Sing Your Own Song:
The Material and the Spiritual in Alice Walker's "Nineteen Fifty-Five"

Mika Kakikawa

Introduction

Alice Walker once said in an interview in 1973 that music is "the art [she] most env[ies]" because musicians are "at one with their cultures and their historical subconscious" (*In Search* 259). She also remarked, "I am trying to arrive at that place where black music already is; to arrive at that unself-conscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace" (264). Especially for black women, singing is a means of communicating their invisible spirituality and sometimes becomes a tool for healing of the mind. In Walker's masterpiece *The Color Purple* (1982), for example, Celie, who has lived a life of abuse and perseverance, is psychologically changed through singing by her same-sex lover Shug Avery. When Shug becomes ill and recovers through Celie's devotion and comes back to the stage, Shug sings a song that she created improvisationaly in bed: "She [Shug] say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick." This, Celie says, is the "[f]irst time somebody made something and name it after me" (70). Shug's call of her name and singing "Miss Celie's song" heals Celie's self-esteem, helping the nameless servant become an individual. Likening Shug to Bessie Smith, Thomas F. Marvin argues that she "forges a strong bond with her audience and gives voice to the 'spirit of the blues' in order to bring relief to less articulate sufferers" (411).

In *Meridian* (1976), her second novel set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, song plays an important role for the eponymous character, a black woman who becomes disillusioned and emotionally distressed by the relationships among black people as she throws herself into the political movement—to heal her wounds of both the body and the spirit. In June of 1968, Meridian goes to church for the first time since childhood and witnesses a red-eyed man who has lost his son in the Civil Rights Movement and is mentally ill. One of the songs that the congregation sing there for him startles Meridian. Listening to "the triumphant forcefulness of the oddly death-defying music" and repeating that "the music has changed" from the past (199; 203), she realizes that "the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own" (204). At this time, she experiences the change in her own thought through a physical perception: "There was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely." This is not merely her subjective reaction, but an objective, observable phenomenon that

her material body shows, for "[h]er heart was beating as if it would burst, *sweat poured down her skin*" (204; emphasis added). For Meridian, the "new" song represents the significant change in the black community that she has not noticed before. It is her bodily reaction that concretizes the difference of the atmosphere from the past, which itself is perceptible but invisible.

For African-Americans, who were forbidden to read and write throughout history as they were forcefully taken from their homeland to America, singing songs was a means of passing down their tradition from older to younger generation (Iwamoto 8). Meridian acknowledges that the song represents such a medium within the black community, as she finally comes to believe that "it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul" (206). Although in her belief the song not only unifies but also save them from suffering, and above all, gives them *soul*, this realization as such becomes tangible through Meridian's body. But this is probably because Maridian's contemplation is concerned with black community—a relationship among people of the same race.

As the epigraph of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (quoted from Herman Hesse) exhibits, "something that is spiritually alive" is a main topic of the whole collection, which is depicted "as an act of resistance to any forces that would kill" (Davis 60). In contrast with *Meridian*, "Nineteen Fifty-Five," the first story of the book, portrays the potential power of the song to heal the human spirit in an interaction between a white man and a black woman primarily in the context of America's materialistic economy of music business. The spiritual—as evoked by the black female singer in *The Color Purple* and represented by the songs sung in the black church in *Meridian*—is treated in this short story neither as paired nor as continuous with the physical but as opposed to the materialism of American society. It seems, for Walker, that the body/spirit dichotomy is only possible in the relationship among African-Americans. It becomes impossible in the interracial relationship between the black and the white that "Nineteen Fifty-Five" depicts, because Walker seems to think that they do not share the same body through which their communication of the spirit materializes. However, this does not mean that such spiritual communication itself is impossible. Indeed, characterizing white America, materialism is pitted against the spiritual that the black music can convey in the story. Through the interaction between an once blues singer and a young popular singer Walker attempts to show that the conflict between the material and the spiritual does not necessarily correspond to the conflict between the white and the black in the United States. Rather, she is trying to show that this conflict is merely a contrast between those who seek for material wealth and those who seek for spirituality.

Traynor and American Materialism

As critics have pointed out, Traynor, a young white singer called "Emperor of Rock'n Roll" (Walker, *You Can't* 9), is based on Elvis Presley (1935– 1977), the "King of Rock'n Roll." At the beginning of the story, set in 1955, a white male music promoter visits Gracie Mae's house with Traynor, a young white would-be singer, to buy hit songs of the past written and sung by her. The ordinary boy, as he becomes very successful in American show business, begins to squander his huge income, just as Presley who is known for numerous extravagant episodes. The shiny accessories all over his body and on his shoes (12) were also a direct characteristic of Presley. The large number of gifts given by Traynor to Gracie Mae, shows another characteristic of Presley's love of giving gifts. Especially, his first present to her is a Cadillac (9), which reminds us of the episode of the pink Cadillac that Presley, who purchased at least a hundred Cadillacs during his lifetime, sent to his mother who did not have a driver's license (Honma 46). All these depictions, as well as the ridiculous size and extravagance of Traynor's house that Gracie Mae visits afterwards, suggests that Traynor is deeply absorbed into American materialistic life that Presley culturally represents.[1]

Whereas Presley notoriously got fatter as the years went by, Traynor never enjoys eating in the materialistic life. When Traynor invites Gracie Mae to dinner at his home in 1968, she notices that he has gained weight: "As Arab like the ones you see in storybooks. Plump and soft and with never care about weight" (Walker, *You Can't* 12). However, the reason for his plumpness, he explains, is that he always has to eat with his cronies. He complains, "I'm sick and tired of eating with them. That's why I eat so much" (12). While being swallowed up by the materialism of the American show business like Presley, Traynor is a person who does not accept materialistic values. Also, despite the public's appreciation of his big hit, he shows no appreciation for his song, which he thinks is just a good copy without expressing what the original song really means. In the scene where Traynor visits Gracie Mae's house on Christmas

[1] Traynor is "about five feet nine, sort of womanish looking, with real dark white skin and a red pouting mouth" and "[h]is hair is black and curly," looking "like a Looisianna [sic] creole" (Walker, *You Can't* 4). All these descriptions, as Peter Nazareth mentions, reminds us of the movie *King Creole* (1958) in which Presley starred as a young creole (151). Walker's depiction of the "nasty jerking he [Traynor] was doing from the waist down" (*You Can't* 7) is a clear expression of the unique dance style of Presley, who was called "Elvis Pelvis." When Traynor talks about his stage experiences (8), they are exactly the same as Presley's. Also, Gracie Mae's letter reveals that Traynor served in the army in Germany (10), which is consistent with Presley's background, for he went to West Germany for military service in 1958. Finally, Traynor's death is in the year of 1977, again the same as Presley's.

Day, 1957, when Gracie Mae's grandchildren turns on the stereo playing his singing a song (written by Gracie Mae) to please him, unexpectedly "he looked like it was the last thing in the world he wanted to hear" (8). After counting up the many stages and countries that he has sung her song, he remarks, "I've sung it and sung it, and I'm making forty thousand a day offa it, and you know what, *I don't have the faintest notion what that song means*" (8; emphasis added). What Traynor thinks important here is not that he has sung on many prominent stages and in foreign countries, nor that he has earned a lot of money. He is not satisfied by his commercial success as a singer because he has never been able to get the meaning of the song. He is seeking for something intangible that cannot be captured through mere singing the song over and over again. It is something that can never be reached by the number of times the song is sung or by the commercial success that results from singing it. Thus, unlike Presley, Traynor leads a materialistic life in reluctance, and it has not completely invaded his mind.

In order to escape from such life, Traynor approaches Gracie Mae, who is "more likely to be spiritually grounded rather than materially obsessed" (Johnson 229), to receive an explanation of the meaning of her song. Turning his back on the material things such as wealth and fame, Traynor wishes to be a real singer who can understand the meaning of lyrics and can sing them as his own. Even if it is not clear for him, what Traynor admires is the authenticity in Gracie Mae's song, which he could never grasp even if he copies her song almost perfectly in every detail. It is true that Walker "insists on the value and beauty of blues women and 'authentic' blues music, celebrating the vitality of African-American expressive culture and the resilient creative spirit of the Black woman blues artist" (224), but she also acknowledges Traynor's spiritual struggle for the authenticity, which is evident in Gracie Mae's encouragement to him. At this time, For Gracie Mae, Traynor is no longer the one white man among others. "But what the hell, by now I feel something for the boy" (Walker, *You Can't* 14).

In order to grasp the meaning of the song, Traynor wants to know about Gracie Mae's life experiences. A passage from a letter of 1960 from Traynor to Gracie Mae shows that he thinks the lyrics of the song is deeply concerned with the life of the creator of the song: "Everybody still loves the song of yours. They ask me all the time what do I think it means, really. I mean, they want to know just what I want to know. Where out of your life did it come from?" (9). For Traynor, the meaning of the song comes from unknown experiences that Gracie Mae must have had throughout her life. In 1968, Traynor visits Gracie Mae at her home, and in the middle of their conversation suddenly starts talking about her past in detail. Gracie Mae is momentarily agitated, "You *is* being spying on me!" (13) but regains her composure when she realizes that Traynor is out of sorts. Traynor's exploration of Gracie Mae's past was not for his personal interest in her private life, but as she herself may

recognize, he is more and more obsessive to know the meaning of the song. He seems to her so monomaniac that she changes her attitude, feeling compelled to give him an explanation he wants, as much as she could: "It was dark but seems like I could tell his eyes weren't right. It was like some*thing* was sitting there talking to me but not necessarily with a person behind it" (13). Gracie Mae explains, "I never really believed that way back when I wrote that song, I said. It was bluffing then" (13-14). She says that only after having life experiences of both bitter and sweet, she was able to become a singer who is truly worthy of the song. After hearing this, Traynor disappointedly mumbles, "I ain't live that long." Gracie Mae consoles Traynor, saying, "Looks like you're on your way" (14). It is not that, as Traynor believes, the song comes from one's life experiences, but that one's life makes up a complete song, if he/she tries to come up with what the song attempts to express. While the gap between Traynor and Gracie Mae is thus evident, it is also evident that Walker recognizes the white man's struggle to get over it through Gracie Mae's sympathy toward him.

Gracie Mae and the Spiritual

As she encourages Traynor, Gracie Mae recollects about Bessie Smith, one of those African-American women musicians who, according to Walker, are "at one with their cultures and their historical subconscious" (*In Search* 259). Walker includes a short reference to a fictional episode in which Bessie once wanted to sing Gracie Mae's song, just as Traynor wants to know the meaning of her song. but Gracie Mae baldly rebuffed her request, and though she does not reveal the reason why, Bessie seemed to understand the meaning of Gracie Mae's rejection. "Later on, she thanked me" (*You Can't* 14). This brief episode, without any explicit explanation about the utterances, indicates that as African-American women singers, Gracie Mae and Bessie Smith share certain understanding about the authenticity of the song. When Gracie Mae asked Bessie, "Ain't you famous enough with your own *stuff*?" (emphasis added), the word "stuff" seems to include that she could not perform it in an authentic way. In fact, she says to not only songs but also life experiences. Namely, Gracie Mae probably thought that Bessie did not understand the meaning of her song because it comes from her life, not Bessie's, and therefore the famous blues singer could not perform it in an authentic way. In fact, she says to Traynor, "Couldn't be anything worse than being famous the world over for something you don't even understand" (14).

This crucial link between Traynor and Bessie Smith highlights "[t]he inversion Walker dramatizes," as Maria V. Johnson formulates, that "a 'nobody' (one who is not famous) is often more somebody (her- or himself) than a 'somebody' (one who is famous), because that person is more likely to be spiritually grounded rather than materially obsessed" (229). To be authentic as a singer is necessary to be "somebody (her- or himself)" who is "spiritually grounded," but how exactly is this possible?

Throughout her life, Gracie Mae has become "somebody" spiritually grounded by living her own life so that her "bluffing" when she wrote her songs becomes authentic. This another "inversion" of the cause-and-effect between life and the song (not that life is the source of the song, but that the song is the model of life) seems to come from the way that African-American women have passed down their traditions from generation to generation. Walker states in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" that "[o]ur mothers and grandmothers" (*In Search* 232) or the "grandmothers and mothers of ours" (233) as unnamed "nobodies" who have secretly inherited spirituality as artists (in ways not recognized in white/male-centered society). By showing an example of the quilt exhibited in the Smithsonian Institution (239) which have been made by a black woman whose name is unknown and lived slavery, Walker says, "They were Creators, who live lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring unused and unwanted talent drove them insane" (233). The women who have created great works of African-American art have passed them on, not by inscribing their names as artists, but by placing their works in the continuous time of daily life.

In another of Walker's stories, "Everyday Use" (1973), the quilt becomes the centerpiece of one of the most representative expressions of African-American women's creativity. The story comically depicts a confrontation over the ownership of a quilt between Mama (no name given) and her younger-daughter Maggie, both of whom remain in an African-American women community, and Dee, the oldest daughter, who was educated outside the native black community and returns home. As the title "Everyday Use" suggests, the quilt is a symbol of the spirit that African-American women have passed on to the next generation throughout history in the form of domestic work (handicrafts), which is made for everyday use, and demonstrate its value when it is used. In other words, the quilt is the work of art that contains a spirituality that transcends materiality. As Houston Baker and Charlotte Baker state, "They are the testimony of mute and inglorious generations of women gone before" (311). However, in the story, Dee tries to separate quilts from the African-American community's value and give it a new material value for consumption. Though Dee appears in the beginning of the story claiming herself as "one who now purports to know the value of the black women as holy patchers" (312), Dee's representation is "[a]ssured by the makers of American fashion that 'black' is currently 'beautiful'" (313), and she only sees fashionable and trendy value in quilts. When Mama tells Dee who wants old quilts that has been passed down in the family is actually supposed to be given to Maggie, Dee protests, "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts!" and says "she'd probably backward enough to put them to everyday use" (Walker, *In Love* 57). To Dee, art and everyday use will never be together because art is something to be displayed in fashion separately from the continuity of the history. In the story, Baker's assertion that "'[a]rt' is [. . .] juxtaposed with 'everyday use' in Walker's short story"

(313) is supported by Mama's act, that taking back the quilt from Dee, who attempts to strip its spiritual value of quilt and giving it to her younger daughter Maggie, who can make, use, and pass it on, and understands the artistic value of "everyday use" art. This is similar to the American commercial values in the "Nineteen Fifty-Five" which redefines songs that contain African-American's spirituality, by separating them from the historical and cultural context behind them and giving them a commercial value that generates money, as mere songs or material that are a collection of melodies. "Nineteen Fifty-Five" and "Everyday Use" may be more similar in structure than *The Color Purple* and *Meridian*, which also feature the same art. By comparing "Everyday Use" and "Nineteen Fifty-Five," we can see that the cultural creations, such as quilts and music of African-Americans, that Walker takes pride in must be both material and spiritual at the same time. Walker also emphasizes that what gives value to a thing like a quilt that ordinary people such as Mama, who have no name, have woven their own histories and feelings and passed it on is spirituality that makes "nobody" into "somebody." And here is Walker's assertion that this is what African-American art is all about. For they have created their own works of art without being given any tools to create artistic works, such as paper, pens, canvases, or paints, their artworks had to be created by incorporating spirituality into everyday materials. This makes the value of continuity of time is essential for their art.

In the conversation which Gracie Mae says of "bluffing," she adds, "The trick is to live long enough to put your young bluffs to use" (Walker, *You Can't* 14). She explains that it is the singer's life experience that makes a "bluff" song to authentic. This is a reflection of the origins of African-American music, which is a comprehensive art form that includes in each song, the spiritual elements such as the singer's experiences and thoughts, emotions, as well as the context in which the song was sung and the audience's reaction to it as just one live performance. It shows that their song is a total work of art. Put another way, a song that does not contain these invisible spiritual elements is not going to be authentic. However, Gracie Mae is not suggesting here that Traynor, a young white man with little life experience and without the historical and cultural background that African-Americans have woven into their songs, could not be a real singer. She shows her encouragement to Traynor by saying, "Looks like you are on your way" (14). Gracie Mae is suggesting that it will make him a real singer in the future, because with the desire, sadness, and emptiness he is experiencing as his heartfelt wish (to sing his own song) is not being fulfilled, may someday lead him to sing his own song, which is not anyone else's.

Dichotomy in "Nineteen Fifty-Five"

Here, I would like to focus on the character representations of the two main characters which contain of black woman and white man in this story, Gracie Mae and Traynor. This is because, in this story that is said to have been modeled on real

singers, there are actually significant differences in the molding of two main characters, and this allows us to read the theme that Walker has committed to this story. As mentioned above, Walker intentionally created the character of Traynor to remind the reader of the very famous white singer Elvis Presley. The reference to "a pack of hound dogs" (17), reminding readers of one of Elvis Presley's biggest hits, leads us to believe that Walker modeled Gracie Mae on Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (1926–84), a black female singer who sang "Hound Dog" and had a big hit before Presley in 1953. However, critics such as Johnson and Nazareth oppose identifying the Gracie Mae's character with any one specific singer who really existed. Johnson acknowledges that the relationship between Traynor and Gracie Mae over the song "Hound Dog" is reminiscent of the relationship between Presley and Thornton, but she also says that "Walker identifies Gracie Mae with obscure African-American creative artists like Lillian Miller" (228). She suggests that the character of Gracie Mae is inspired by several female singers who were talented but did not become famous: "Like the blues people alluded to in Walker's dedication, they insist 'on the value and beauty of the authentic'; they insist on the value and beauty of themselves; they insist on being themselves, and they demand that their needs be accommodated" (223–224). As Ishida Yoriko says, Gracie Mae represents a black woman who created art with a strong spirit and remained true to herself: "Walker asserts the value of blues woman and authentic blues, portraying the expressive culture of black people and the creative spirit of black women singers, which is embodied by a black woman named Gracie Mae Still" (my trans.;159). Nazareth says that "Walker deliberately made the reference to 'a pack of hound dogs' to make the reader go off on the wrong track" (156) and that "the Alice Walker story is showing the relationship of the Elvis figure not exclusively to one African American Woman but to AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN" (152). Gracie Mae's character is a composite of multiple real-life black female singers, as if she were a quilt, which Walker identifies as one of the symbols of African-American women's art.

What, then, is Walker's intention in creating such a characterization? Referring to Ola in Walker's fourth novel, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Johnson argues that Traynor wants to know the meaning of the song because "his longing for the lost African American parts of himself which are embodied in his 'Loosianna Creole' features" (234). However, I would rather argue that the story is focused on portraying a person who goes beyond such racial distinctions and seeks spirituality apart from materialism. This is because, as mentioned earlier, although the two main characters are a black woman and a white man, the story is not structured as an antagonism between the two people of different races or genders. As one person in search of spirituality, Traynor must be an individual, and Gracie Mae must not be an individual in order to symbolize spirituality.

It is not in the relationship between the two people that the structure of conflict in

this story is portrayed. In 1968 in the story, when Gracie Mae is invited to Traynor's house, Traynor shows Gracie Mae around his mansion and Gracie Mae says, "The first thing I notice is that, altogether, there are five stoves. He looks about to introduce me to one. 'Kitchens don't do nothing for me. Let's go sit on the front porch.' and we hike back and we sit in the rocking chairs rocking until dinner" (Walker, *You Can't* 15). The two, sit side by side look so small compared to the mansion on their back, one exploring spirituality, one embodying spirituality, turning their back to the mansion that is a symbol of the huge materialistic value which Traynor is trying to escape. What this scene represents is a clear opposition between materialism and the human being who tries to resist it.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that what Walker was trying to show in "Nineteen Fifty-Five" is the magnificence of the art/song created by African-Americans, and the magnificence of their spirituality that has endured the hardships of slavery and passed on their art to generations to come. However, Walker also insists that this greatness of art and spirituality is not exclusive to African-Americans. Though "Walker contends that white America has not lived long enough" (Harris 83), she said in the interview with Kay Bonetti in 1981, "Whites are going to have to go through a whole lot to be able to sing, but that's what singing is, I think—having to go through a lot, understand a lot, and suffer a lot" (qtd. in Harris 83). Walker shows that their great art and spirituality is open to all people, even those who are immersed in the materialistic society symbolized by the "deacon" who is a white music promoter, as long as they are willing to pursue spirituality, as Traynor does. Also, Walker shows through the words of the iconic African-American character Gracie Mae— "But what the hell, by now I feel something for the boy" (Walker, *You Can't* 14), and "Looks like you're on your way" (14)—an encouragement that even white people, as human beings in pursuit of spirituality, can have possibility to achieve their goals someday. Walker also tries to show the spiritual position of African-Americans, that they believe their great spirituality is something that can be shared by all mankind, and that they are free from the idea of racial superiority, which is another greatness that they possess. As Walker writes in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," "our mother's life" itself is art, and the spirituality that her children inherit, along with her storytelling, will become the next art that they create: "Yet so many of stories that I write, that *we all* write, are my mother's stories" (*In Search* 240; emphasis added). By using the phrase "we all," Walker clearly means all children, all human beings, regardless of race.

Moreover, Walker gives warning for all Americans, that this spirituality is something that everyone must possess in order not to be swallowed up by materialism and lose their souls in an American society dominated by commercial materialism. At the end

of the story, in 1977, Gracie Mae receives a phone call from one of her children informing her that Traynor had died young, in the middle of his career. Told to watch the TV to see the outcry of his fans mourning his death, Gracie Mae says, "But I didn't want to see'em. They were crying and crying and didn't even know what they were crying for. One day this is going to be a pitiful country, I thought" (*You Can't* 20). When Traynor complains about his fans, that "[t]hey like a pack of hound dogs trying to gobble up a scent" (17), Walker suggests that by "trying to gobble up" the insubstantial "scent," American consumers are driven by superficial materialistic interest. Since what they are seeking is insubstantial, they would never get the satisfaction that the authentic thing would bring, and thus Traynor has been consumed by his fans and grown weary of it. Gracie Mae's words about not wanting to see his fans consume both Traynor as a singer and his death as nothing more than commodities (20) are a true expression of her feelings. To Gracie Mae, Traynor has already become a fellow human being with the same values, one who places importance on spirituality rather than materiality, and one who has unfortunately fallen in the middle of pursuing that spirituality. Uttered in response to the ridiculous fuss of his fans caused by Traynor's death that consumes even death like a festive event and symbolizes the ever-increasing materialism of American society, Gracie Mae's final words sound like a prophecy: "One day this is going to be a pitiful country, I thought" (20). Also, they sound like a lament for the death of a comrade-in-arms, who died young and was one of the few people who are willing to live in the American materialistic society and fought against it. As Harris says, "In an age of warfare, economic globalization, and a continuing exploitation of nature, when money seems to matter more than people's lives, we need to remember what it means to be human and reclaim love, Walker's religion, as the ultimate way of our being and living" (149). With the two characters in "Nineteen Fifty-Five," Walker presents a way of life that encompasses life and art, the material and the spiritual.

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