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Alice Walker and the Grotesque in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

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Introduction

Born to sharecropping parents in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, Alice Walker is perhaps most widely known as the author of *The Color Purple*. As one who manages to raise diverse feelings among different readers, Walker is famous for breaking taboos such as that of “speaking about sexual abuse within the black community” (*Alice Walker’s The Color Purple* 160). As the author of works that deal with issues ranging from race relations to sexuality, Alice Walker is, in the words of Minrose C. Gwin, one of “the best-known [authors] among southern women writing today and one of the most widely read and anthologized American writers of the twentieth century” (462). Walker is an author heavily influenced by her Southern heritage which is evident for readers of her fiction as well as of the personal anecdotes expressed in various essays. Walker is an author with a strong interest in the Southern Gothic and, of special significance to this essay, the grotesque. In the collections of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* Walker expresses how she has been inspired by Southern writers such as William Faulkner and Walker’s fellow Georgia native, Flannery O’Connor, suggesting Walker’s Southern legacy and interest in the grotesque (20, 42).¹

Walker’s interest in the grotesque is also suggested by her personal experiences of feelings of ugliness following an accident involving a BB-gun at the age of eight (*In Search* 363). After her eye became deformed by the BB-gun accident, Walker experienced “feelings of shame and ugliness” and by the age of twelve she “did not pray for sight” but “for beauty” (366). These “feelings of shame and ugliness” are, of course, understandable within a culture where beauty is praised and where all that deviates from the ideals and beauty standards is considered ‘ugly’ may also viewed as ‘grotesque’.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland is a novel that contains a surplus of implicit references to the grotesque and carnival.² Although the novel raises questions about race relations, gender, and domestic violence; it is Walker’s uses of the grotesque that frames the narrative most powerfully. Set in the era of Jim Crow in Green County, Georgia, *The Third Life* depicts the lives of Brownfield Copeland and his sharecropping father Grange. The novel takes us through four decades of the relationship between Brownfield and Grange as well as their relationships with different women. As we enter the narrative we follow the childhood of Brownfield and the abuse he and his mother Margaret suffer at the hands of Grange. As the novel progresses, Brownfield grows up to be a bitter young man in search of his father who

¹ *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden* hereafter referred to as *In Search*

² *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* hereafter referred to as *The Third Life*

by then has left his family to pursue a life in the North. Brownfield enters into a relationship with one of his father's old girlfriends, Josie, but eventually marries Mem, who is Josie's niece and somewhat of an adopted daughter. Together with Mem, Brownfield has five children, and by the time Grange comes back from the North, Brownfield has been imprisoned for murdering Mem. Grange develops a close relationship with one of his granddaughters, Ruth, whom he decides to rescue from a life in despair with the newly released Brownfield. At the end of the novel Brownfield and Grange fight over who has the right to Ruth, by then a teenager, and the novel closes with Grange's murder of Brownfield in the local courthouse.

This essay examines how Walker, from a womanist perspective, uses the grotesque as an aesthetic tool in order to question and push the ideals and boundaries that constrain the lives and identities of African American women and men in the South. The grotesque can be defined along the lines of a trope that does not co-align with what is considered 'normal' within specific cultural contexts. Whether it is inside Brownfield's mind in his ideas about Mem and her pregnant body, or in Grange's views of whites, the grotesque is used by Walker as a way to provide criticism of the grotesque ideas of the United States as a culture and society. In doing so, Walker manages not only to criticize patriarchy and white supremacy, but also to display the possibilities of multiple femininities and masculinities, thus disrupting the 'neat' categories of the gender binary, as well as exposing the negative ontological repercussions of inhabiting a body marked as grotesque.

The Grotesque in Literary Theory

The history of the development of the grotesque as an art form and its adaptation into literature is long and complex. Since a complete historical overview of the origins and development of the grotesque is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief account of the origins of the term itself will have to suffice.³ The grotesque was initially viewed "as the expression of classical good taste" in art, but instead came to stand for the exact opposite during the mid-16th century (*Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque* 68). It was during the 1700s that "the grotesque began to be applied to literature" and during its earlier stages throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the grotesque had a controlling function and moral purpose (76, 82). One of the more significant points to make about the history of the grotesque is that the word grotesque means literally 'grotto-esque' or 'cavelike,' which stems

³ For a complete historical overview, see *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque*.

from the excavation of the Domus Aura cave paintings during the 1400s in Italy. The grotesque is, potentially, any image or representation that invokes fear and/or causes us to question prevailing hegemonic ideas and ideals commonly perceived as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. In terms of literature, then, one of the more commonly used examples of the grotesque is Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor Samsa wakes up one day having turned into a monstrous insect. Although Samsa has turned into an insect the world around him remains unchanged. This pattern is crucial to the grotesque: it is when the absurd and the strange enter into the real world that the grotesque happens. The grotesque is not a fairy tale world or fantasy where everything is somehow turned upside down, but instead it is the real world that is the backdrop where grotesque images are displayed.

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the main theorists within the grotesque, centers his understanding of the grotesque, as defined and discussed in *Rabelais and His World*, within the material body.⁴ For Bakhtin the grotesque body is one of excess, it is protruding and overflowing and, more importantly, a site of resistance. The Bakhtinian grotesque body is the non-static which is always in a state of transformation. This view of the grotesque body is mainly a positive one and a source of resistance that questions boundaries and disturbs that which has been excused as natural or normal. Contrary to the ideal classical body which is “finished and completed,” grotesque bodies are blended with the world and “remain ambivalent and contradictory: they are ugly, monstrous, [and] hideous” (25). Bakhtin suggests that the grotesque body, as opposed to the classical ideal, “is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). Bakhtin goes on to write that:

The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. ... The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase. (62)

It is evident that Bakhtin centers his ideas of the grotesque within the material body; however, I will in this essay also apply the Bakhtinian idea of the grotesque to aspects outside the material body. In my view, the grotesque is also applicable to thoughts and ideas. One example of the grotesque aspects of ideas is the view of the female body within patriarchy. This notion is twofold: on the one hand the female body is grotesque in the eyes of patriarchal

⁴ *Rabelais and His World* hereafter referred to as *Rabelais*.

thought; on the other, from a feminist/womanist perspective the idea of the female body as grotesque within patriarchy is in itself grotesque. For me, then, it is crucial to nuance Bakhtin's ideas about the grotesque by applying these to matters extending beyond the material body.

Although Bakhtin focuses on the progressive and potentially positive aspects of the grotesque, one must question this view of the grotesque as necessarily progressive. For the grotesque can also have an oppressive function particularly for those who inhabit bodies marked as grotesque. Wolfgang Kayser, a major influence in the field of the grotesque during the 20th century, defined the grotesque in terms of "the estranged world" and the "play with the absurd" (185). Whereas Bakhtin focuses on the positive aspects and transgressive possibilities of the grotesque, Kayser focuses much more on what I would like to call the potentially oppressive aspects of the grotesque. For Kayser, the grotesque is a potential source of fear since it deviates from cultural norms and values. Furthermore, Kayser also suggests that the reason why 'we' may fear the grotesque is "because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world" (185). Thus the grotesque may inspire fear since it has the power to make us question the very foundations of our own world as we know it.

Although these theoreticians choose to focus on slightly different aspects of the potential of the grotesque, they share the notion that the grotesque is potentially subversive towards hegemonic cultural orders. Central to the idea of the subversion and resistance to prevailing cultural idea(l)s is the concept of carnival in terms of spectacle and laughter. Bakhtin describes the "feast of fools" during Rabelais's time as one which involved rituals that nearly all were "a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level" (*Rabelais* 74). The carnival is, for Bakhtin, a temporal moment in time when all hierarchal structures are temporarily subverted and "[marks] the suspension of ... privileges, norms [and] prohibitions" (10). Carnival theory is related to the grotesque since it enables the possibility of resistance towards prevailing cultural hegemonic idea(l)s.

One thing becomes clear in the discussion of key words in this section: the grotesque is intricately linked to questions of power. Not only can the grotesque be used to maintain power through the use of oppressive and controlling images – the grotesque becomes the antithesis of the ideal within a specific cultural sphere – but it can equally be used as a tool of resistance against such controlling images.

Walker Scholarship

Regarding overall scholarship on Walker, there is an abundance of critical material on *The Color Purple*, whereas *The Third Life* seems to have been of less interest to scholars. This profound interest in *The Color Purple* at the expense of her other works is perhaps not solely a result of difference in literary quality, but also an extension of the success and mixed reception of the film adaptation of *The Color Purple*. Walker has been accused of giving overall ‘negative’ portrayals of African American men. However, there has been a great deal of more recent scholarship suggesting that Walker’s male characters should not be viewed as an attempt to damage or in any way provide negative stereotypes of all African American men.

Previous work on *The Third Life* has mainly focused on gender issues and in particular there has been a vast interest in Walker’s male characters. Early critiques of *The Third Life* were less interested in chastising Walker for her so-called ‘negative’ portrayals of African American men than those of the 1980s; however, as Erna Kelly notes in “A Matter of Focus: Men in the Margins,” after the publication of *The Color Purple* criticisms of Walker’s allegedly overtly brutal male characters arose (174). Minrose C. Gwin notes that “Walker’s writing has turned upon the axis of black women’s lives” and “her insistence that black men, despite their own victimization, must take responsibility for their treatment of black women” is pivotal to the understanding of Walker’s fiction (463).

Several scholars have noted that the criticisms of Walker’s male characters either condemn her characters for being brutal, or they denounce them as being weak and thus not masculine. As Candice M. Jenkins observes in her queer reading of *The Color Purple*, Walker questions and reworks the idea of the connection between a brutal dominant male and black masculinity. Walker “*deconstructs* [the] black family romance,” and shows us how dangerous the sphere of the family entity can be for, in this case, black women (92).⁵ Jenkins’s reading of Walker shows us how her works have continually refashioned the black family structure and indeed ‘queered’ “the very notion of the potent black patriarch” (94). Since Walker’s critics have accused her of portraying black men in an overtly negative light we must ask ourselves what it then is that supposedly makes her black male characters negative or, for that matter, positive. Jenkins suggests that the ideal image of the black male

⁵ However, Jenkins is not suggesting that the sphere of the family entity is any more or less dangerous for non-black women.

and masculinity as a whole are “closely aligned” with patriarchal dominance and that it is Walker’s depictions of the failure of black patriarchal dominance that has caused her critics to lash out against her portrayals of black men (115). Moreover, within the context of patriarchy, the black family entity where the ideal black male is dominant and strong, Walker’s depictions of supposedly ‘weak’ or non-dominant men are potentially grotesque.

One of the more significant strains of scholarship on Walker is that which argues that Walker purposely marginalizes men and whites in her fiction. For instance Kelly suggests that Alice Walker, in most of her fiction, marginalizes men in the sense that the focus is kept on women, thus “looking at what it is to be a woman of color” (172). Kelly also argues that Walker continually keeps black women at the center of the plot by making them the norm, especially when they are the contrary of the norm in society (172). However, although Walker may marginalize men in her fiction, Kelly makes sure to underscore the fact that Walker does not malign them (172). Not only does Walker consciously choose to marginalize men in her works, but she also largely ignores the white world. Kelly suggests that in a majority of Walker’s works the white world is treated as a backdrop, something which Walker herself has acknowledged and that Jenkins also argues in her analysis. Jenkins reads David Marriott’s analysis of Richard Wright’s writing as highlighting “the way that whiteness can be understood as a *backdrop* ... for masculine assertions of power” (101). Likewise, Jenkins argues, white racist society is not only the backdrop for Walker’s stories, but also by extension the source of the violence and abuse that Walker’s black male characters subject their families to.

Another aspect of *The Third Life* that is important to note is that Walker provides an explanation for the African American male characters’ violence against women. The main reason why the male characters Brownfield and Grange mistreat and abuse women is because it is a reaction to how they themselves have been mistreated and abused by white society. For instance Jenkins suggests that Walker’s black male characters gain access to their masculinity and “manhood through the recreation of a (violent) patriarchy in their own homes” (101). Since these men’s identities have been shaped within a social sphere that is grounded in white racism, they have also internalized ideas of the violence of that social sphere (101). However, it is crucial to keep in mind here that although Walker provides an explanation for the actions of these men she does not excuse their violence nor justify their abuse of women. Instead, Walker is showing us what happens when we accept such behavior: entire lives are lost.

I also wish to highlight the healing aspects of Walker's works. Barbara T. Christian suggests that "[w]hat is particularly southern about Walker's manner of protesting is that it always takes place within the possibilities of healing" (567). Furthermore, Christian also underscores that Walker's writing always has an "arc towards healing": "in each of her novels, major characters who are wounded in some way go through a process of healing" (567). This "arc towards healing" is indeed pivotal to understanding Walker's works, for although Walker is deeply concerned with portraying the suffering of, in particular, African American women, her novels also convey the idea that there is a possibility of healing and a brighter future. It is, however, pivotal here to note that it is Walker's uses of the grotesque that carries the suffering of her female characters. Therefore, it is through her use of the grotesque that Walker displays her 'arc towards healing'.

In the admirable article "To Build A Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness," Amanda J. Davis discusses how Walker, along with other authors such as Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison; demonstrate "that nation-building could not occur without discussing the relationships between black men and women and addressing the specific realities of black women's lives" (24-25). Davis suggests that texts, such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* "serve as a critical re-centering and examination of violence against women and the challenges violence poses to women's attempts to achieve and maintain wholeness in a society where liberation itself is often gendered" (25). More specifically, Davis argues that Walker queries the possibility of "women to maintain, or even momentarily achieve, wholeness in homes and a society in which the black female body frequently acts as a location of pain" (32). Although Davis provides a convincing argument in her analysis, I feel that by exploring the grotesque we may be able to enhance our understanding of why the "the black female body frequently acts as a location of pain" (32).

Although the prevalence of grotesque images in Walker's works is obvious, it seems many scholars have failed to take this into account when analyzing her fiction. Critics have looked at Walker in terms of her Southern heritage. One such scholar is Robert James Butler. Butler argues in "Alice Walker's Vision of the South in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*" that the novel is an 'accurate' depiction of the South. Maintaining that although – or perhaps due to the fact that – Brownfield's life crystallizes "all that is negative about Southern culture," Butler argues, persuasively, that the novel nevertheless describes "a 'whole truth' about the South which is complex" and multifaceted (196, 203). Butler also suggests

that the novel ‘succeeds’ “because it consciously avoids an oversimplified vision which expresses only one ‘side’ of Southern life” (203). Although the Southern tradition of writing inevitably brings to mind Gothic tales with grotesque images, Butler neglects this aspect of *The Third Life* in his analysis. Moreover, Walker explicitly uses the word ‘grotesque’ several times in *The Third Life*.⁶ In my view, Butler and other scholars who have placed emphasis on Walker’s Southern heritage have failed to lift Walker’s use of the grotesque to the forefront. In light of this lack of understanding of Walker’s prominent use of the grotesque, I have chosen to examine Walker’s grotesque images. It is my firm belief that only by looking at the grotesque aspects of *The Third Life* will we be able to gain a more satisfactory understanding of the novel as a whole, as well as of Walker’s contribution to the critique of the U.S. as a white supremacist society and culture.

Historical Context

In order for us to be able to fully understand the circumstances surrounding this novel an overview of the historical context within which *The Third Life* was produced is needed. Walker wrote the novel between “the winter of 1966 ... [and] November of 1969,” a time period filled with different social movements attempting to change U.S. society (*The Third Life* 248-249). Of special interest to this essay are the civil rights movement and the history of race relations and the government endorsed bi-racial hierarchy of the U.S. South. Not only will a brief account of the race-relations in the U.S. enhance our understanding of *The Third Life*’s narrative as such, but it will also provide critical insight to the reasons why Walker wrote the novel.

From the end of slavery African Americans have struggled for their rights to be treated as equal citizens in U.S. Although slavery formally ended in 1865 the U.S. remained a white supremacist society that continually disenfranchised African Americans throughout most of the twentieth century. The three amendments that were added to the U.S. Constitution following the end of the Civil War in 1865 formally announced the equality of all races, but

⁶ There are three instances in the novel where the word ‘grotesque’ is used explicitly. When Josie is lying on the floor in front of her father and a circle of former ‘lovers’ Walker describes her as “deformed and grotesque” (40). When Ruth and her sisters find Mem murdered lying “faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood,” Mem’s body’s “attitude of profound, inevitable rest” appears “grotesque” to the girls (122). And, finally, at a graduation ceremony, Ruth sees Grange from a distance and realizes that “[w]henver she ... looked at him like a stranger he seemed grotesque” (190). In my view, these three instances where Walker explicitly uses the word grotesque, signifies her overall use of the grotesque throughout the novel. Therefore, it is indeed curious that scholars have failed to examine Walker’s uses of the grotesque.

failed to “become a reality for African Americans’ daily lives in either the North or the South” (*America Firsthand* 14).⁷ The economic disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South was expressed through sharecropping, a system “in which ex-slaves were forced to pay a share of the crop to former owners in exchange for the right to farm” (48). Moreover, African Americans were continuously discouraged from executing their right to vote through the implementation of poll taxes and complex voter registration forms. Simultaneously, a racist culture influenced by Social Darwinism and scientific racism was shaped, and, in turn, this culture laid the foundations of the Jim Crow system. Initially passed in 1860 as a law in Louisiana that “mandated ‘separate but equal’ accommodations on railroads,” Jim Crow laws eventually spread throughout the South (*Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents* 238).⁸ Within this system of Jim Crow, laws with the policy of ‘separate but equal’ segregated the South and secured the formal exclusion of African Americans from white society.

Individuals of the African American community were not only subjected to the psychological violence of Jim Crow laws, but physical acts of violence were also committed. As a reaction to the emancipation of slaves, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) formed in 1866, a terrorist organization dedicated to “controlling African Americans” through use of violence (26). Although the KKK began as a Southern and largely a male organization, it is important to note that the organization not only turned into a nationwide organization during the 1900s, but it also had a significant number of female members from the 1920’s (*Women’s America* 249).^{9,10} Nevertheless, the organization was committed to violent acts against African Americans and also murdered a large number of men, women, and children through the act of lynching. One of the main spokespersons of the antilynching campaign was Ida B. Wells-Barnett, journalist and reformer, who actively fought against lynching in the South. Identifying lynching as based on white fear of African Americans, Wells-Barnett made “opposition to lynching a leading cause among African American activists” (*AF* 89). Although violence committed by whites against African Americans continued, lynchings largely ended during World War II.

⁷ *America Firsthand* hereafter referred to as *AF*.

⁸ *Brown v. Board of Education* hereafter referred to as *Brown v. Board*.

⁹ *Women’s America* hereafter referred to as *WA*.

¹⁰ The women’s Ku Klux Klan had an estimated 250,000 members across the U.S. “within a year of its founding” (*WA* 249).

Although oppressed within this white supremacist society, activists were always ready to struggle against the racist apartheid of the South and for the equal rights of African Americans throughout the U.S. Together with Du Bois and other prominent African American activists, Wells-Barnett founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 (*Brown v. Board 7*). During World War II African American activists created the ‘Double Victory Campaign,’ a campaign that sought to end the fascism abroad as well as racism ‘at home’ in the U.S. In the 1950’s the beginnings of the civil rights movement began which intensified during the 1960’s. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) initiated the first sit-in to integrate the segregated South in 1960, and sit-ins spread throughout the South and became a prominent tool of resistance for the branch of the civil rights movement committed to non-violence (240). During the summer of 1964, which came to be known as Mississippi Freedom Summer, Northerners, African Americans as well as white Americans, traveled to the South in order to register African Americans to vote “and to teach African American children their history in ‘freedom schools’” (AF 269). This ‘Freedom Summer’ led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which secured the rights of African Americans to vote in elections and outlawing poll taxes (269). Despite this success of the nonviolence organizations such as SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights movement was constantly under attacks of violence from whites wishing to sustain white supremacy. Apart from the activists who were murdered or simply ‘disappeared’ during ‘Freedom Summer’ “thirty-five African American Churches were burned; and thirty homes and other buildings were bombed” (269). Moreover, prominent figures of the civil rights movement Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were murdered later in the same decade.

The role of women within the civil rights movement was ambiguous since they were expected to partake in the movement and fight for their rights as African Americans, but were also expected to submit to traditional gender roles.¹¹ Although African American women were as active members of the civil rights movement as African American men, and indeed held high positions within the NAACP, SNCC, and SCLC, many women found themselves stuck with positions “traditionally assigned to women” such as those involving clerical work (WA 632). Realizing their own subordination African American women started their own civil rights movements in order to fight for their rights as African Americans and women. Pauli

¹¹ Walker writes about the civil rights movement, and the role of women within the movement, in the novel *Meridian*. The novel, like *The Third Life*, also contains a surplus of implicit references to the grotesque.

Murray, lawyer and civil rights activist, coined the term ‘Jane Crow’ to underscore “the discrimination on the basis of sex” and wrote, together with colleague Mary Eastwood, the now classic essay “Jane Crow and the Law” (636).

Initially, African American women allied with white feminists in their struggle for the equality of the sexes; however, African American women soon realized that white women would often fail to acknowledge that black women were doubly oppressed. This is one of the main reasons why African American women’s activists, such as Walker, became reluctant towards labeling themselves ‘feminist’. Instead Walker decided to call herself ‘womanist,’ representing her preference for human rights and commitment to the “survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female” (*In Search* xi). According to Walker, “[w]omanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” and a womanist is “not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (xi). For Walker, the term ‘womanism’ suggests a belief in the universal human rights as opposed to the somewhat restrictive meanings of ‘feminism.’ According to Black Feminist Patricia Hill Collins, Walker has thereby “[redefined] all people as ‘people of color’” (*Black Feminist Thought* 46). As a whole, Walker centers her definition of womanism in the belief in preservation of all human rights, not only those of women.

Analysis

Within the context of Southern culture and specifically the Jim Crow South within which *The Third Life* is set, it is pivotal to keep in mind that the image of the ‘black woman’ is the opposite of the ideal white classical closed male body, as defined by Bakhtin. Suggesting that “the grotesque is dangerously entangled with both racism and patriarchy in the South,” Sarah Gleeson-White quotes Mab Segrest, a scholar of Southern writing, who maintains that “[b]oth patriarchy and racism depend on creating a category of the Other--or freak, not 'normal like me.' In southern racism, it is the black person; in patriarchy, the female” (112). It is therefore not difficult to imagine that being both black and female in the South creates a double burden of oppressive power structures.

Some of the female grotesques that Walker uses are evident in her descriptions of Josie as an excessive, greedy woman who is somewhat of a sexual carnivore who consumes men. The image of the female sexual carnivore is used several times in the novel. For instance Lorene is ‘oversexed’ like her mother Josie, and Brownfield’s mother Margaret is described as being a “huntress of soft touches” on weekends (20). Moreover, it is suggested in the opening of the novel that Grange has forced Margaret to “sell herself” to other men as

well as to have extra-marital affairs (10). Other female grotesques in the novel emerge through descriptions of the pregnant body which is used several times throughout the novel and through the descriptions of the adolescent girl, embodied in the character of Ruth.

The Female Adolescent

The image of the female adolescent is one that is potentially grotesque within patriarchy mainly because it questions the boundaries of the gender binary. Because adolescent girls are not yet fully ‘transformed’ into women they are potentially dangerous to patriarchal society. Although the grotesque aspects of the adolescent and adult female bodies are expressed differently – the adolescent is grotesque because she is not as clearly marked feminine/female as the adult, and the adult is grotesque because she is so different from the ideal male classical body – this does not mean that there is anything less grotesque about one or the other. In her analysis on Carson McCullers and the Bakhtinian grotesque Gleeson-White argues that “[t]he female adolescent is perhaps even more grotesque than her adult counterpart for not only is she female, but also she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood” (111). Although Gleeson-White’s argument is quite persuasive, I would suggest that the female adolescent and adult are equally grotesque within patriarchy although in different ways. What really matters is that the female body, adolescent or adult, is different from the ideal male closed and complete, classical body.

Particularly significant here is also that the part of the body where the female reproduction cycle is located is within the sphere of the ‘lower bodily stratum’ which is central to Bakhtinian thought (*Rabelais* 20). Whereas Bakhtin focuses more on the scatological aspects of the lower bodily stratum, I find it interesting here to relate his ideas of the lower bodily stratum to the female reproductive organs. The lower bodily stratum represents all that which is grotesque about the physical body and within the context of the female body, then, the grotesque are the menses and that which relates to pregnancy, for instance afterbirth.

Through the adolescent character of Ruth, Walker displays a womanist critique of patriarchal society. Ruth, Grange’s granddaughter and Brownfield’s youngest daughter, is somewhat of a loner who, due to Brownfield’s murder of her mother Mem, ends up living with Grange from early on in her life. Considered a ‘freak’ by the other children at school, Ruth is referred to as “Mrs. Grange” due to her close relationship with her grandfather (191). Grange and Ruth become close friends and Grange teaches her all she needs to know in order

to survive in the world. Although dependent on Grange, Ruth is self-sufficient and independent from the start as she is described as having “popped out by herself” during her birth (67). Throughout most of her presence in the novel, Ruth is an adolescent and she becomes gradually more aware of her own body and begins to fear her physical transformation into an adult. The image of the mind/body dualism is evident here in the way that Ruth is described as experiencing her body rather than being it: “One day the question of what her future was going to be loomed very large. It was the day her body decided it was ready for a future and she knew she was not” (193). Susan Bordo argues that within the mind/body dualism the mind is constantly attempting to escape the body, thus turning into a binary where the mind represents what is positive and the body that which is negative (5). Bordo also adds the notion of gender to the mix, suggesting that if Western ideology perceives the body as negative, then understanding woman as ‘the body’ also suggests that ‘woman’ is that negativity (5). Ruth’s fear of her body turning into a woman then exposes some of the anxiety and the mind/body dualism that young girls within patriarchy experience.

Moreover, this “day her body decided it was ready for a future and she knew she was not” is the day Ruth has her period for the first time and the realization of now inhabiting a woman’s body terrifies her: Ruth feels that inhabiting a “woman’s body [also makes] her defenseless” (193). This is interesting in at least two respects. On the one hand her body is now defenseless because it is a ‘woman’s’ body trapped within patriarchy where ‘man’ has unlimited claim and access to such bodies. On the other hand this is interesting because it shows us how terrifying it is for Ruth to inhabit a woman’s body because it is unknowable, it can, potentially, behave whichever way it wishes to behave. Ruth’s mind no longer has control over her body because the reproduction process is now at work inside her, always transforming and never finishing because the menstrual cycle is always in the midst of a process. In my view, due to the unfinished aspects of menstrual cycle, the female reproduction organs epitomize the incomplete body central to the Bakhtinian grotesque. The menstrual cycle is non-static and potentially dangerous to patriarchy: because one cannot tell in what stage of the cycle a woman is from simply looking the body, the ‘fertile’ female body is particularly dangerous to patriarchy. Gleeson-White suggests that the grotesque can convey “the strangeness of the adolescent experience, in terms of the changing body, sexual anxiety, and social demands for conformity” which then explains Walker’s use of the grotesque in terms of the adolescent characters (117).

Returning to Ruth's first period, Grange attempts to help Ruth cover up her period and has ambiguous feelings towards the event: "Grange had bought her napkins, a belt, and a lovely talc that smelled like a warm rose. He was excited and troubled over what he would say to her about such an unplanned for, though not unexpected development" (193). Although Grange is "excited" about Ruth's development he is also unsure about what to say to her (193). However, Grange nevertheless buys "napkins, a belt, and a lovely talc that smelled like a warm rose" for Ruth so that she need not expose her period to the world (193). Although most women are encouraged to cover up their period both literally and verbally, it is interesting that Grange shows such care as to buy napkins for Ruth and that he is "excited" about her "development" (193). However, neither Ruth nor Grange wish to talk about the "development" which goes to show the overall sensitive nature of menses and the female reproduction system (193). Moreover, Grange's buying of "a lovely talc that smelled like a warm rose" shows the need to control the female body and disguise the smell of menses, considered 'disgusting' in patriarchal ideology (193). The symbol of the "warm rose" here is also interesting when considering that the rose itself is a symbol for the female genitalia. Thus Grange's attempt to cover up the signs of Ruth's menses is a display of patriarchal control. However, at the same time Grange's sense of care for Ruth in this scene also suggests Grange is replacing the absent matriarch, taking care of Ruth at a pivotal stage in her body's development Grange steps in and assumes the role of the mother buying Ruth napkins.

Through her display of the adolescent character Ruth and her seemingly grotesque body, Walker's womanist perspective enhances the Bakhtinian ideas of 'lower bodily stratum'. By depicting Ruth's initial confusion and ambivalent emotions towards her first period, Walker displays the notion of inhabiting a woman's body as terrifying. Indeed Ruth's response to now inhabiting a "woman's body" is paralyzing for her because it "[makes] her defenseless" (193). Ruth's entrance into womanhood during her first period is a traumatic experience. However, Walker also suggests an alternative masculine ideal through the character of Grange during Ruth's first period. Grange assumes the role of the substitute matriarch, and the care and affection Grange's character offers suggests a masculinity that is able to look beyond the grotesque aspects of female reproduction.

Female Spectacle and the Woman of Excess

Closely related to the grotesque is the hysteric. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément argue in *The Newly Born Woman* that within patriarchy all hysterics end up being destroyed or, as Daphne, stowed away in an asylum. Discussing the images of the female hysteric and sorceresses Cixous and Clément maintain that “[t]his feminine role ... of [the] hysteric is ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time. Antiestablishment because the symptoms – the attacks – revolt and shake up” the patriarchal establishment or to whomever “they are exhibited” (5). Moreover, Cixous and Clément argue that the female hysteric “unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated ... everyday life” and they are conservative “because [they] end up being destroyed, and nothing is registered except [their] mythical traces (5). Another adolescent character is Brownfield’s oldest daughter Daphne who at the end of the novel embodies the Freudian female grotesque of the hysteric. Indeed, Daphne is a hysteric and we are left with no other knowledge of her fate than her ‘mythical trace’ in a “crazy house up North” (218). However, we must distinguish between Brownfield’s view of Daphne as a hysteric and Walker’s inherent critique here. This ‘mythical trace’ of Daphne’s is voiced through Brownfield who represents patriarchy and not through the narrative voice of Walker. Therefore Walker’s criticism is inherent within Brownfield’s voice; since he fails to understand the real circumstances surrounding Daphne’s alleged ‘madness’ he can easily dismiss her as an ‘insane’ ‘hysteric’. The real reason behind Daphne’s alleged ‘madness’ is that her father has murdered her mother.

The image of the female hysteric is closely related to the concept of ‘spectacle’ which in carnival theory means the complete loss of boundaries and a degrading exposing of a body that is completely accessible and on display. The female spectacle where a woman is completely on display and accessible also suggests a loss of control of oneself and as Russo writes, “[m]aking a spectacle out of oneself [seems] a specifically feminine danger” (54). The female grotesque spectacle is particularly dangerous to patriarchy since it threatens and pushes the confining borders that have been assigned to women. However, the female grotesque spectacle is ambiguous since it can be both oppressive and liberating. The female spectacle is liberating because it has the power to expose the hidden and disguised controlling forces of patriarchy since the spectacle forces us to consider why we view the female grotesque spectacle with horror or admiration. But the female grotesque spectacle is also oppressive because it teaches us or, rather, it reinforces our understanding of certain images as grotesque. From Brownfield’s perspective Daphne personifies the female spectacle of the

hysteric and when Daphne starts having her “monthly sickness,” Brownfield lashes out against her with violence, kicking her in the stomach (119).

Another example of an overt female grotesque spectacles in *The Third Life* that of Josie who is described as a woman of excess and depicted within the context of spectacle numerous times. Brownfield discovers Josie’s aggressive sexual appetite and “[finds] her a devouring cat, voracious and sly, wanting to eat him up, swallowing him down alive” (36). Josie is continuously depicted in similar terms of excess and spectacle. The scene where Josie is haunted by the memory of her father and particularly the one of her returning to his house on his birthday one last time at the age of sixteen is one that epitomizes the Bakhtinian body of excess (38, 39). In the scene, Josie is intoxicated, she lies on the living room floor with her father standing over her, and she is surrounded by a semi-circle of men who have all paid her father to have sex with her. Josie looks like an “overturned pregnant turtle” and “[i]t seemed to [the men] that Josie’s stomach moved and they were afraid of their guilt suddenly falling on the floor before them wailing out their names. But it was only that she was heaving and vomiting and choking on her own puke” (40). Here Josie embodies both the carnival spectacle as well as the Bakhtinian grotesque body of excess and his ideas on the lower bodily stratum. Josie is a spectacle because she is in a state of complete powerlessness and she is on display before a male audience. Josie’s “swollen body” is not only pregnant, her belly also appears to be moving in front of the eyes of the men, each of whom might be the father of the baby inside her pregnant stomach, and on top of that she is also vomiting (40). The overflowing pregnant body of excess represents the unknown, and it is threatening both because the female body in patriarchy in itself is considered ‘Other’ and potentially dangerous, and also because the body is pregnant. Though Josie’s pregnant belly is protruding and extremely visible, right in the face of patriarchy, it is also unknowable because it represents something unfinished and in the process of becoming.

The relationship between the female hysteric and that of the female ‘spectacle’ is clear since they both represent a complete loss of boundaries and the display of a body that is completely accessible. For Brownfield, Daphne embodies the female hysteric which is what enables his violent and abusive behavior towards her. Walker’s criticism is inherent within Brownfield’s voice: since he fails to understand the actual circumstances surrounding Daphne’s ‘madness’ he is able to dismiss her as a ‘hysteric’. The Bakhtinian carnival spectacle and the grotesque body of excess are embodied in the character of Josie. Placed on display in front of an audience of men, Josie’s protruding and pregnant body frightens the

audience. Symbolically, Josie's body threatens patriarchy, as represented by the 'semi-circle of men' surrounding her, because they are all equally responsible for her physical state. Walker's uses the grotesque images of the female hysteric and spectacle to ascribe the responsibility of the condition of these women to the patriarchy that shuns them.

Monstrosity

Monsters, like the hysteric and female spectacle, are also closely related to the grotesque. In her article on pregnant bodies, Rosemary Betterton discusses the monstrous aspects of pregnancy. Betterton argues that "[t]he embodied pregnant woman ... destabilizes the concept of the singular self" because it "[threatens] to spill over the boundaries of the unified subject" (85). Using the ideas of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti in her article, Betterton suggests that "the monstrous helps organize structures of difference in a same/other binary between what is ... normal and abnormal, whether it be between sexual, racial, or human/nonhuman categories" (82). Moreover, Betterton also maintains that, particularly "[i]n the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," monstrous births were "linked to women's sexual excess or perversion" (83). This linking of female 'sexual excess or perversion' to monstrosity was a way of controlling female sexuality. In *The Third Life* monstrosity is indeed linked to the 'sexual excess' of female characters; however, the novel offers alternative versions of monstrosity.

Not only does Josie's pregnant body appear monstrous to the men surrounding her in the scene described in the previous section, but the outcome of that pregnancy, Lorene, is monstrous. I would argue that Lorene is symbolically the monstrous offspring of the many 'lovers' of her mother. In the scene where Josie is surrounded by former 'lovers,' "the big questioning eyes" of these 'lovers' stare at "the big thrusting stomach that none of them owned" (40). Although none of them are willing to claim 'ownership' of the fetus inside Josie's pregnant belly, it is clear from the scene that they are all jointly responsible for her pregnancy. Similarly, Brownfield's baby brother, Star, is also the monstrous offspring of his mother's relationships with "many lovers:"

The baby's name was Star, but it was never called anything. It was treated indifferently most of the time and seemed resigned to not belonging. It had grayish eyes and reddish hair and was shadowed pale gold and chocolate like a little animal. From its odd coloration its father might have been everyone of its mother's many lovers. (19)

Whereas Lorene is free and has an ‘open-ended’ fate, Star ends up dead at the hands of his mother Margaret. Poisoning herself and Star, Margaret dies sitting on her knees in a “dark clearing” in the forest (21). Exaggeration is elementary to the grotesque and the brief life of Star is indeed exaggerated: Star is described as animal-like in coloration, is shunned, and just does not belong in the world; he also dies when still a baby. Further on in the novel, Brownfield and Mem have a baby who resembles Star and remains unnamed up until its early death. It is Brownfield, however, who kills the baby by leaving him out in the cold. These children are extreme in their coloration and therefore also shunned as ‘other’ within their surroundings. By creating sympathy for these babies who have no opportunity to live Walker criticizes the society where these seemingly ‘monstrous’ babies have no place, simply due to the color of their skin. Walker’s inherent criticism of the bi-racial hierarchy is evident since these ‘albino’ babies are both black and white. Through these ‘albino’ characters Walker provides criticism towards the racialized gaze; a criticism which is also evident in her depictions of whiteness, which will be discussed below.

Interestingly, these babies are shunned due to their lack of color, or for their apparent whiteness, which turns them into monstrous ‘freaks’ within this predominately African American environment. In my view, these babies also “[destabilize] the concept of the singular self” because they force Brownfield to reflect upon his own heredity: although the baby Mem gives birth to is white Brownfield knows it is his son because the baby “looked jest like” him and Grange (225). Brownfield is forced to recognize that he carries these genes inside him and therefore his body is destabilized, and, in line with the grotesque, his body becomes two in one. Therefore, Brownfield’s body is unstable, double, and unfinished which all are fundamental to the grotesque body.

As Walker’s narrative unfolds, Lorene’s monstrous character offers seemingly endless possibilities for exerting pressure on and transgressing the boundaries that define and confine femininity. Lorene leads an over-sexed, promiscuous life similar to that of Josie’s: they end up competing over the same men and when Lorene migrates North it takes “two very young and talented girls” to replace her at the Dew Drop Inn (60). Symbolically embodying her lascivious mother’s relations with numerous men, Lorene’s excessive sexual appetite is unbecoming for a woman, she is almost a monster. Moreover, Lorene is “cursed with the beginnings of a thick mustache and beard” and she is “as sinewy as” a man and “[h]er legs [are] even more hairy than her face” (34). This hairy and androgynous being is only recognizable as female from “her odor and breasts” (34). What makes Lorene such an

interesting character in terms of her grotesque and monstrous qualities is that she transgresses the borders of what a 'woman' is: Lorene is slippery, a freak of culture and nature, she is neither human nor animal, female nor male yet still at the same time she *is* in fact both animal *and* human, both female *and* male. Lorene is also engaged in an Oedipus-like relationship with her mother where they compete over the same men; thus, Lorene transgresses the norms of proper behavior for daughters, as well as for mothers and lovers. Lorene is, in a way, her own mother in drag: imitating her mother by engaging in sexual relationships with the same men, Lorene is also 'worse' than her mother (40). By the age of fifteen Lorene has already given birth to "two baby boys," whereas Josie had Lorene at the age of sixteen, and Lorene is also admired by some of the youngsters of the community as opposed to Josie who is looked down upon (43):

For although [Lorene] looked more like somebody's brother than anybody's girl, she had a reputation for toughness that earned her an abundance of respect from youngsters who hoped to grow up to be like her. She was noted for her expert use of the razor, and it was said that she had once cut up a customer's wife and then run the customer out of the room while his wife almost bled to death. (44)

What in the end happens to Lorene is left unsaid; we know only that she ends up migrating North (60). This open ending of Lorene's character offers in itself an abundance of possibilities. Because we are not told what happens to her, the reader is free to imagine whatever fate s/he wishes for Lorene; Lorene is free and although she is a mother she is not tied down by her children.

In *The Third Life* monstrosity is linked to female sexual excess and reproduction. The 'product' of Josie's promiscuous lifestyle is monstrous. Lorene is depicted as someone who is both male and female as well as animal-like. However, although the eighteenth and nineteenth century discourses which linked female excess to monstrous births were oppressive since they constrained women's sexuality, Walker's narrative offers a different perspective of monstrosity: although Lorene is monstrous, she is also free. Moreover, Walker criticizes the society where the 'monstrous,' 'albino' babies have no place by creating sympathy for them. Walker's criticism of the racialized gaze and bi-racial hierarchy is evident since these 'albino' babies are both black and white.

Mem's Salvific Wish

If the grotesque is the incomplete, irregular, and monstrous body that is blended with the world, then the potential need or wish to control the body would be one way of avoiding becoming grotesque. The need for respectability can be expressed through the maintaining of strict control of one's body. Indeed, Candice M. Jenkins argues that at least part of the criticism against Walker's portrayals of black men was driven "by the propriety-seeking salvific wish" (109). Jenkins proposes the term 'the salvific¹² wish' to describe the desire of racial or communal uplift particularly among middle-class African American women through the adoption of bourgeois values (13). The salvific wish can be understood along the lines of the need to control bodies by maintaining propriety as a means of survival within a social or cultural context that threatens the safety of those bodies.

The salvific wish is visible in *The Third Life* in several respects. Both Mem and Ruth's school mate Rossel express a salvific wish, Mem through her wishes to provide a proper and safe home for her children, and Rossel through her wish to marry Walt Terrell – "the richest black man in the county" (190). Although these characters struggle to fulfill their respective salvific wishes, Walker's narrative does not offer these characters any salvation through the fulfillment of their salvific wishes. Indeed one day Mem arranges to rent "a new house in town" with "sinks and a toilet inside the house and it's got 'lectric lights and even garden space for flowers and greens" (85). This salvific wish of Mem's puts Brownfield's manhood at stake since she has gone ahead and signed the lease for the house without consulting Brownfield who, in a fit of rage, screams: "I may not be able to read and write but I'm still the man that wears the pants" (87). Although Mem at this stage in the narrative considers Brownfield ugly and questions her marriage to him, she still shows consideration for him, attempting to convince him that "factory work'll keep [him] out of the rain" (85). Moreover, after the birth of Ruth, Mem protects the "children from the sight of childbirth" and covers up and folds the pallet "as neatly as newspaper" (*The Third Life* 70). Mem's careful folding of the pallet shows the need to cover up that which is grotesque and also a salvific wish of treating with dignity that which is considered grotesque as a way of elevation. However, despite Mem's repeated attempts at fulfilling her salvific wish to provide a proper and safe home for her children, Walker's narrative continuously rejects Mem's wish. Instead

¹² Jenkins coins the term 'salvific' from the word 'salvation' which has, she writes, "religious connotations [and therefore also] has significant linguistic resonance in African American communities (*Proper Lives, Proper Relations* 13).

Mem ends up suffering through an abusive relationship with Brownfield and eventually ends up dead.

Analogously, Rossel's salvific wish is rejected by Walker who instead depicts Rossel as a child after having married Walter Terrell. At the funeral of Rossel's father, Ruth looks at Rossel from a distance: "Rossel was richly robed in black and looked like a stricken queen. She had grown older in that year, and, apparently, more devoted to her husband, for she leaned within the protection of his arms with the abandoned dependency of a child" (192). Rossel's new "abandoned dependency of a child" displays Walker's womanism in terms of critique towards a patriarchal society where women are condemned to a dependency on men in order to survive (192).

At a different level, Grange represents Walker's own salvific wish. Since Grange is the character that has come to realize that he cannot take out his rage at the white community upon his family and is Ruth's absent mother's substitute, the 'new' Grange represents Walker's wish for an 'ideal' manhood. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Grange is the substitute matriarch who takes care of Ruth when her mother, Mem, dies. The care Grange shows for Ruth is both paternal and maternal and he goes to great lengths to protect Ruth from the abusive Brownfield. Therefore, Grange symbolizes a transformed masculine ideal and also represents Walker's salvific wish.

Although Walker rejects Mem's and Rossel's salvific wishes through Mem's death and Rossel's development into a childlike 'dependency' on her husband, there is an inherent social critique hidden in these rejected salvific wishes. Walker's narrative offers a critique of a patriarchal society which fails to account for these women. Moreover, through Grange, Walker's presents her personal salvific wish for a transformed masculinity. Assuming the role of the substitute matriarch for Ruth, Grange is, unlike his son Brownfield, neither oppressive nor abusive. Instead Grange personifies the womanist salvific wish of a more caring and sensible masculinity.

Pregnant Death

Bakhtin proposes the image of the senile, pregnant hags as the ultimate grotesque. The view of the senile, pregnant hags is profoundly ambivalent because the image represents both death and birth at the same time. The senile, pregnant hags represent a pregnant death, "a death that gives birth" (*Rabelais* 25). Bakhtin goes on to write:

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body ... From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other. ... It is dying and as yet unfinished ... No longer is there one body, nor are there as yet two. ... The unfinished and open body ... is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. (26)

The body of these hags are “unfinished and open”; although not a single body, nor “as yet two,” these hags represent “the epitome of incompleteness” (26). The image of the senile, pregnant hag is the ultimate grotesque for Bakhtin: since they are both old and senile they are not supposed to be able to be pregnant, yet their bodies do represent both death and life simultaneously. In light of the earlier discussion of mind/body dualism, the senility of these hags is interesting. Since these hags are senile their minds are not in control of their bodies, their grotesqueness is emphasized further. I would argue that these senile hags represent a body within which the mind/body dualism is no longer at work. Instead, the mind has become *one* with the body and together they form a grotesque creature whose actions cannot be predicted.

Mem, at the time of Ruth’s birth, resembles Bakhtin’s old hags. It is Brownfield who has turned Mem into this deformed, pregnant, old creature: he has beaten her down, physically and psychologically, and it is he who has impregnated her and brought her down to “lowness” (*The Third Life* 9). The image of pregnant death is clearly expressed in Brownfield’s gradual destruction of Mem:

Brownfield lay in wait for the return of Mem’s weakness. The cycles of her months and years brought it. The first early morning heaving were a good sign. Her body would do to her what he could not, without the support of his former bravado. The swelling of the womb, again and again pushing the backbone inward, the belly outward. He surveyed with sly interest the bleaching out of every crease on her wrinkled stomach. Waiting. She could not hold out against him with nausea, aching feet and teeth, swollen legs, bursting veins and head; or the grim and dizzying reality of her trapped self and her children’s despair. He could bring her back to lowness she had not even guessed at before. (*The Third Life* 101)

Brownfield beats Mem and “[tries] to pin the blame for his failure by imprinting it on her face” and Mem “[becomes] a haggard automatous witch beside whom even Josie looked well-

preserved (55). Although Mem is not an old hag per se, she is indeed described as old when she gives birth to Ruth. Her hair is described as being “as grey as charcoal,” and “much” of it “had fallen out” (73). Mem is also described as having turned into “a haggard *automatous* witch,” which further suggests her resemblance to the Bakhtinian senile hags (my italics, 90). The significance of the word ‘automatous’ is crucial to the point made earlier about the lack of mind/body dualism of the senile, pregnant hags.

In the novel Brownfield represents patriarchy which is responsible for bringing Mem down to this ‘low’ state of existence and, interestingly enough, it is that same patriarchy that shuns her for being in that state. The representation of the senile hag as the ‘ultimate’ grotesque within patriarchy is twofold: it is within patriarchy that the old pregnant hag is the ultimate grotesque and patriarchy is also responsible for bringing her down to this state. It is Brownfield who beats Mem, because it makes him “feel good about himself,” therefore Brownfield benefits from Mem’s debasement (55).

As Russo suggests, the Bakhtinian concept of the senile pregnant old hags is ambivalent within patriarchy because marginalized bodies such as that of ‘woman’ are already transgressive (56). Although feminist scholars, such as Russo, have critiqued Bakhtin for a lack of understanding the ambivalence and problematic issues of the senile pregnant hags, I believe there is more potential in Mem since Walker herself is a self-proclaimed womanist and also due to the overall critique inherent in the novel (63). The representation of Mem as a pregnant old hag is of course ambivalent: the tragedy of her life is indeed degrading and I realize that the use of her fate as an example of resistance would indeed be upsetting for women who really do endure abuse. However, I would suggest that the way in which Walker uses Mem’s tragedy in this novel is what really matters here, that is, Mem’s tragedy is used in order to critique the patriarchy that is responsible for her fate.

Grotesque Whiteness

Walker’s depictions of whiteness both in terms of narration as well as told through the voices of the non-white characters are infused with a carnival spirit of mockery. Whiteness is related to ghostliness, death, and animalism in *The Third Life* on several levels and Walker deliberately mocks and satirizes whiteness with her use of the grotesque. There is a crucial difference between Walker’s uses of the grotesque in terms of addressing womanist issues, as discussed above, and her criticisms of whiteness. Although Walker uses the grotesque image

of senile, pregnant hags to highlight her criticism of patriarchy, her grotesque white images are different because they are satirizing and parodying.

In his ideas on carnival theory in *Rabelais*, Bakhtin writes that the grotesque is “a reaction ... against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism” (37). Whereas the main object of mockery and subversive acts Bakhtin speaks of were directed at the Church during the Middle Ages of European culture, the carnival aspects of mockery as displayed in *The Third Life* are directed at the hegemony of white supremacist culture and society of the South. The most clearly expressed carnival aspects of whiteness in *The Third Life* is when Grange brings Ruth along to “inspect” a white family living nearby:

One day they watched the people who lived on the adjoining property. There was a man who had lank, neck-length hair the color of greasy pine bark. There were half a dozen little cracker children around him. They grew in stairsteps, looked hungry and rusty, and kept straws and pine needles in their teeth. ... It was Grange's idea that they inspect some ‘white people’ for Ruth's further education. What Ruth noticed was that they were not exactly white, not like a refrigerator, but rather a combination of gray and yellow and pink, with the youngest ones being the pinkest. (181)

This scene invokes laughter and is a clear satire of whiteness. Ruth's discovery that whites are “not exactly white” “like a refrigerator” parodies the entire system of racial categorization as well as the racialized gaze. The description of “the youngest one” as also “the pinkest” suggestively conveys images of white people as pig-like. Throughout the novel Walker presents a mockery of white appearances, as whites are repeatedly depicted in terms of ghostliness and animalism, and Walker also specifically parodies white skin. One of the least sympathetic characters, the white woman in Central Park, is made a mockery of in terms of the qualities of her skin which “[turns] a truly paper-white” when she first notices Grange and, later in the same scene, turns into “a crimson blush” (150, 151).

In her essay “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” bell hooks discusses how whiteness has been perceived by African Americans. hooks writes:

... black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. For years black domestic servants, working in white homes,

acted as informants who brought knowledge back to segregated communities – details, facts, observations, psychoanalytical readings of the white “Other.” (165)

This ‘special knowledge of whiteness’ acquired through ‘close scrutiny,’ is clearly an act that Walker’s characters Grange and Ruth engage in. They are not merely ‘inspecting’ the white family as a simple pastime, but in order to ‘further’ Ruth’s education. Moreover, in this scene, and also throughout the entire novel, Walker depicts whites as “Other.”

Although Ruth initially appears reluctant towards Grange’s attempts to teach her how to hate whites, Ruth gradually discovers her personal rage towards white supremacist society. Apart from the above discussed scene where Ruth and Grange ‘inspects’ a white family, Grange’s ‘education’ of hate and mockery of white people also involves teaching Ruth the history of African American exploitation (181). Grange tells Ruth the truth about slavery and how the whites “stole [Ruth] from Africa” and “brought [her to America] in chains” which she refuses to acknowledge since she was born in the U.S. (138). However, Ruth comes to terms with her own hatred of white supremacy in her symbolic meeting with the white girl Jacqueline Paine. Receiving a book handed down to her school from the white school across town Ruth discovers the name of the previous owner of the book, Jacqueline Paine (185). Ruth reads the opening pages of a book and these opening pages contain “The Tree of the Family of Man” (185-186). This “Tree of the Family of Man is overtly racist as it contains images of whites as “scientists” and Africans as mere savage (186). Beneath each picture Jacqueline has written notes describing the different races. For instance, beneath the picture of Native Americans Jacqueline has written: “Note: Our own American Indians. We saved from disease and wild primitive life. Taught them useful activities as pictured above. They have also been known to make beads” (186). However, beneath the picture of the ‘African savage’ Jacqueline has only written ‘the n-word’¹³ (186). Seeing this note, Ruth discovers a “pure and simple lust for blood” inside her (187). Running out of the classroom, Ruth curses at her teacher Mrs. Grayson calling her a “mean evil *stupid* motherfucker,” words she has inherited from Grange (187). This scene evokes the grotesque in two aspects. The ideas of white supremacist ideology as expressed through Jacqueline’s notes and the ‘Tree of the Family of Man’ are grotesque for Walker. Jacqueline Paine also signifies the pain suffered

¹³ I have chosen, out of personal and political reasons, to deliberately leave out the ‘proper’ ‘n-word’ here, which is used in Alice Walker’s text. As a non-black person, I feel it is not my place to use a word that has been used so severely by whites against the African American community, and still to this day is a source of potential trauma for people of African descent when used by whites.

by the whole African American community under white supremacist ideology. Indeed Jacqueline's very name Pain[e] underscores this aspect of Walker's criticism and making it overt. Similarly, Ruth's initial rage and 'lust for blood' is also grotesque. However, despite her initial rage, Ruth breaks down into tears after leaving the classroom. Walker clearly criticizes white supremacist ideology: she exposes the pain this ideology has inflicted upon the African American community; indeed, the scene ends with Ruth "wishing she were dead" (187).

Through Grange, Walker also mocks whites for being greedy through his statements about white people being "the cause the fence was invented" (175). On the same note Grange states that whites indeed would "[steal] the skin right off [his] back, if black hides'd bring a good price" (142-143). These statements are both part of Grange's attempt to teach Ruth "the necessary hate" she will need in order to survive in the white supremacist society in which they live (143). Calling Eisenhower an "as wishy-washy a lookin' rattler as ever was" Grange expresses his rage and hatred towards the white supremacist society of the U.S. (195). Here, Walker also manages to bring in her personal engagement with the Civil Rights' movement in her criticism of white supremacy. By describing Grange's need to teach Ruth "the necessary hate" brings to mind the more militant branches of Civil Rights activism (143). Grange tells Ruth that "[t]he gun is important. For I don't know that love works on everybody. A little love, a little buckshot, that's how I'd say handle yourself" (196). This section resembles the ideas expressed in the "The Ballot or the Bullet"-speech delivered by Malcolm X on April 3 in 1964 where he articulated his ideas about the rights of African Americans to defend themselves with weapons: "This doesn't mean you're going to get a rifle and form battalions and go out looking for white folks, although you'd be within your rights – I mean you'd be justified" (McCarthy and McMillian 388). Grange's and Malcolm X's ideas are ambiguous since they invoke laughter and mockery of whites, yet there is also a sense of seriousness prevalent since African Americans would be "justified" to "go out looking for white folks" considering that the U.S. was founded on the enslavement and exploitation the African American community.

Walker mentions in *In Search* that one of the main reasons for her admiration of Flannery O'Connor is due to O'Connor's ridiculing white women: "she caused white women to look ridiculous" (59). In my view, this statement provides an explanation for Walker's own mockery of white women and particularly the white woman in Central Park whom Walker describes as looking "like a blond pregnant deified cow" (151). The scene is set in New

York's Central Park when Grange meets a pregnant white woman, who ends up drowning in a pond after falling through the ice with "her heavy body," and is central to Walker's criticism of white supremacist ideology (152). Grange sees the white woman sitting alone on the bench with "her big belly her own tomb," a scenario which is also another strong image of pregnant death as discussed above (147). This scene takes place in wintertime when ice is covering the pond, ice, winter, and cold all symbols of whiteness which reinforces Walker's criticism of whiteness and white supremacy. Moreover, Walker's setting of the scene in the North, commonly considered more 'progressive' in terms of race-relations than the South, further emphasizes her critique since it shows us that white supremacist ideas also prevail in the North. When Grange muses upon his experiences in the North, he remembers having "found that wherever he went whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia; Harlem as they did Poontang Street" (140). Although the South may have had white supremacist laws such as that of the Jim Crow system, the North is equally segregated and equally racist. The difference between Grange's experiences in the South and the North is that he is ignored in the latter but clearly marked as inferior in the South.

Although Grange believes he has murdered the woman, he has in fact not since he attempts to help her from drowning but it is in fact the woman who rejects his helping hand and "with her last disgusted breath" screams 'the n-word' at him before sinking into the pond (152). For Grange, who is throughout the novel depicted as someone who despises whites, this scene where the white pregnant woman would rather die than accept help from him only fuels his anger and hatred of whites. However, Grange also feels "liberated" and feels a renewed wish "to live" which is the result of his "denying of the life of her child" (153). This suggests that it is only through the destruction of white supremacy that the African American community can find a renewed spirit and will to live. As opposed to Grange who manages to transform and channel his hatred into doing something positive for his granddaughter Ruth, the white woman is consumed by her hatred which is what leads to her death. Likewise Brownfield's hatred consumes him and is ultimately what leads him to his death at the end of the novel.

Whiteness is mocked and satirized in several aspects through the use of grotesque. By describing whites as greedy and pig-like, as well as parodying the skin color of whites Walker parodies whiteness and infuses her depictions of white characters with a carnival spirit. Simultaneously, Walker exposes the pain experienced by the African American individuals who are subjected to the hate of individual whites as well as the

psychological violence of white supremacist ideology. Moreover, the parodying of the system of racial categorization and the racialized gaze as depicted through Ruth further enhances Walker's critique.

Brownfield

I have named this final section of the essay Brownfield for one simple reason and that is because Brownfield represents the epitome of grotesque in *The Third Life*. Brownfield is *the* grotesque for Walker because he represents all that Walker is criticizing, and he is grotesque both in body and mind. According to Bakhtin the grotesque involves the complete degradation of the physical body and writes: “[d]egradation ... means coming down to earth ... to degrade is to bury” (*Rabelais* 21). This complete degradation is also “always conceiving” and as we see in Walker's depictions of Brownfield, the degradation he experiences is also “always conceiving” (21):

... his once clear eyes were now red-veined and yellowed, with a permanent squint ... and he'd developed severe athlete's foot that caused him to limp when the weather was hot or wet ... [and] ... developed a serious bronchitis aggravated by rashes and allergies ... his hands broke out and the skin itched so that he almost scratched it off ... [and years later] ... his hands were like gray leather on the outside, the inside scaly and softly cracked, too deformed for any work except that done too and for animals. The harder and more unfeeling the elephant-hide skin on his hands became the more often he planted his fists against his wife's head. (*The Third Life* 83)

This depiction of Brownfield's grotesque body is conceiving because for each grotesque feature he 'receives' throughout his life, he develops yet another grotesque feature. It is also conceiving because Brownfield's “unfeeling elephant-hide skin” also increases his physical abuse of his wife, Mem. Walker deliberately describes Brownfield in grotesque, degrading terms throughout the narrative. At the age of four, Brownfield is ‘covered with sores’:

Tetter sores covered his head, eating out his hair in patches the size of quarters. Tomato sores covered his legs up to the knee – when the tomatoes in his mother's garden were ripe he ate nothing but tomatoes all day long – and pus ran from boils that burst under his armpits. (7)

Moreover, Brownfield's actions and attitudes towards his family are grotesque: he is physically and psychologically abusive towards his wife and children and even murders his wife Mem. Walker characterizes Brownfield as grotesque not only in the eyes of his family, but also from a wider perspective since his entire character is described in grotesque terms. Brownfield is greedy and destructive, he only wants Ruth because he does not want Grange to have her, indeed he only wants to take Ruth back in order "to make Grange sweat" (223). Treating his family like one of his possessions Brownfield claims ownership to Ruth saying: "She belong to me and I want her" "just like my chickens or my hogs" (204, 220). The same attitude goes for his relationship with Mem whom he deliberately abuses and destroys gradually, indeed Brownfield becomes "her Pygmalion in reverse" (56). Brownfield tries to change Mem into a grotesque "ugly" creature that he no longer desires simply because further it enables his mistreatment of her (57).

Brownfield's entire persona is grotesque from inside and out, his body is unstable, degraded and depicted in derisive terms throughout the novel. Even the way he is named is derisive:

"And what's his name going to be?" [Grange] had asked Margaret, feeling no elation at the birth of his son. In her depression, carelessly she asked him, "What's the first damn thing you see?" And he, standing before the door, saw the autumnal shade of Georgia cotton fields. "Sort of brownish colored fields," he had answered. ... "Brownish color" ... "Brownish field. Brownfield" [Margaret replies] There was not even pity in her for her child. (178)

Named for the "autumnal shade of Georgia cotton fields," autumn symbolizing death and decay, Brownfield is seemingly destined to lead a similar life (178). Brownfield represents death and destruction and everything that comes in his way wilts: Mem, once a "plump" beautiful woman who loved to sow flowers in the garden, slowly decays literally at the hands of Brownfield into a "skinny" and "ugly hag;" the unnamed "albino" baby dies at the hands of Brownfield; his family is destroyed with Brownfield's murder of Mem; and Brownfield's entire life is an endless line of death, destruction, and decay (162, 224).

Walker depicts Brownfield's very mind as grotesque. The grotesque aspects of Brownfield's mind are shown in his ideas about his family. Thinking to himself that Mem's deserves his abuse, Brownfield justifies his ill-treatment of her by repeatedly speaking to her in derisive terms: "Who the tell you think'd hire a snaggle-toothed old *plow* mule like you? ...

You ain't just ugly and beat-up looking, you's old!" (87-88). Brownfield also addresses Mem by calling her "Miss Ugly" or simply "Ugly" and calling the children "stupid" instead of saying their names (82-84). Furthermore, Brownfield questions the humanity of his daughters: "To him they were not really human children, although his heart at times broke for them. He could not see them as innocent or even as children." (74). Brownfield's ideas about his family are grotesque, but it is his lack of self-examination which constructs him as overtly grotesque: he fails to realize that his family deserves better. Although Brownfield does show instances of sympathy for both Mem and his daughters, he chooses, repeatedly, to ignore this: Brownfield "pinched [Mem's] tense worn cheek. Even as he did it he knew dull impossible visions of a time when that cheek was warm and smoothly rounded, highlighted and sleek" (84). This is what makes him even more so grotesque: Walker depicts Brownfield as someone who does in fact, at brief moments, realize his wrongdoings and yet he still chooses to reject his conscience.

At the end of the novel Walker's criticism becomes particularly clear: in order to save Ruth from destruction Grange must destroy Brownfield, and Grange ends up shooting Brownfield in the town courthouse (246). Since Brownfield represents patriarchy in the novel Walker's criticism is that in order for Ruth, i.e. 'woman', to be free patriarchy must be destroyed. Ruth continually rejects and resists Brownfield and his claims of ownership to her ownership by stating "I'm not yours", and likewise Ruth also rejects normative behavior as ascribed to girls (219). However, analogously Ruth sees a potential for change inside Brownfield as she notices his "resemblance" to Grange and sees Brownfield's eyes are "full of sadness" (215, 219). But since Brownfield fails to change, like Grange, his life is sacrificed at the end of the novel. Walker allows Grange to kill his son Brownfield as a way of rewarding Grange's change from abusive father to loving and protective grandfather. For although Grange remains hateful towards whites, he no longer allows this hate to consume him, nor does he take out this hatred on his family as he did during Brownfield's childhood.

Brownfield is the epitome of grotesque for Walker. Through his lack of self-examination, his ideas, as well as the descriptions of his physical body, Walker has constructed a truly grotesque character. By using abusive language towards his family and also regularly abusing them physically, Brownfield destroys everything that comes in his way. Ultimately, it is his lack of self-examination that constructs Brownfield as overtly grotesque. It is here that Walker's criticism surfaces and becomes clear: since Brownfield fails, even refuses, to learn from his mistakes and wrongdoings, although faced with the opportunity

several times in the novel, he simply chooses to stay in his grotesque state of death, destruction, and decay.

Conclusion

In this essay I argue that Walker uses the grotesque in different ways when addressing womanist and racial issues. Walker uses the grotesque in order to alter confining gender binaries and expose and criticize the destructive aspects of patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies. Through her narrative and the diverse characters of *The Third Life*, Walker exposes the repercussions of oppressive white supremacist and patriarchal orders.

In my analysis above, I discuss the female reproductive organs and menstrual cycle as inherently grotesque within patriarchy. Since the menstrual cycle is always in transformation and never finished, the female body is the epitome of the grotesque within patriarchy, where the closed and complete classical body is the ideal. Walker highlights the discomfort of female adolescence through the experience of Ruth. Through her display of the adolescent character Ruth Walker's womanist perspective expands the Bakhtinian ideas of 'lower bodily stratum'. Simultaneously, Walker also offers an alternative masculinity through Grange and his response to Ruth's first period. Assuming the role of the substitute matriarch, Grange's care and affection offers a masculinity that rejects the patriarchal notion of female reproduction as 'grotesque.'

Walker's womanist wish for a reconstruction of femininity and masculinity is evident through her depictions of the different characters in *The Third Life*. The character who is perhaps most free is Lorene: she is monstrous, both male and female, a mother who is not tied down by her children, and a sexual carnivore who manages to escape the confining life of the Dew Drop Inn and the South. Although monstrosity is linked to female sexual excess and reproduction in this novel, Walker's depiction of Lorene offers an alternative view of monstrosity. Moreover, although the representation of Mem as a senile, pregnant old hag is ambivalent, Walker uses Mem's grotesque tragedy in terms of a womanist critique of the patriarchy that is ultimately responsible for Mem's fate. Finally, Grange is offered as an archetype for a reformed masculinity. Assuming the role of the substitute matriarch, Grange is kind and caring, unlike his son, Brownfield, who remains oppressive and abusive throughout the novel.

Brownfield is the most grotesque character of the novel. Ultimately it is his lack of self-examination that constructs Brownfield as overtly grotesque. Walker's womanist

objective and criticism is crystallized in the depiction of Brownfield: not only is he grotesque in body and mind, Brownfield also refuses to learn from his mistakes and wrongdoings, although faced with the opportunity repeatedly throughout the novel. Instead of transforming into a man the likes of Grange, who offers a transformed masculine ideal; Brownfield remains content in his abusive and oppressive state of mind.

Whiteness is mocked and satirized in several aspects through the use of grotesque. By describing whites as greedy and pig-like, as well as parodying the skin color of whites Walker deliberately mocks whiteness and infuses her depictions of white characters with a carnival spirit. Simultaneously, Walker exposes the pain experienced by the African American individuals who are subjected to the hate of individual whites, as well as the psychological violence of white supremacist ideology. Moreover, the parodying of the system of racial categorization and the racialized gaze as depicted through Ruth further enhances Walker's critique. Walker's critiques of the racialized gaze and bi-racial hierarchy are also exposed through her use of the grotesque, 'monstrous' 'albino' babies.

At the core of *The Third Life* lies Walker's idea of the 'Earthling psyche.' As Walker mentions in the afterword to the novel, 'the Earthling psyche' is that which never excuses oppression "whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree" (252). Hence, although Brownfield's abuse and oppression of his wife and children is an extension of the oppression he has been subjected to by white racist society in the U.S. South, Brownfield cannot be excused. Although he may blame white society, Brownfield still has a responsibility for his actions. In the end Brownfield, the epitome of grotesque, must be sacrificed in order for Ruth to have a future. Therefore, Walker's novel is prescriptive: by suggesting that in order for the African American woman to be truly free from oppression, both the grotesqueness of white supremacist society and African American patriarchy must be destroyed.

This essay provides a significant contribution to previous scholarship on Walker's fiction. By exposing Walker's uses of the grotesque, I offer an analysis that not only highlights the grotesque images used in *The Third Life*, but also exposes the relationships between Walker's grotesque images and her womanist objective. The aim of *The Third Life* is to critique the oppressive regimes of patriarchy and U.S. white supremacist culture and society. It is my hope that the analysis offered here will encourage others to re-read Walker's works with a focus on her overt uses of the grotesque.

Through the use of the grotesque literature has the power to question prevailing ideals and thus provide resistance against oppressive norms and ideals. Although the mere display of grotesque images in itself cannot alone *change* oppressive norms and ideals, the display of such images has the power to create a dialogue and speak back to such ideals. Because the grotesque forces us to deal with or at least look at something that is terrible, threatening, and indeed frightening, by extension we are then also forced to somehow negotiate our own relationship with the grotesque – we must deal with how we feel about the grotesque. And it is in this dealing with or negotiation of the grotesque that resistance has the potential to grow.

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