

# **Black Female Spectatorship and the Dilemma of Tokenism**

**by MICHELE WALLACE. 1994**

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## Preface

When I wrote this essay, I was struggling with something crucial in my knowledge of myself as a writer, intellectual, and perhaps even as an "artist" (although I don't usually think of what I do as art), but, as usual, I had no idea where it all would lead. As such, this essay was not written with the intention of sharing conclusions already arrived at but, rather, it was a sketching out of ideas in formulation, more or less, at the moment of composition. There has been considerable editing after the fact in an attempt to make things fit in a coherent fashion, but I have felt in the end as though a real revision of the piece would completely destroy it. I would not write such a piece now about how I felt at academic conferences. I can hardly remember exactly what I was going through at those conferences then, although I continue to be faintly surprised at myself as someone who is black in a largely white profession. Although it still can be creepy (any kind of privilege is creepy), I am not nearly as afraid as I used to be. After all, it wasn't the white people I was afraid of but myself.

Nevertheless, I thought the essay deserved publication (1) because I don't like to suppress things I've written merely because I now find them embarrassing, and (2) because I think the question of spectatorship—whether there could be said to be such a thing as a black female spectator in a psychoanalytic

sense, and where that left me so far as being somebody who was interested in spectatorship, black and otherwise—is still important.

At that time, I was beginning to think seriously about the idea that everything in one's life wasn't simply black or white, or, indeed, even related to race in any way. Lots of people who are not black take this kind of thinking for granted, but for me it was something new. Also, all of my concerns had to do with feminist generations of one kind or another: the generation of feminists who had embraced psychoanalytic feminism as a significant advance over materialist feminism; the generation of black feminists, an other feminists of color, who had elevated the differences of race and sexuality to paramount importance, over an above gender, and who had subsequently discounted the validity of psychoanalysis to feminism because it was thought to be inherently too white and bourgeois; and then the generation of black feminists that myself had helped to create in which feminism was presumably "theorized"—that is, depersonalized, abstracted, and distanced—from the lived experience of the theorizer. In the midst of these questions, I was ogling through some knotty identity thing, and it centered on the problems I had with any kind of public speaking. I felt invisible. How could anybody who was invisible speak before an audience and be heard?

In any case, I stand slightly verified by a film I've just seen by Cheryl Dunye called *The Watermelon Woman*. A film by a black lesbian filmmaker, it deals with many of the issues of identity that have troubled me in the particular context in which I raise them, in the context of stereotypical images of black women in film. Plus, it is also a delightful and joyous film about the link between black feminist and lesbian generations. It lifted my spirits. I hope this piece will lift yours.

Despite being concerned with the *visual* arts, however, the discipline of art history can never be exclusively defined by visuality. The making of art objects, monuments, buildings, sculptures, prints, and all range of materials which are the topic of art

histories involves a complex of historical, institutional, sociological, economic, as well as aesthetic factors. Feminists working in and against this field need deal as much with issues of training, patronage, access to exhibiting facilities, languages of art criticism, and mechanisms of the market, as with the semiotic and ideological productivity of the "image" itself. Cinema, we might argue, has distilled the visuality of visual culture to create an apparatus which interpellates its consumers above all as spectators—a condensation which is not true of the domain of the visual arts.

GRISELDA POLLOCK, "Trouble in the Archives: Introduction"

I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility.

STUART HALL, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?"

In a special issue of *Camera Obscura* in 1989 on the "female spectator," the editors posed a series of questions to contributors, one of which was:

The very term "female spectator" has been subject to some dispute insofar as it seems to suggest a monolithic position ascribed to the woman. In your opinion, is the term most productive as a reference to empirical spectators (individual women who enter the movie theatre), as the hypothetical point of address of the film as a discourse or as a form of mediation between these two concepts? Or as something else entirely?<sup>1</sup>

The array of responses was fascinating and informative, but what attracted my attention even more was that, although quite a number of the fifty-nine contributors mentioned "race" as an unsettling factor to previous conceptions of "spectatorship," there was only one black writer, Jacqueline Bobo, the prominent black feminist communications theorist.<sup>2</sup>

"Unfortunately," Bobo writes, "when the female spectator is usually spoken of and spoken for, the female in question is white

and middle class. As a black woman working within the discipline of cultural studies, my goal is to expand the scholarship on the female spectator beyond this."<sup>3</sup> In the process, Bobo, whose work on film and spectatorship I admire immensely, was inadvertently responding to the question posed by *Camera Obscura* by saying that she saw "female spectatorship" as a "reference to empirical spectators," not as a "hypothetical point of address of the film as a discourse."<sup>4</sup>

I concur with Bobo's interest in the historical realities of black female spectatorship, but I am not as willing as she to cede the psychoanalytic framing of spectatorship. I feel that a psychological approach, even a specifically psychoanalytic approach to black forms of spectatorship is much needed, but I would add that we need not use psychoanalysis as we have found it. In fact, the range of acceptable interpretations of what psychoanalysis is and what it can do is already quite vast. Yet all the approaches I've found, from the use of feminist psychoanalysis in cultural criticism to the theorization of feminist psychologies, continue the pretense of color blindness. In the theories of psychoanalysis in general, as well as in the practice of psychoanalysis, race has no reality. This is an unacceptable state of affairs. Even if it turns out to be impossible to theorize "race" as a fundamentally psychological phenomenon, it seems to me that "race" should always be viewed as a present and relevant (social, historical, material, ideological) context for psychological phenomena and psychoanalytic interpretation.

Feminist film criticism generally employs psychoanalysis in a rigorous and precise manner. Either to a lesser or greater extent, it uses Jacques Lacan's rereading of Sigmund Freud in order to analyze "textual" or filmic issues, or issues of discourse, with little reference to possibly relevant social and historical contexts. When one reads it, it appears as though such interpreters are coming up with timeless and universal psychological criteria. At the same time, the disclaimer that feminist film critics have begun adding lately that their observations about spectatorship have no application or interest for people of color and only apply to a narrow bourgeois realm of a white Euro-American middle class goes too far, I think. The white Euro-American middle class of the past century is not yet

some obsolete aboriginal tribe on the verge of extinction. Its values have been for some time, and continue to be, ideologically dominant.

On the other hand, I am willing to agree with Griselda Pollack and other critical perspectives in art history that the historical and material specificity of the multiple visual realms of the past and the present have not been adequately articulated or described by feminist film criticism's use of "the gaze" or "spectatorship." Because my concerns are related to a discussion of society and culture in the present, it seems important to keep in mind the historical context of film (especially films that include references to race), as well as the impact of other cultural forms and intellectual discourses on film. I would like to examine how issues of "race:" might be relevant to multiple concepts of spectatorship (the historical/social and the textual/psychological), first, by telling a story.

In the fall of 1990, I participated in a feminist art history conference at Barnard at which I was to lead a workshop on race, gender, and modernism along with the white art historian Ann Gibson. Immediately prior to my own session, I attended the session of a white female friend that was on popular culture with a focus on music. My friend, whose training is in art history and critical theory, did her presentation on Sinead O'Connor, and her copresenter talked about Madonna. My own recollection is that the session was packed and that I was the only person of color present. After brief presentations by my friend and the other white woman presenter (much more of an expert in music than my friend), a general discussion took place that handled popular culture and rock and roll with a kind of reverence and awe that I can now see, in retrospect, had much to do with the rarity of popular culture discourse at an art history conference.

At the time, however, what annoyed me as somebody who was inadvertently representing "race" through my body in the room, as well as choosing to represent "race" at my session that would follow, was that everybody in that room was talking about rock and roll in particular, and popular culture in general, as though black people had never existed and never made any contribution to it. What stands out in my mind is their wondering

aloud where the rhythm that was apparent in Elvis Presley and Madonna had come from? One particularly astute art critic (who just happened to be male) suggested that we refer to Rosalind Krauss's work on rhythm in Picasso.

By this time, I was absolutely steaming but I was also afraid to speak, afraid to say that the rhythm that Elvis exhibited (not to mention the rhythm in Picasso) had come from the same place, from Africa, that rock and roll was largely the invention of African Americans, that it was impossible to talk sanely about popular music in the United States without dealing with "race."

Now, I am not altogether sure why I was so afraid to speak then. I know that I am now beginning to lose that fear, but at that time I was very much in the grip of it. I also know that I was often successful in hiding my fear, and as a consequence no one ever knew or believed (especially white people) that I was afraid.<sup>5</sup> I can remember, however, telling myself that I should save my energy and my anger for my own session, although I didn't recognize at the time that the critical space of my session (high modernism/primitivism) was qualitatively different from the critical space of this session (the only session at the art history conference on popular culture).

Both women followed me into my session, whereupon I immediately began the calculated time release of my barely suppressed rage. I was still afraid to speak, by the way, which made my fury, no doubt, all the more difficult to bear for my listeners. The thing that I can best remember saying, which seems to me still instructive for my remarks here, was: "You [white women] are interested in Madonna because she is white. You are not interested in Tina Turner, not because she's less interesting, but because she is black." Of course, my friend felt completely betrayed, attacked, and confused by the way in which her session had resurfaced in my session. Matters were not helped by the fact that my session, as was hers, was well attended by feminist art historian high-muckety-mucks (as Zora Neale Hurston might have called them). So the whole antagonism took on the aura of a professional challenge.

Meanwhile, the other white woman, the copresenter, engaged me in lengthy and not unfriendly conversation afterward. Obviously baffled, she insisted, again and again: "Of course, I am well aware of the contribution blacks have made to rock and roll. I don't know why I didn't mention it."

At a more recent meeting of the Society of Cinema Studies in New Orleans, on a panel on "multicultural feminist theories" chaired by Ella Shohat. I tried to spell out what I saw as the analogous relationship of this narrative to the situation then at hand in regard to explaining the problem of black female spectatorship. The idea that every story, every narrative cloaks a deep structure, a simpler and more logical narrative that will then reveal the hidden meaning and order of the less astute and self-conscious narrative, is not only a foundational idea in high modernisms but also an idea that I am highly drawn to. On the other hand, I am well aware that from a postmodern perspective, or a multicultural perspective (these two dissimilar discourses have this in common), master narratives may not necessarily unlock the meaning of lesser narratives, and instead, knowledge is seen as an endless series of narratives, great and small, linear and fragmented, stretching on into an alternately meaningful and meaningless, heterogeneous infinity. After all, when you think about the appeal of textuality as the very thing you can never get rid of, or live without, you can't help but wonder whether the meaning of the story (or the novel, the film, or the song) was ever the point at all.

Nevertheless, I would like to persist in arguing in favor of modernist readings and the continuing usefulness of master narratives such as history and psychoanalysis. During the Society of Cinema Studies panel, I tried to suggest one partial modernist reading. First, as we all know, I said, in established practices of feminist film criticism (as in the field of feminist art history) "race" is generally ignored or trivialized in the form of the "race/gender/class mantra." But even more disturbing, I said, is that—both before the past few years when "race" wasn't being mentioned in feminist film discourse and now that it is being mentioned in the work of Mary Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Judith Butler, Jane Gaines, and Lucy Fischer—I still continue to have the feeling that the "I" (the "I" of my

subjectivity as an individual black woman who is too dark to “pass for white”) am still being ignored or silenced.

Moreover, I continued, I suspect that as in the construction of the famous Freudian reference to “a child is being beaten,” it might be a good idea to acknowledge that this effect may have many points of origin, some of them internal to individual/collective black female psychology. It is also important to remember that the process of being silenced or erased or ignored is not some analytical abstraction. After all, I said, it makes “me” angry, so angry that “I” usually can’t speak rationally or honestly about it, especially at those moments when it is occurring. And if you remember that in this case the “I” is probably not just I alone, then you begin to realize that this blockage may represent a massive obstacle to black women and white women’s becoming reconciled to one another’s positions.

In this construction, I pointed out that I was well aware that I was leaving out everybody else except white and black women. Questions arising from interactions among white women and other kinds of women of color, other kinds or women of color with black women, and women of color from different places among themselves were all the more complicated. Differences of sexuality and class also wouldn’t make it any easier.

But what I neglected to do was to provide the problem of being silenced, erased, or ignored with a historical context because, of course, I no longer view myself as silenced, erased, or ignored. I was speaking then, at the Society of Cinema Studies, about being silenced in the past, about coming to understand how my own rage had silenced me to such a degree that even when I was speaking the loudest, I was not really saying what I needed to say.

Moreover, to dichotomize visibility and invisibility, or voice and silence, in such a way as to suggest that the former inevitably leads to power and the latter inevitably leads to disempowerment is perhaps misleading. While I think that visibility and voice are important strategies for emerging discourses, invisibility and silence (as in, for instance, working behind the scenes or foregrounding the talents of others) can be

useful strategies, too. I hardly need to add that structures of dominance can be both invisible and silent and quite as powerful.<sup>6</sup> The key thing is not to forget that voice and visibility are being employed as metaphors for empowerment, and that invisibility and silence are metaphors for lack, repression, and powerlessness.

So here "I" was, then, at the feminist art history conference in 1990, or on the feminist film criticism panel in New Orleans in 1993, and "I" was in possession of one legitimately rational argument, concerning the importance of "race" as a historical and material reality, and one illegitimately irrational argument, concerning the importance of my own individual subjectivity as a black woman, without which neither I nor any other black women could function as an intellectual in either the fields of art history or film criticism. Did it matter then that I was not especially well equipped to do either? Moreover, was there some way that I hadn't yet recognized how to avoid personalizing these issues?

Nevertheless, at the art history conference (in 1990), I began confidently with the statement, "You're interested in Madonna," or as I might have said at the cinema studies conference in New Orleans, "[You're interested in] Rita Hayworth and Lana Turner" (in 1993) "because they are white, not because they are interesting. You're not interested in Tina Turner" (in 1990) or "Hattie McDaniels and Butterfly McQueen" (in 1993), "not because they aren't interesting, but because they're black." In either context, the feminist art history conference in 1990 or the cinema studies conference in 1993, what manner of statement is this? Is it true? How is it true? Moreover, what did I hope to gain by saying it, besides isolation and ridicule?

I think both statements were true, and that they start to take us to the root of the problem—that white women are often interested not in black women but, quite naturally, in themselves. Moreover, that preoccupation, as opposed to the possibility of being interested in black women, has been as much a structural aspect of a so-called female spectatorship as either the "gaze" or the objectified "image."

Granted, it is easy enough to observe that black female intellectuals aren't usually interested in Madonna, Rita Hayworth or Lana Turner, but they usually aren't any more interested in Tina Turner, Hattie McDaniels, or Butterfly McQueen than white female intellectuals. I suspect that for black women, at least as adults, the possibility of identification, at any level, is much more problematic than it is for white women. On the other hand, "I" (the "I" who is interested in the problem of black female subjectivity) am interested in Tina Turner, Hattie McDaniels, an Butterfly McQueen because I want to understand how the hate/love feelings for them are constructed in film discourse and, by so doing, how black female self-hatred (or perhaps *self-hatred* is too strong a word here and I really mean something like ambivalent self-esteem) is constructed by the videos and films in which they appear.

Most important of all, I don't see the recent preoccupation in critical circles with "passing," or the construction of the nearly white or actually white actress playing the black female—as in the two versions of *Imitation of Life*—as a problematization of "race" that necessarily brings us anywhere near the questions I am trying to pose about black female subjectivity. Most black women are not passing and never have been able to pass or look nearly white. Hasn't the precise problem of "race" all these years been the impossibility of "passing" for most of us? After all, the question of black women who look white, or nearly white, or as "good" as white (for example, Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Fredi Washington) seems to pose virtually the same question in terms of spectatorship as the white woman herself. In such a context, "race" becomes an abstract concept that makes as little visual or linguistic difference as possible.

I am well aware, however, that "passing," miscegenation, an lightness have been privileged in African American discourse as well. In novels by African Americans such as *Iola Leroy* (1890) by Frances Harper, *Contending Forces* (1900) by Pauline Hopkins, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1921) by James Weldon Johnson, and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, as well as in the film *The Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) by the black filmmaker Oscar Michaux, "passing" becomes a key issue in African American culture. Nor do I mean to suggest that

problems associated with “passing” and being light enough to pass don’t constitute a valid black experience. In an essay called “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper recounts such problems in fascinating detail.<sup>7</sup> A recent documentary called *A Question of Color* by black filmmaker Kathe Sandler and a book called *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* by Kathy Russell explore these issues as well.<sup>8</sup>

Also, as I have become more familiar with the lives and careers of the actresses who were forced to play the mulatto roles, such as Fredi Washington, Lena Horne, Nina Mae McKinney, and Dorothy Dandridge, I come to realize the courage, fortitude, and political acumen of these women. Light versus dark was never a seamless and carefree operation in the black world, however it was read in the white world.

What I do mean to suggest is that it is harder still to focus on the black woman who is in the majority but who, nevertheless, remains in the margins of discourse and representation, who is invariably viewed by many as desexualized and trapped in the maternal role.<sup>9</sup> In *Imitation of Life*, the woman in the margins, the so-called mammy figure played by Louise Beavers in the earlier version (directed by John Stahl) and Juanita Moore in the Douglas Sirk version, seems to resist explication and examination. On the one hand, you may say there really is nobody there, as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis said in a recent talk about Mahalia Jackson at the end of *Imitation of Life* (1959). On the other hand, Jackson’s position as a coda figure precisely mirrors the plight of black women in the dominant discourse.

On closer examination, the so-called mammy stereotype inevitably gives way to the frequent textual complexities of particular black female performers and their collaborators. In *Imitation* (1934), Louise Beavers rubs Claudette Colbert’s feet and speaks warmly of the pleasures of sexual attraction. Cloaked in such scenes, in the guise of servitude and ignorance, is the experience and worldliness of the black woman as well as the privilege and innocence of the white woman.

In regard to the work of Ethel Waters in *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and in *Pinky* (1949), I would challenge the description by both Donald Bogle and Thomas Cripps of her as a stereotypical mammy. In *Cabin*, Waters is still a hot momma, although not as thin or as young as Lena Horne, her competition. In *Pinky*, she plays an old woman, but her spiritual wisdom and beauty and her quick-witted intelligence give her as much dignity as the white character played by Ethel Barrymore, who is ostensibly her employer but has become more of a friend.

While *Imitation of Life*, *Cabin*, and *Pinky* are not black films in the sense of having been produced under total black control, neither are they really films about black people. These films, nevertheless, incorporate significant traces of a potentially subversive black talent, [including] dance and musical performance. These landmark performances by black women also indicate a slowly shifting terrain for visual representations of black women. The proof of the pudding, it seems to me, is that such films were the exceptions rather than the rule, and that despite their financial success, production of "problem" films and black musicals never progressed to the next logical step but were somehow squelched during the McCarthy era.

Such films as *Imitation* are still films about conventional and tradition-bound stereotypes of black life, about how white people feel about black people. *Imitation of Life* only engages with black female subjectivity, in any real sense, at the level at which Louise Beavers or Juanita Moore (much less successfully in the 1959 version) manage to assert themselves as actors, or at the level of Mahalia Jackson's brilliant solo at the end. Needless to say, *Cabin*, cast in the classic Hollywood musical mold, does not get much closer to the realities of black life.

One may argue that classic Hollywood is not about real white people either. I would argue that there is an additional dimension to the unreality and reification of Hollywood representations of "race." As Stuart Hall explained at the Black Popular Culture conference in 1991, "what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility." That statement applies especially well to black women in popular culture, even as it also applies to the configuration of images of

white women, black men, and everybody else in the dominant discourse.

In this regard, I would like to pose a further question: what if the black female subject is constructed much like the white female subject? Or what if the similarities between the psychoanalytic construction of the black female subject and that of the white female subject are greater than the dissimilarities? Moreover, if you accept the thesis that psychoanalytic film criticism proposes of a closed Eurocentric circuit in Hollywood cinema in which a white male-dominated "gaze" is on one end and the white female "image" is on the other end, what happens to the so-called black female subject? Does she even exist? And if she does, how does she come into existence?

helpful to me in thinking about the problems suggested here has been the writing of black female conceptual artist and theorist Lorraine O'Grady in "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity" and in her unpublished "Postscript," and the writing of black feminist art historian Judith Wilson in "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art."<sup>10</sup> In looking at the status of the black female nude in art history, which is handled very differently from the white female nude, O'Grady insists that the only constant in Euro-American theoretical analysis has been "the black body's location at the extreme," whereas Wilson remarks on how black fine artists have also avoided the black female nude because of its negative associations, perhaps with the sexual exploitation of slavery.

O'Grady, who says her goal is to "deal with what Gayatri Spivak has called the 'winning back of the position of the questioning subject'" is thus prompted to suggest that "the black female's body needed less to be rescued from the masculine gaze than it had to be sprung from an historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, erasing her completely."<sup>11</sup> While I think that O'Grady is onto something here when she suggests that the issue for black women is one of establishing subjectivity, I haven't always been able to see the notion of a black female subject as separate from the notion of a white female subject. Would this mean, after all,

that there were Asian, Indian, and African female subjects as well? Is subjectivity really divided by race, nationality, ethnicity? I don't think so. I'm not saying that subjectivity isn't divided. I think it probably is divided in some manner, but I'm not sure that it can therefore be viewed as historically and materially specific, and that it divides easily by ethnicity, nationality, or any other constructed or natural rubric. Certainly, "spectatorship" as it is constructed by the dominant discourse does not.

On the other hand, things like class allegiances and identity, sexuality, and experience seem to make a profound difference in how the female subject is constituted visually and how those images circulate. Even more significant here is O'Grady's suggestion that the status of the white female "image," or the objectification of the white female body, is part of the circuit of subjectivity for women. In other words, although the white male "gaze" (or the gaze of the dominant culture) objectifies and, therefore, dehumanizes the white woman, in fact, that objectification also implicitly verifies the crucial role white women play in the process of or circuit of spectatorship. In other words, the process of objectification also inadvertently humanizes as well a built-in advantage that is then denied to women of color in general, but to the despised (or desired) black woman in particular.

So the problem of white female subjectivity is one of reversing the terms somehow, or reversing the connection or the hierarchy between male and female, whereas in the case of the black female body, or the body of the other, the connection is to a third, much less explored level in the hierarchy, the sphere of the abject, which includes, as Sander Gilman and Michel Foucault have pointed out, the pathological.<sup>12</sup>

As such, reversal is no cure and cannot take place. Black female subjectivity remains unimaginable in the realm of the symbolic. O'Grady's approach as an artist seems to be to attempt to upgrade the status of the black female nude, or at least to get us to think about how and why the black female nude is devalued. Can you imagine Louise Beavers in a sexy dress in *Imitation of Life*? And yet Bessie Smith played just such a role in *Saint Louis Blues*, not to mention in life.

Lately, I have been working on my mother Faith Ringgold's series of story quilts. *The French Collection*, in which she illustrates the adventures of a protagonist named Willa Marie, born in 1903, who goes to Paris to become an artist and who alternates working as an artist's model with her own painting (true of many female artists). In the process, the subsequent images toy with this circuit of subjectivity that O'Grady proposes as so crucial, for Willa Marie is configured as both subject and object by the text and the images.

In a multicultural context, the response of many is to historicize the question of subjectivity (which I believe is crucial as well) and, in the process, dispense with the synchronic explanations of psychoanalytic complexity and abstraction. But, then, how do we account for the play of the unconscious in black cultural production and in the everyday lives of black people? The play of the unconscious roughly refers to the highly ambivalent relation of plans to practice, and stated intentions to unconscious motivations, in African American cultural and social life.

I ask the question about the unconscious precisely because of the problem of interpreting the sexual and gender politics of recent mainstream black cinema. Clearly, the construction of spectatorship in *Malcolm X* cannot be wholly explained by relying on empirical data. We can guess that the construction of gender and sexuality in Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* has more to do with Lee's own issues around gender as well as cinematic traditions in the specularization of women's bodies, and black women's bodies, in Hollywood cinema than it has to do with Malcolm X's life. Moreover, there is apparently the mediation of how Malcolm X also fictionalized his own life in his *Autobiography*, which provides the documentary basis for the film.<sup>13</sup> Gender and sexuality were also very problematic in Malcolm X's self-conceptualization.

On the one hand, regardless of the specific problem of interpreting *Malcolm X*, it is no longer surprising that Spike Lee, as well as other black filmmakers, succumbed to reinscribing precisely the same hegemonic fantasies about the nature of sexual difference as other filmmakers in the dominant discourse

of Hollywood cinema. From the perspective of the question of what is happening to the real, historically determined black female spectator, there is little here to interfere with her conventional construction. But from the perspective of the question of what is happening in terms of the construction of the subject both internal to the discourse of the film and internal to her unconscious psychological processes as a viewer, I suspect that a complicated series of changes is occurring. On the theory that the Eurocentric circuit of white male "gaze" and white female "object" has a psychic cost, variations in that system surely make a difference, but what difference?

Meanwhile, *Daughters of the Dust*, a film by independent black filmmaker Julie Dash, attempts to provide a corrective to the boyz. The film deliberately sets out to tackle the problem of upgrading the black female image and gets bogged down in excessive visuality. Yet again, something crucial has to be occurring on the level of "the hypothetical point of address of the film as a discourse." After all, if it makes no difference how a film deploys its black bodies, why have they been so relentlessly excluded in the past?

Of course, the important thing about all of this is that some of the rules regarding the conventional Hollywood characterization of the black female are finding their way into recently released black films. Black film theorist Ed Guerrero, at a recent Society of Cinema Studies panel on blaxploitation film, referred to the most recent crop as following a credo of ghetto centrality.

And yet the opportunity still exists in the examination of the work of these or any other black filmmaker for thinking about the black women's bodies in the margins, for reformulating notions of spectatorship to encompass the impact of "race" on subjectivity.

— MICHELE WALLACE is the author of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. She is professor of English, women's studies, and cinema studies

at the City College of New York and the City University of New York Graduate School.

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<sup>1</sup> *Camera Obscura* 20-21 (1989): 17–18. The above epigraphs are taken from Griselda Pollack, "Trouble in the Archives: An Introduction," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 4:3 (1992): iii-iv; and Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21-33.

<sup>2</sup> I am not accusing *Camera Obscura* of racism. Cinema and communications studies are still largely white fields, and the reasons for this (racism is only one of many) originate at a much deeper level in the structure of our cultural arrangements than the particular racial views of any set of academic editors. Forced to make a selection of black feminist intellectuals engaged in debates around female spectatorship in 1989, there weren't a lot of candidates, although I might have asked Valerie Smith, Judith Wilson, Coco Fusco, Hortense Spillers, Mae Henderson, Lorraine O'Grady, and myself, as well as other black feminists already engaged in visual studies of one kind or another, or in psychoanalysis.

<sup>3</sup> Bobo, *Camera Obscura* 20-21 (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Years of therapy have been crucial in helping to finally dispel, or at least hold at bay in critical academic situations, the paralyzing stage fright I used to experience. I think that stage fright had to do with many things. Race was only one of them.

<sup>6</sup> See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition* 58 (1993): 4–32.

<sup>8</sup> Kathe Sandler, director, *A Question of Color* (California Newsreel, 1993); Kathy Russell, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> In a talk at the CUNY Graduate School in 1993, E. Ann Kaplan greatly contributed to my understanding of how the maternal melodrama serves to construct the black female in film.

<sup>10</sup> Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," *Afterimage* 20 (1992); O'Grady, "Postscript to 'Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,'" unpublished manuscript; and Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in Dent, *Black Popular Culture*. [The full text of Lorraine O'Grady's "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity"—including its "Postscript"—has since been widely anthologized, including in: Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds., *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* (New York: Icon, 1994); Grant Kester, ed., *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham and London: Duke University

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Press, 1998); and Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2003).]

<sup>11</sup> O'Grady, "Postscript."

<sup>12</sup> Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, Vintage, 1979); and Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).