), and the man caring for his sick wife, who asks, “What good is the vote if we don’t own anything?” (225) Meridian’s answer to this question acknowledges that the vote may not be enough, but she also offers a powerful rebuttal to those who would deny the importance of voting for people who have been disenfranchised: “‘I don’t know,’ said Meridian. ‘It may be useless. Or maybe it can be the beginning of the use of your voice. You have to get used to using your voice, you know. You start on simple things and move on. . . .’” (225; ellipses in original). I contextualize Walker’s portrait of youth-led voter registration drives and Meridian’s practices of nonviolence by discussing the emergence of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black-led, grass-roots civil rights movement active in the rural South. We read their statement of purpose from 1960, in which they begin by affirming the “philosophical and religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action.”¹⁴ I emphasize that the text represents a grassroots movement and everyday activism, much of it taking place out of the media spotlight surrounding movement leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Meridian also thematizes the relationship between religion and/or spirituality and politics in Black communities. For example, toward the end of the novel, Meridian discovers a church that is different in feeling and action from her mother’s church described earlier in the book. I frequently get students to compare and contrast these churches—who are the preachers and how and what do they preach? What kind of art and music is featured and why?¹⁵ As with the discussion of Walker’s term “womanism,” students are able to engage in a debate about what religion is and should look and feel like through Walker’s contrasting examples. Questions of religion and spirituality are also brought to the fore in the novel when we discuss Meridian’s “falling sickness” as a biopsychosocial sign of the political burden she takes on as she “volunteers to suffer” (25) for others. I have written about this elsewhere as a form of what I call “illness politics,” a politics I argue is informed by and inseparable from both sexual and racial politics (Diedrich 2016).

The novel also grapples throughout with the ideological and tactical question of whether one is willing to give one’s own life and/or take another’s life for a cause. Following the first chapter titled “The Last Return” is a two-page portal into the past, a return from the present of the opening chapter in which Truman finds Meridian in a small town in Georgia in the early 1970s still engaged in activism, despite or indeed because of the fact that the movement has moved on. This portal into the past is not listed in the table of contents as a separate chapter, but it has a title of sorts: a list of thirteen names in block letters:

MEDGAR EVERS/JOHN F. KENNEDY/MALCOLM X/MARTIN
LUTHER KING/ROBERT KENNEDY/CHE GUEVARA/PATRICE
LAMUMBA/GEORGE JACKSON/CYNTHIA WESLEY/ADDIE MAE
COLLINS/DENISE MCNAIR/CAROLE ROBERTSON/VIOLA LIUZZO.
(Walker 1976, 21)

There is blank space above and below the list of names, and the text below in italics begins with the sentence “*It was a decade marked by death*” (21). Ten years, ten assassinations. I take the time to explain who each person was and how they were killed, beginning with Patrice Lumumba assassinated in the newly independent Congo in January 1961 and including the four young girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing in 1963 and Violet Liuzzo, a white civil rights worker killed by the KKK while driving white and Black civil rights activists back to Selma after the march from Selma to Montgomery. Visually, the block of names is like a tomb and the interchapter is both a textual burial site (the two pages following the list of names describes Meridian and other Saxon students watching John F. Kennedy’s funeral on television in 1963) and passageway into a haunted past. Yet, despite marking the many losses in the struggle for civil rights, the text works against melancholic memorialization and traumatized paralysis both in terms of the story it tells and the structure of the narrative, as I argue in my concluding discussion of the novel’s form.

Form

Along with contextualizing the novel in relation to the history of civil rights and women’s liberation and using the story to familiarize students with key feminist concepts and theories, we also examine the way Walker conveys important ideas about the temporo-politics of activism through the novel’s form and structure. I discuss the novel’s patchwork form—its many short chapters that do not create a linear story, but instead present a crazy quilt-like pattern with different pieces of the story from different times stitched together. I show students images of “crazy quilts” and get them to consider how and why Walker draws on this form as a means of storytelling. I explain to the students that the “crazy quilts” only look crazy; in their creation and use, there is a method in their splendid visual madness. While some students find the text’s form thrilling in its multiple stories, perspectives, and temporalities, others find it disorienting and difficult to follow. For those students looking for or needing more linearity as they read, I provide some guidelines for reading at the outset. These guidelines include a rough chronological timeline of the events that take place in the book (with spoilers!), because knowing this chronology in advance can help some students track better the temporal back and forth and circular structure of the narrative. This also helps emphasize that the broken-up form and disorienting reading experience is deliberate as a metatextual effect that works to, as Valerie Smith

has argued of Walker's stories in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, "confront the inadequacy of representation and eschew easy resolutions" (1998, 22). Smith's reading of her experience teaching Walker's story "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells" resonates with my own experience of teaching *Meridian*. In particular, Smith describes how the issue of interracial rape reveals the narrator's "split affinities" as a Black woman, causing the trajectory of the narrative to disintegrate (25). This formal/meta-textual disintegration becomes pedagogically useful for Smith. She finds "that what Walker and her narrator confront in writing 'Advancing Luna' and what my students confront in discussing the story is the status of the text as a specific cultural formation that reflects and shapes their experience as social subjects" (31). In my WGSS classroom, Walker's formal innovations demonstrate subjectivity as a conundrum to be explored—not taken for granted.

I first introduce the overall structure of the novel by asking students to consider the title and the dictionary definition of the word "meridian," which serves as an epigraph for the book. As the epigraph shows, "meridian" has several meanings, including "pertaining to midday, or to the south"; "the highest point of power"; "in astronomy, an imaginary great circle of the celestial sphere" and, in geography, "any of the lines of longitude running north and south on a globe or map, representing such a circle or half-circle"; "a place or situation with its own distinctive character"; and "a graduated ring of brass, in which a globe is suspended and revolves" (Walker 1976, n.p.). I want students to think about what formal images these multiple meanings conjure, especially considering that "meridian" is both the title of the book and the name of its protagonist. Thus, we discuss how the story puts us in the middle of the struggle for civil rights and that the South is a central battleground in this struggle. I also point out that the temporal structure of the book demonstrates the "highest apparent point" of the civil rights movement, as well as the inevitable movement away from the zenith of politics in action, while suggesting the possibility of a return to a high point again in the future. Meridian, the character, is the person around whom the story and the other characters revolve; she is notable for being involved at the peak of the movement and remaining even after the most eventful moments pass. Her endurance is distinctive.

Meridian is also the name of a town in Mississippi. This is not mentioned in the dictionary definition as epigraph, but would have likely been known by readers of the book when it was first published.¹⁶ Maria Lauret reminds us of this fact and explains that Meridian is a town with a long history of racism and civil rights activism, as the site of race riots in 1871 and the voter registration drive in the 1960s, and as the place from which three civil rights workers (James Chaney, who was from Meridian, Mississippi, and Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, who were from New York) disappeared during Freedom Summer in 1964 and were eventually found dead (1994, 140). *Meridian* only briefly references these brutal killings (and in fact, James Chaney's name is

misspelled as Cheney), yet Walker clearly wants to pay homage to these three young men and their work and show the feelings of both possibility and despair that accompanied the activism of Freedom Summer.

As part of my effort to situate *Meridian* involves relating diverse civil rights histories, I discuss the lives and deaths of these three young people in my class. I show the missing persons poster created by the FBI and the front page of the *New York Daily News* from August 5, 1964, with the images of the three men from the missing persons poster above the headline “3 Miss. Bodies Believed Righters: Found in Graves at New Dam after Six-Week FBI Hunt.” I also show a postcard written by Andrew Goodman to his parents in New York, which was postmarked June 21, 1964, the last day of Goodman’s life. Goodman’s short note reads,

Dear Mom and Dad
 I have arrived safely in Meridian Mississippi. This is a wonderful town and the weather is fine. I wish you were here. The people in this city are wonderful and our reception was very good.
 All my love
 Andy

The card in Goodman’s handwriting that would have been received by his parents after his death but before his body was found has affective force even a half century after Goodman’s killing. The guileless openness with which Goodman meets people in the town of Meridian stands in stark contrast to the evil promulgated by the white supremacists who killed him, Chaney, and Schwerner. Asking students to try to imagine the emotions that his parents must have felt upon receiving this card—bringing into the classroom the hopes, fears, and grief contained in this card and its message is, for me, part of the politico-affective work of pedagogy. I always choke up when I read the postcard to the class, and although I can’t predict how students will respond to my emotional response, I also know that as a teacher, I can’t prevent these sorts of feelings, even if I may try to hide them to protect my own vulnerability. I end my discussion about the murders of the three young civil rights activists in Mississippi by explaining that Andrew Goodman’s family created a foundation in his name after his death, and that that foundation registers students to vote and has done so for many years on the Stony Brook campus.¹⁷ Once again, this allows me to relate the issues narrativized in *Meridian* to the current moment, but also to suggest something about the multiple temporalities of politics affirmed in the novel’s content, form, and title.

Coda: The Recurring Dream

At the precise center of Walker’s novel is a chapter titled “The Recurring Dream.” This chapter is the last chapter in the novel’s first section “Meridian

Hill,” which is followed by two shorter sections, “Truman Held” and “Ending.” The brief description of the recurring dream is repeated three times in the text, forcing the reader to consider the problem of a hegemonic necropolitical narrative form, followed by a sentence that indicates the persistence of future repetitions of the dream/narrative structure:

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.

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Even when she gave up reading novels that encouraged such a solution—and nearly all of them did—the dream did not cease. (Walker 1976, 121)

In Walker’s text, the recurring dream and its textual repetition open the chapter in which the symptoms of Meridian’s falling sickness—what she calls her “blue spells” (122) because of the bluish aura that surrounds objects in the world around her—are detailed and described as worsening: “But one day the blue became black and she temporarily—for two days—lost her sight” (123). She then experiences paralysis and a kind of ecstasy (124), which only eases with the possibility of forgiveness between Meridian and her mother, whose lifelong pursuit of purity and propriety stands in contrast to Meridian’s pursuit of justice, and between Meridian and her friend Anne-Marion, whose revolutionary rhetoric can only regard Meridian’s practice of social suffering as “obsolete” (131). Walker’s novel presents the narrative trope of death as resolution to a problem *as a problem*. She has her protagonist come close to death both through illness and rejection of her practices of social suffering as “obsolete.” And yet, this is not the ending but a challenge to write and enact different endings, which the final section of the novel, “Ending,” does, as Meridian is released from suffering as Truman takes on her burden and illness. In teaching the feminist classic *Meridian* now, we enact anew both the recurring dream and other possible endings to our stories of politics in action.

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Notes

1. At Stony Brook, most of our program's double majors combine WGSS with a second degree in the sciences. If a student is pre-med, for example, they know they have to take the required pre-med courses, but they also understand the pragmatic and conceptual benefits of supplementing science courses with, say, courses that fulfill our specialization track in gender, sexuality, and public health. Double majoring in WGSS makes them stand out on their applications to medical school, but it also helps them consider how they can combine doctoring with social justice work.

2. Wiegman (2012) describes the politico-affective relationship to objects of several interdisciplinary identity fields, including women's and gender studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and American studies. While these fields are constituted more obviously as identity knowledges than more traditional fields in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, still I would argue, and I think Wiegman would agree, that practitioners of these more traditional fields also constitute and are constituted by their politico-affective relationship to their objects of study. Elsewhere, I have used Wiegman's work to explore the politico-affective relationships and disciplinary imperatives at work in the medical humanities (Diedrich 2015).

3. I have used Grewal and Kaplan's (2006) textbook for many years because it offers an excellent framework and diverse selection of readings. I supplement these readings with more recent texts, like Rankine's, and novels and films.

4. I also have students read Rankine (2015). As with the two pieces from Crenshaw on intersectionality, these two pieces from Rankine allow us to consider different forms of writing and argument.

5. Nash (2019) provides an intellectual history of intersectionality and discusses the conceptual, institutional, and affective work that the term does. In the chapter "Love in the Time of Death," Nash argues that "none of the widely circulating origin stories contend with intersectionality's connections to the juridical, or think deeply about intersectionality as a legal project" (121). Interestingly, in my attempts to demonstrate interdisciplinarity in action for students in my introduction to WGSS class, I have always framed the emergence and enactment of the concept and practices of intersectionality in relation to the law and Crenshaw's background as a professor of law. Pedagogically, I have found the specificity of Crenshaw's formulation as a solution to a legal problem the framework that helps students best grasp the concept.

6. I consider Atlanta home, though I am careful not to claim to be of the South. My family migrated to Atlanta from the Midwest in the 1970s when my father opened a branch office of a Milwaukee-based architectural firm there.

7. For an excellent resource on Walker's biography and early writing, see Tate (1991).

8. I am of course drawing on Harney and Moten's (2013) formulation of the practice of Black study as different from Black Studies in the academy.

9. Not surprisingly, perhaps, sometimes students have read Rebecca Walker's (2001) work and not her mother's. Briefly mentioning the conflict in this high-profile mother-daughter relationship allows me to touch on generational conflicts in feminism in general.

10. The recent controversy surrounding an interview with Walker (2018) in the *New York Times* in which she promoted the work of an avowed anti-Semite would also be fodder for discussion in my class.

11. Another novel I often teach in the introductory course—Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992)—also presents writing and reading as modes of survival.

12. This discussion of performativity can connect back to Rankine’s discussion of Serena Williams, which she frames with the question of “how to be a successful artist.” Rankine seems to be saying that all Black people, but especially Black people in the public eye, must be successful artists (2014, 35–36).

13. In the past, I have had students read the chapter “Black Power—Catalyst for Feminism” from Sara Evans’s *Personal Politics* (1979) to give them some background on the racial and sexual politics fictionalized in *Meridian*. More recent work by sociologist Winifred Breines has complicated the narrative about sexism in SNCC and called into question aspects of Evans’s influential interpretation (2006, 27–28).

14. I post for students a flyer available online from the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox with the full text of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Statement of Purpose (2007). This flyer includes an image of the SNCC logo, depicting a handshake between a Black and white person and graphically suggesting the emphasis on love and mutual regard. The flyer also shows a photo of John Lewis, “SNCC field secretary and later chairman,” and “others pray[ing] during a demonstration in Cairo, Illinois in 1962.” (SNCC, 2007). Walker dedicates *Meridian* to Lewis, who she calls “the unsung.” I briefly introduce Lewis, who becomes another useful link to the present and a way to discuss different forms of politics and what Lewis calls “good trouble.”

15. McDowell discusses “the symbiotic musical and religious traditions” as crucial to *Meridian*’s rediscovery, in the South, of “the power of the black past” (1993, 174). While I agree with McDowell’s reading of this scene as crucial to *Meridian*’s “commitment to the racial struggle once again,” I think Walker is also suggesting in her contrast between Black churches that the church and the music must be engaged in the struggle not simply a haven from it (176).

16. This fact is mentioned in Greil Marcus’s (1993, 11) review of *Meridian* first published in the *New Yorker*. Marcus notes as well that Walker is likely also referencing Camus’s final chapter of *The Rebel* called “Thought at the Meridian,” which, Marcus explains, ponders existential questions about actions and their limits.

17. For more information about the Andrew Goodman Foundation’s work, see their webpage: <https://andrewgoodman.org>.

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