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On Firsts, Foremothers, and the "Walker Effect"

The dominant narrative of Hurston's reemergence as a major literary figure often includes Hurston's "discovery" by Alice Walker. Celebrated author of *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker was the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Literature and the first to win the National Book Award for Fiction. The author of several acclaimed novels and collections of poetry, she is also a noted civil and human rights activist, with her writings lauded for both their literary strengths as well as their distinctive and often groundbreaking representations of the pernicious influence of racism and sexism on the interior lives of Black people.[1] During the 1970s, Walker's critical and popular endorsement of Hurston, reinforced by her own growing literary import, significantly influenced receptions of Hurston's writing. The rhetorical descriptions of Hurston in several of Walker's essays define a number of tropes and motifs that were repeated in subsequent discussions of her work in both literary studies and anthropology. In particular, Walker represents Hurston's literary and ethnographic work as affirmative and authentic Black cultural works and, at times, defines Hurston's life as representative of *the* Black woman's experience. Her writings about Hurston significantly influenced Hurston's reputation as a model of Black womanhood and a literary foremother.

Walker's "foremother" archetype revised persistent references to forefathers as the theoretical and institutional founders of disciplines. Her assertion of Hurston as her literary foremother occurred within a larger context of

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women activists' efforts to question structures of patriarchy and define alternatives to patrilineal descent that structured knowledge production, institutions, and social relationships. Feminist scholars, informed by their experiences in consciousness-raising groups in the women's liberation movement, were raising questions about the sources of women's oppression. If a source was the patriarchal family, as many argued, then how might mothers and the experience of motherhood be considered and defined? Across many fields and disciplines, they defined and imagined maternal intellectual genealogies as untapped sources of knowledge, sources that they and their daughters might draw from to confirm their shared experience of oppression and to empower collective action against that oppression.[2] Many of these intellectual genealogies, however, included only white women, leaving Black women scholar-activists and other women of color to define and defend their own genealogies and "her-stories."

While Alice Walker is often cited as having discovered Zora Neale Hurston, earlier essays by scholars Mary Helen Washington, June Jordan, and Ellease Southerland, published in *Black World*, began a reclamation and evaluation of Hurston's literary work during the early 1970s in terms of Black consciousness and women's empowerment.[3] *Black World*, previously known as *Negro Digest*, was a leading periodical for a largely Black audience, which published critical scholarship on Black art, politics, and letters since its founding in 1942. Altogether the essays of Washington, Jordan, and Southerland established a Black woman's literary space within the periodical. Within a larger context of the civil rights movement and Black Arts era, their essays also signal an emerging contemporary Black feminist activism and criticism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their essays and discussions reflect an affirmative re-visioning of the Black experience through literature and reveal a concern with shaping a racial and gendered consciousness regarding the experiences of Black Americans through readings of Hurston's work.[4]

Mary Helen Washington's "The Black Woman's Search for Identity" argues that Janie's search for identity is a search for Black identity, rooted in the "Black" experience of the folk (1972, 71–74) and in terms that reinforce Black love and community. Washington describes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as having captured the "miracle of Black love" that has survived "despite the inhuman definitions of man-hood and womanhood that have been forced upon us" (69). She describes Janie's quest for identity as "her search for Blackness" that evolves over the course of her three marriages and culminates with her marriage to Tea Cake. Theirs is a relationship that symbolizes a "centered[ness] in the Black community" as they work "down on the muck" alongside other workers (74).

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Washington's discussion of Hurston's novel as an affirming text also defines "Blackness" as a singular and un-diversified experience.[5] Within her essay, main characters of *Their Eyes* fall into two categories: those who are alienated from the Black community because they aspire to "standards dictated by white society" (Nanny, Jody Starks, and Mrs. Turner) and those who are the Black community (Tea Cake and the workers on the muck) (71). Given the particular political and economic assault on Black communities and families in the early 1970s and the momentum of Black activist and cultural movements committed to resisting anti-Black prejudice and violence, this assessment resonated with contemporary Black audiences. *Their Eyes* certainly denotes Black communities with complex characterizations that represent varied racial politics and sociocultural experiences and customs. In addition, feminist critics have since provided readings of Janie and Tea Cake that complicate, for example, Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. The novel, of course, reveals that Tea Cake, the otherwise romanticized hero, beats Janie and justifies his abuse of her as his way of showing Mrs. Turner (and the community) that he has power and controls their relationship. Mrs. Turner, who covets Janie's European features and despises darker Black people, befriends Janie because they are both white in appearance. She speaks ill of Tea Cake and suggests that Janie should meet her brother, boasting that he has straight hair and that he publicly disparages Booker T. Washington. Tea Cake overhears their conversation and later decides to beat a silenced Janie in front of Mrs. Turner and her brother "tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (Hurston [1937] 1998, 147–48). The circumstances that prefigure Tea Cake's violence against Janie reveal a complex politics of color, class, and gender within the novel's Black communities that critics have argued make a romantic reading of *Their Eyes* as a "miracle of Black love" difficult (Washington 1987).

Washington would revisit the novel and Janie's place within the Black folk community within a later essay titled "'I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands': Emergent Female Hero," originally published in her work *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960*. She rightly complicates feminist readings of Janie as essentially empowered in a reading of the novel that underscores Janie's silent response to Tea Cake's beating (Washington [1987] 1993, 102). However, I would argue that the sole focus on Janie's voice tempers our understanding of how community voices figure in Hurston's work in this case to reveal a community's problematic romanticization of domestic violence. The community of the muck view Janie's and Tea Cake's highly emotional and public displays of silent despair (Janie) and audible regret (Tea Cake) romantically. While critics note that we don't hear Janie's voice (Washington [1987] 1993,

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102; duCille 1993, 123), we are told that the "women see visions" and the "men dream dreams" when Teacake and Janie display a honeymoon phase immediately following the incident (Hurston [1937] 1998, 147). The community's response suggests that the domestic violence that occurs on the muck happens often enough and with some common patterns that distinguish Janie's and Tea Cake's versions as "romantic" by comparison. For one, women on the muck may raise their voices and fight back. As Sop-de-Bottom complains, "Mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out mah jaw teeth" (148). In response, Tea Cake explains to Sop-de-Bottom that Janie is "uh high time woman and uster things," wrongly implying that Janie's wealthy class status shapes her "respectable" silent response to domestic assault (148). The complicated politics of race, class, color, and gender hierarchies within these varied exchanges (between Tea Cake, Janie, Mrs. Turner, Sop-de-Bottom, and the men and women on the muck) illustrate how Hurston offers a less than idyllic and complex representation of Black life and love in *Their Eyes*. Hurston effectively centers the problem and prevalence of domestic assault in her novel, and Janie's silence strategically increases the narrative suspense. Near the novel's end, readers might wonder whether she will be able to defend herself against a rabies-maddened Tea Cake when his latent jealous streak fatefully remerges.

Again, Mary Helen Washington's early work on Hurston published in *Black World* lay a critical foundation for an even more focused assessment of her contributions to Black literature. Two years later, the August 1974 issue of *Black World* featured an image of Zora Neale Hurston on its front cover with the caption "Black Women Image Makers."[6] Two articles concerning Hurston's life and work are included within this issue: June Jordan's "Notes toward a Balancing of Love and Hatred" and Ellease Southerland's "The Novelist-Anthropologist's Life/Works." Jordan describes Hurston's *Their Eyes* as "the prototypical novel of affirmation," which, in contrast to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), emanates from Hurston's experiences within a "supportive, nourishing" environment (Jordan 1974, 6). Noting that Richard Wright "has been presented as a solitary figure on the literary landscape of his period," Jordan describes how Hurston's erasure comes from readings that ignore her focus on Black love, perhaps viewing it as a less important aspect of Black life (5). Jordan calls for readings of both *Native Son* and *Their Eyes* to provide a more balanced discussion of their literary import: "But rightly we should not choose between Bigger Thomas and Janie Starks; our lives are as big and as manifold and as pained and as happy as the two of them put together" (7). Jordan further offers a cautionary statement that would prove prophetic in terms of Hurston's later reception: "We should absolutely resist the superstar, one-at-a-time mentality that threatens the

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varied and resilient, flexible wealth of our Black future, even as it shrinks and obliterates incalculable segments of our history" (9). In advancing Hurston's *Their Eyes* as an alternative literary representation of Black life and culture, Jordan warns against an iconizing impulse in the reception of Black literary works and argues that the "one-at-a-time mentality" originates with the "glare of white, mass-media manipulation" that chooses one Black literary "star" (4). Her appeal, directed to an audience of *Black World*, encouraged general readers and scholars to resist the mass media in its efforts to focus primarily on the merits of one Black author. One wonders if Jordan ever imagined that Hurston might succeed Wright as a literary "superstar" and that she would become such a central literary figure that years later critics such as Hazel Carby, Ann duCille, and Michelle Wallace would begin to question the inordinate attention given to her work.

Ellease Southerland's "The Novelist-Anthropologist's Life/Works" (1974) provides a biographical summary of Hurston's life and includes a discussion of her anthropological training and folklore research. She also provides summaries of some of Hurston's major works: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse* (1938), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and a brief reference to *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948).[7] In addition to Southerland's and Jordan's articles, the main section of the periodical features Mary Helen Washington's "Black Women Image Makers" and Alvin Ramsey's "Through a Glass Whitely: The Televised Rape of *Miss Jane Pittman*."[8] Washington's article describes how Black women authors Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paule Marshall, and Toni Cade Bambara use literature to revise negative stereotypes of Black women, while Ramsey challenges the "distortion" of Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in the televised version of the novel (Ramsey 1974, 31). The focus on gender and race in these four articles, along with Hurston's front cover image, give this issue of *Black World* a decidedly Black woman's focus, with Hurston as the framing icon. The "Black Women Image Makers" issue stands as a record of a larger reassessment of Hurston's life and work within Black studies.

The publication of this issue came during an era of increased publication of writings by and about Black women. A number of heralded collections of Black women's critical literature, essays, and creative writings emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s as the U.S. feminist movement, civil rights movement, and Black Arts era overlapped in their interests in Black women's issues and political empowerment.[9] Alice Walker, now known as a celebrated Black feminist/womanist poet, essayist, lecturer, activist, and short story author, began her literary career during this period.[10] Among her many writings,

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between 1974 and 1979 Walker published essays and a public lecture that highlighted the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston: "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South" (1974), "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" (later titled "Looking for Zora") (1975), "Saving the Life That Is Your Own" (1975), "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" (1977), and "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design" (1979). These essays were published and republished in several widely circulated sources, including *Ms.* magazine, the first nationally circulated feminist magazine in the United States.

Walker's early Hurston essays are very persuasive and had a collective influence on critical and popular readers, prompting a national and international audience beyond U.S. Black feminist circles and allies to begin consuming Hurston's works. The ways in which Walker's essays are read, consumed, and remain in demand were and are in many aspects beyond Walker's individual or ultimate control. The Walker and Hurston association depends on Walker's rhetorical skills, audience demand, and powerful institutional (academic and publishing) support. Moreover, audiences are captivated by her powerful poetic voice that has remained true to a communal and political ethos alongside significant shifts in Hurston's reception within the critical literature.

Although Walker has been credited with discovering Hurston, the five essays listed above, taken together, reveal that Hurston's work, although out of print, was in circulation among writers and teachers like herself. Walker's rhetorical construction of Hurston's "discovery" popularized Hurston to a broader audience while calling for greater awareness and support of many Black women writers.[11] However, her expression of great veneration for the work of Zora Neale Hurston was not lost on multiple audiences, including civil rights and feminist audiences, with an ever-increasing interest in reading literature by Black women. In claiming Hurston as her literary foremother, Walker's own growing literary status as a writer propelled the mass interest in Hurston's personality and in her literary and ethnographic productions. Significantly, Walker's essays were often paired with readings of Hurston's fiction, most often *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in both literature and women's studies classrooms.[12] Articles in *Black World* reintroduced Hurston to a largely Black audience, but Alice Walker's crossover appeal ensured that a much larger and diverse popular audience would readily read Hurston's work.

Almost fifty years later, Walker is often credited with placing Hurston at the forefront of the Black female literary tradition and with introducing Hurston and her work to American popular culture and to the American literary canon. However, scholars have questioned how Hurston became an icon and how her

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work—in particular, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—reached canonical status.[13] How was Zora Neale Hurston represented in these early essays so that she garnered a unique critical and popular attention apart from other Black women writers who are comparatively given less critical attention? Some scholars and critics, noting Hurston's massive popularity, have employed spiritual metaphors to describe the kind of attention given to Zora Neale Hurston and her most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As early as 1978, an article in the *Washington Post* described the beginning of the resurgent interest in Hurston as cult-like.[14] Literary critic Hortense Spillers describes spiritual, mythic, and mysterious aspects in Hurston's reception: "Talking about Zora Neale Hurston is like approaching the Sphinx—so much riddle, so many faces, and all of it occurring on fairly high holy ground since Alice Walker's remarkable discovery a couple of decades ago" (2004, 94).[15] Literary scholar Ann duCille, also employing spiritual or mythic metaphors, has referenced the unprecedented accord and canonical consumption of her work as "Hurstonism": "The legend of Zora is of biblical proportions: what once was lost now is found" (2005, 2).[16] In fact, many of Alice Walker's early essays employ a "what once was lost now is found" motif that, in part, illustrates and celebrates her "discovery" of Hurston. The essays' rhetorical arguments greatly shaped how some critical and popular readers of Hurston's work would understand and represent Zora Neale Hurston's life and literary contributions.[17]

The first of these essays, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," was published by *Ms.* in May 1974 and is perhaps Walker's best-known essay.[18] Despite brief references to Hurston, it is significant as a "lost and found" Hurston story because a part of its title and its general sentiment is repeated in "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," which was published the following year. It is also a foundational Walker effect essay in its focus on themes that would shape how Walker subsequently wrote about Hurston's life and influence, including themes of foremothering, references to authentic Black experience, and overcoming racial and gender oppression. Walker argues that Black women should look for the "genius" of their mothers', grandmothers', and great-grandmothers' creativity in the "low" or everyday arts such as quilting, gardening, and storytelling. For Walker, Black women were without "a room of their own," and despite the constraints of racism, sexism, and economic poverty, they created artistic genius in practical everyday forms.[19] In the essay, Walker mentions Phillis Wheatley along with Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston as having created literary works despite their "contrary instincts." Walker says, "For when we read the poetry of Phillis Wheatley—as when we read the novels of Nella Larsen or the oddly false sounding autobiography of

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the freest of all black women writers, Zora Hurston—evidence of 'contrary instincts' is everywhere. Her loyalties were completely divided, as was, without question, her mind" ([1974] 1983, 236).[20]

At the time of Walker's essay, proponents of the Black Arts movement criticized Wheatley's work for its lack of a Black racial aesthetic. Walker defends Wheatley by explaining that references to "white" themes existed because of the conditions of her enslavement, and she argues that instead of ridiculing her themes and form, readers should celebrate Wheatley for creating art against seemingly insurmountable odds (237).[21] The conclusion of Walker's essay places more emphasis on Phillis Wheatley's life and accomplishments than on those of Zora Neale Hurston. However, Walker focused more centrally on Hurston in subsequent essays as she worked to make sense of the "contrary instincts" that, she argued, defined Hurston's sensibility as a writer. In essays, public lectures, and in the subject matter of her novels, she more pointedly defined an affinity for Hurston's life story, cultural background, and fictional themes. When Hurston is briefly noted in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," she is not only mentioned in terms of "contrary instincts" but also as being the "freest of all black women writers" (236). The former representation later emerged in the criticisms of scholars, including anthropologists, as they worked to explain the experimental forms of Hurston's ethnographies. The latter reference revealed how Walker would single out Hurston's literary contributions in future essays in exceptional terms.

"In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" is Walker's first essay that significantly addresses Hurston. Because it was published just ten months later in the same national feminist magazine, readers might surmise by its title that Walker's "mothers' gardens" originated with the work of Zora Neale Hurston rather than in Phillis Wheatley.[22] In this essay Walker again employs a lost-and-found motif as she recounts her first trip to Hurston's "birthplace," Eatonville, Florida, where readers learn the many ways that Hurston is "lost" not only to Walker as a literary foremother but also to Hurston's hometown and larger Black community. However, with the essay's publication in *Ms.*, the "lost" Hurston would be found by a diverse feminist national reading audience who were also eager to address the invisibility of women of color in the literary arts.

Walker's essay begins with a quotation from Robert Hemenway's "Zora Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology" (1972) that foreshadows the essay's tone and setting. Hemenway writes, "Zora Neale Hurston died without funds to provide for her burial, a resident of the St. Lucie County, Florida, Welfare Home.[23] She lies today in an unmarked grave. . . . Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most significant unread authors in America, the author of two minor classics

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and four other major books" (Walker 1975, 74). Walker's use of Hemenway's opening quotation frames a persuasive narrative that critiques the American literary society's ignorance of Hurston and recounts Walker's search for biographical information about Hurston. Walker poses as Hurston's niece in order to more easily gain information concerning Hurston's later life, and although there are flashes of Hurstonesque humor in Walker's narrative, her search for "Zora" becomes a somber search for Hurston's missing grave.[24] When she finds the gravesite, Walker, still posing as Hurston's niece, purchases a marker for the site in honor of Hurston's legacy.

Funeral rituals are symbolic and material demonstrations of cultural beliefs about family obligation and honor. The gesture of putting a marker on Hurston's grave has a powerful symbolic and real effect. The monument that Walker placed at Hurston's unmarked grave reads "Zora Neale Hurston, 'A Genius of the South,' Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist, 1901–1960" (Walker [1975] 1983a, 107). With the ritual act of placing a headstone on Hurston's lost and neglected gravesite, Walker inscribes Hurston into a place of honor and confirms her kinship with Hurston as she transforms it from fabled to fictive kin. The story of Walker's trip to Eatonville eventually framed Hurston's inscription into the literary canon, as subsequent popular and critical essays regarding Hurston's work often begin or end by recounting Walker's placement of a headstone on Hurston's abandoned gravesite.[25] These acknowledgments to Walker happen so frequently in the critical and popular literature that they have become their own rhetorical ritual.[26]

Of course, Walker's essay works to persuade readers that more than Hurston's physical body has been lost to readers: her corpus deserves more critical exploration. Walker's essay reinforces this point by interweaving the narrative of her search for Hurston's grave with italicized commentary that illustrates that Hurston was unfairly criticized by critics of the era, that she is sorely unrecognized by the town she grew up in, and that biographical details of her intriguing life story remain incomplete. For example, in addition to Hemenway's opening quote, commentary from Hurston contemporaries Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes are juxtaposed by comments from anonymous readers (a librarian and students from Wellesley College and Yale University), all complicating the mystery of Hurston's life story and compelling readers to go on their own search for Hurston. One such quote, attributed to "Student, Special Collections Room, Beinecke Library, Yale University," reads, "You have to read the chapters Zora *left out* of her autobiography" (Walker 1975, 86). Alongside the narrative suspense of the search for Hurston's grave and the great pathos that Walker's prose invokes, I imagine the essay created a bandwagon effect for

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audiences, leaving readers to question, "Why don't *I* know more about Zora Neale Hurston?" and even convinced of their duty to learn more about her and to do so with great reverence.[27]

The third of Walker's Hurston essays, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," was delivered as a public lecture in December 1975 at a meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in San Francisco. Walker's central thesis is that artists need models in order to sustain their lives, both figuratively and literally. Walker begins the essay with the example of Vincent Van Gogh, whom she describes as a prolific artist who sold only one painting during his lifetime and whose life tragically ended in suicide. She notes that Van Gogh discussed that he had a lack of models for his work in a letter written shortly before his death.

Using the word "models" metaphorically, Walker describes her critical impressions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (1899) as examples of differences in plot resolutions in novels written by Black and white authors, respectively. Walker especially bemoans how students have not been taught *Their Eyes* because "it was written by a black woman." She says, "Loving both these books, knowing each to be indispensable to my own growth, my own life, I choose the model, the example of Janie Crawford. And yet this book, as necessary to me and to other women as air and water, is again out of print" (Walker [1975] 1983b, 7). Walker again describes how she "discovered" Hurston as she gathered research for a short story. Walker wanted the short story to involve aspects of "Voodoo" as a central plot element. However, as Walker researches for data, she continuously encounters racist descriptions (written by white researchers of "Voodoo"):[28]

> Well, I thought, where are the *black* collectors of folklore? Where is the *black* anthropologist? Where is the *black* person who took the time to travel the back roads of the South and collect the information I need: how to cure heart trouble, treat dropsy, hex somebody to death, lock bowels, cause joints to swell, eyes to fall out, and so on. Where was this black person? (11; Walker's emphases)[29]

Walker recounts that she eventually finds Hurston within a footnote to the "white voices of authority" (11). She then provides a brief biographical description of Hurston. She begins four of the paragraphs' sentences with "Zora" and twice repeats "*That Zora*" (12; Walker's emphasis). The aural effect of this intonation elevates Hurston's significance. It is also noteworthy that she uses Hurston's first name so that Hurston is at once elevated and made familiar. Walker later states that had Hurston's work been "lost," then Walker's own "mother's

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story would have had no historical underpinning, none I could trust, anyway." Walker also mentions that the short story she wrote drawing on Hurston's work is listed as "one of the *Best Short Stories of 1974*." Walker suggests that she owes this achievement to Hurston, asserting that she would not have written the story "had I not known that Zora had already done a thorough job of preparing the ground over which I was then moving" (13).

Walker's lecture underscores the lack of access to books written by Black women, and its tone resonates with the discourse of the Black Cultural Arts movement that espoused a politicized perspective on the production of Black arts and letters.[30] In addition, the essay particularly encourages the audience/reader to consider that Walker's success is directly related to the influence of Hurston's work. She briefly mentions other literary "models"; however, the effect of the entire essay firmly ties Hurston to Walker, one of the central figures of a new generation of circa 1970s Black writers.[31] The significance of genealogies is reinforced via Walker's discussion of how the acclaimed short story is inspired by her biological mother and Zora Neale Hurston, whom she claims as her literary foremother. Furthermore, beyond the reference to Van Gogh's suicide, the essay's argument (that models are needed to save one's life) is an urgent appeal. It may not have been lost to listeners—and, later, readers—of the lecture that Walker considered suicide when faced with no options for a safe abortion as a young woman, an event that her first published book of poetry, *Once* (1968), openly chronicled (White 2004, 114–18). Walker makes a feminist and fearless admission in this literary work, especially given that abortion was illegal at the time. The same themes of Black female oppression, vulnerability, creativity, and strength would be taken up in Ntozake Shange's acclaimed choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, originally produced on Broadway in 1975 and later published in 1976. The importance of psychologically complex and fully human and political representations of Black women in the arts and popular media were beginning to resonate with U.S. audiences and certainly charged the reception of Walker's lecture.

Walker's address came at a time that marked the beginning of an increase in literary publications of contemporary Black women writers (Walker among them) by mainstream publishers, and Hurston's works were included in this wave because of Walker's essays and lectures. An excerpt from Mary Helen Washington's foreword to the 1990 and 1998 reprints of *Their Eyes* describes the context of Walker's lecture and subsequent responses:

> By 1975, *Their Eyes*, again out of print, was in such demand that a petition was circulated at the December 1975 convention of the Modern Language

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> Association (MLA) to get the novel back into print. In that same year a conference on minority literature held at Yale and directed by Michael Cooke, the few copies of *Their Eyes* that were available were circulated for two hours at a time to conference participants, many of whom were reading the novel for the first time. In March of 1977, when the MLA Commission on Minority Groups and the study of Language and Literature published its first list of out of print books most in demand at a national level, the program coordinator, Dexter Fisher, wrote: "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is unanimously at the top of the list." (Washington [1990] 1998, xii–xiii)

In 1977, Walker's "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," was published as the foreword (dated December 1976) in Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977).[32] In this essay, Walker again describes how she found Hurston. However, Walker revises her earlier "lost and found" story of finding Hurston as she prepared to write a short story that involved Vodou. She explains that she had heard of Hurston for the first time while auditing a Black literature course taught by Margaret Walker:[33]

> The reason this fact later slipped my mind was that Zora's name and accomplishments came and went so fast. The class was studying the usual "giants" of black literature: Chesnutt, Toomer, Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, with the hope of reaching LeRoi Jones very soon. Jesse Fauset, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall (unequaled in intelligence, vision, [and] craft by anyone of her generation, to put her contributions to our literature modestly) and Zora Neale Hurston were names appended, like verbal footnotes, to the illustrious all-male list that paralleled them." (Walker 1977, xi)

Walker's point, of course, is that Black women writers were often cursorily overlooked, even in academic courses expressly committed to Black literature. Notably, Hurston is but one of many Black women "lost" to the Black literature course, which Walker carefully notes, while even emphasizing the contribution of writer Paule Marshall. Larsen, Fauset, Petry, and Marshall were all Northern-born, but, as Walker later explains, her particular interest in rural Southern customs and her interest in Vodou as contexts for her short story led her to develop a keen interest in Hurston. Walker, a Black woman Southern writer, felt that she was without the literary models she needed to fictionalize the stories of Southern African Americans that resisted stereotypes of Southern Black folkways through dimensional and nuanced characterizations. Notably, she draws inspiration from Hurston's ethnography *Mules and Men*, which she calls "perfection." She praises *Mules and Men* and notes its appeal to her Southern

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relatives, many of whom were living in the North. The book reminded them of stories and customs from their Southern past. Because of the affirming effect that *Mules and Men* had on her Northern urban relatives with Southern roots, Walker asserts, "This was the first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health, a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, *a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature*" (emphasis mine). Walker later contends that Hurston's "racial health" is defined by her attention to diasporic issues, attributed to her having grown up in a community of Black people: "In her easy self-acceptance, Zora was more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them" (Walker 1977, 86). Walker says that if she were condemned on a desert island and allowed only two books, they would be Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, about which she states, "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" (86; Walker's emphasis).

Walker's affinity for Hurston is undeniable, and the distinctions she gives to Hurston's ethnography and writing elevate Hurston's work as distinctive in its ability to describe Black people's lives as complex. More pointedly, Walker's assessment reveals a Black Arts aesthetic mandate that Black art should represent Black people in ways that support "racial health" vis-à-vis an "uncolonized" African consciousness. Although not characteristic of all Black Arts or Black aesthetic productions, some of the early influential theorists of these movements during the late 1960s and early 1970s defined "Black Art" through a rejection of European influences and middle-class values (D. Smith 1991, 94). Critics like LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle produced anthologies of poetry and political essays that defined a variety of Black aesthetic interests but that sometimes assumed an authentic and singular blackness (D. Smith 1991, 94, 95–98). Collectively, their goals were to establish an autonomous and community-based art form in response to heightened political unrest and sustained racial oppression against African Americans. Artists and writers created productions to serve and uplift African Americans through the promotion of cultural practices not often dramatized or expressed in Western arts. These included embracing a range of social practices as distinctively Black and linked to African traditions. The Black experience was defined through the celebration and practice of African-inspired performativity in dance, song, attire, hairstyles, music, and poetry and in the production of literature that sought to represent this experience. Black women decisively shaped these literary efforts, including the works of Mari Evans, Audre Lorde,

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Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Alice Walker, which often displayed a revolutionary tenor in their portrayal of the experiences of Black women.

Within this context, Walker's judgment of other Black literature as "lacking" in comparison to Hurston's body of work is an ironic "cautionary tale." In the 1930s and '40s, Hurston failed to meet the standards of "the race" and was therefore marginalized as a writer, and by the 1970s her work is represented by Walker as the standard of "racial health" by which all other Black literature might be compared.[34] The title of Walker's 1977 essay declares her "partisan view" of Hurston, and her distinctive attention to Hurston (as opposed to the other footnoted Black women writers) is explained within the context of her own valid interests as a Southern writer. By 1977 Walker had published several collections of poetry and two novels. Her singular statement about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ("*There is no book more important to me than this one*") signaled the Walker effect to come. The persuasive statement was among the blurbs used to promote the first reissue of the novel in 1978 by University of Illinois Press.[35]

In 1979 Alice Walker edited a collection of Hurston's work titled, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*.[36] The edited volume includes excerpts from Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*; excerpts from *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*; selected short stories; excerpts from selected fiction; and selected essays and articles. Walker wrote its dedication, "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design" (1979b). Like the previous essays discussed, this essay strongly asserted Hurston's artistry and genius, her particular ability to overcome the overwhelming odds of her race and gender, and her commitment to "the folk." Again, the folk are generally regarded as Southern, country, rural people whom Hurston represents. In addition, Walker underscores the limitations on Hurston's work because of the constraints of material poverty and patron dependency:

> Financial dependency is the thread that sewed a cloud over Hurston's life, from the time she left home to work as a maid at fourteen to the day of her death. It is ironic that *this* woman, who many claimed sold her soul to record the sources of authentic, black American folk art (whereas it is apparently cool to sell your soul for a university job, say, or a new car) and who has made of some of the universe's most naturally free stuff (one would be hard pressed to find a more nonmaterialistic person), was denied even a steady pittance, free from strings, that would have kept her secure enough to do her best work. (3–4)

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In 1983 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and The Women's Press, a feminist press based in London, published four of the five essays discussed here in a collection of Alice Walker's essays, lectures, and letters titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.[37] Together the collected essays presented both Walker and Hurston to national and international popular audiences. Their combined effect underscores Hurston's significance as a writer and extends their mutual influence. Each essay chronicles, with variations, the search for and finding of Hurston. They also represent the end of Hurston's life as tragic. By emphasizing the material conditions of her life, both Walker's construction of Hurston's legacy and her claim as heir to the inheritance of that legacy become more apparent. Walker's critical acclaim is deeply interwoven with the reclamation of Hurston, and her rhetorical construction of Hurston significantly shaped Hurston's subsequent popular and critical reception.

Of course, Walker was not alone in recuperating Hurston's legacy through narratives of gratifying discovery. Both Sherley Anne Williams and Mary Helen Washington wrote forewords to editions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1978 and [1990] 1998), respectively) in which each described encountering Hurston's most celebrated text for the first time. However, this fact is often lost in popular narratives of Hurston's legacy, rendering invisible the work of these scholars. Additionally, the individual narratives of discovery created a meta-narrative of *the* Black feminist literary tradition with Hurston at its center. For example, Washington provides a description of her "own discovery" of *Their Eyes* at a local Detroit Black book store in 1968 ([1990] 1998, x). She draws attention to the illustrated jacket cover that graphically figures Janie with "long hair cascading down her back, her head turning just slightly in his direction with the look of longing and expectancy" (xi). After this description, Washington writes:

> What I loved immediately about this novel besides its high poetry and its female hero was its investment in black folk traditions. Here, finally, was a woman on a quest for her own identity and, unlike so many other questing figures in black literature, her journey would take her, not away from, but deeper and deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, and communal life representing immersion into black traditions. (xi)

This passage is noteworthy for its exotic representation of blackness; defined by a tropical geography that is figured to signify an essential blackness that one (by way of Hurston's Janie) descends into.

In addition, Washington's reference to jacket covers requires consideration of its jacket copy given the critical authority of those who endorsed Hurston's

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work. The 1998 Perennial Classics edition of *Their Eyes*, critically framed by Washington's foreword and an afterword by Henry Louis Gates Jr., included blurbs from Alice Walker, the *Saturday Review*, and scholar/poet June Jordan. Walker's quote "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" is taken from Walker's 1977 essay "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View."[38] The blurb from the *Saturday Review* (a well-known critical magazine with a national and international audience) situates *Their Eyes* within the white male American literary canon: "*Their Eyes* belongs in the same category—with that of William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway—of enduring American Literature" (Stevens 1937). Jordan's blurb, excerpted from *Black World*, reads, "The prototypical Black novel of affirmation: it is the most successful, convincing, and exemplary novel of Blackness that we have. Period" (Hurston [1937] 1998).[39] In short, the jacket promotional copy appealed to the tastes and political leanings of a diverse audience: Alice Walker's as well as those of *Saturday Review* and *Black World*. The text's popularity is appealed to, Hurston's place in a white male American canon is confirmed, and the text is cited as a source of authentic "Blackness."

As mentioned previously, in addition to Black aesthetic themes of race pride and cultural tradition, Walker also referenced themes of motherhood, family, and kinship. In the essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" ([1975a] 1983), Walker describes how she posed as Hurston's niece so that she could gather information about Hurston's life; locate Hurston's unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida; and arrange to have a headstone placed there. She explains, "Besides, as far as I'm concerned, she is my aunt—and that of all black people as well" (102). Years later, Walker's appeal for a cultural, if fictive, kinship continues. For example, during a 2004 National Public Radio (NPR) interview with reporter Vertamae Grosvenor to promote her novel *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004), Walker reads from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and comments on its significance, employing familial and kinship ties:

> MS. WALKER: It is the grandmother spirit, the strong grandmother, the cinder grandmother, the no-nonsense grandmother, that's what's missing in this culture. That's who should be speaking to us now in this hour.
>
> GROSVENOR: For Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston embodied the disciplined, loving authority of the grandmother spirit of the Earth. By holding firmly to the authentic inner life of the black rural South, Walker says Hurston provided cultural nourishment and spiritual food. (Grosvenor 2004)

Rather than a literary foremother, Hurston is represented here as "the grandmother spirit of the Earth." Later in the interview Walker says, "I felt—and

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I still feel, I will always feel very daughterly, very niecely in relation to Zora. And I feel a responsibility to her." Again, Walker appeals to the audience via metaphors of familial obligation and responsibility, including the nurturing of extended familial relationships and claiming of fictive kin.[40]

This interview reinforces Walker's representation of Hurston as "lost and found" while also offering another telling of Walker's discovery of Hurston. Walker mentions that she likely encountered Hurston's work in a collection edited by Langston Hughes, *The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1899–1967* (1967), which included Walker's "To Hell with Dying" and Hurston's "The Gilded Six Bits," but that she most likely did not notice Hurston's work because she "read all the men" and because the narrative was "so familiar and so country . . . so much what I was used to in Georgia that I didn't pay much attention to it." Grosvenor adds that a neighbor loaned Walker a copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which led to Walker's research about Hurston's life and work, including her trip to Eatonville and Fort Pierce, Florida, which Walker, of course, recounts in her essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston."

The theme of lost and found was not lost to news writers or to their readership, including a news article titled "Lost and Found" that appeared on the first page of the "Dixie Living" section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on February 3, 1991. Staff writer Cynthia Tucker noted the "rise" in Hurston's "literary reputation" and described the "Zora" festival held amid what she described as Eatonville's "decline," which she suggests might reverse its course with renewing interest in Hurston's work. In addition, she reports Hurston's bio and recounts that, rejected by her Black peers and criticized for her use of Black idiomatic language and a lack of concern for the "Race Problem," Hurston's work fell out of vogue. Tucker highlights that Walker found Hurston's unmarked grave in Fort Pierce and bought a tombstone for it, noting the inscription, typeset to represent Hurston's tombstone on the page:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON
"A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH"
1901 — — — 1960
NOVELIST, FOLKLORIST
ANTHROPOLOGIST

In effect, the narrative of Hurston's rise and fall as lost and found, as discarded and reclaimed, circulates in radio, newsprint, academic publications, classrooms, informal circles, and in new forms of media and has its source in the strength of Walker's rhetoric, which appealed to reader's emotions, character, and reason.

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Themes of poverty, tragedy, and creative, social, and real death are powerful. They only partially explain, however, the rhetorical strength of Walker's essays and Hurston's reclamation as a feminist foremother. In the 1980s the theme of motherhood was employed as an organizing principle in feminism, with literary criticisms directly connecting the work of Walker and Hurston and in some instances working to complicate their affinity.[41] For example, within the collection *Mothering the Mind*, Mary Helen Washington's "I Sign My Mother's Name: Alice Walker, Dorothy West, Paule Marshall" works to foreground the importance of Walker's biological mother in the development of Walker's early work (Washington 1984, 161).[42] Dianne F. Sadoff's "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston" addresses how Walker writes Hurston as her literary foremother in ways that reveal its construction while avoiding critical "anxieties" one might expect to occur within a genealogical narrative, real or imagined. Sadoff asserts, "Race and class oppression intensify the Black woman writer's need to discover an untroubled matrilineal heritage" (1985, 5). In 1993 *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond* was published. Edited by Lillie P. Howard,[43] this collection of essays explores the relationships between Walker and Hurston in terms of biography (as shared Southern experience) and comparative thematic treatments of their respective novels. The collection firmly links Hurston and Walker together as central to the Black women's literary tradition in twelve essays that either compare and contrast *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with Walker's *The Color Purple* or that more generally compare and contrast themes of folklore and spirituality in the works of both writers. In effect, criticisms highlight the construction and critical connections between the two literary figures, providing opportunities to further analyze and interrogate their literary bond.

Walker and Hurston are paired throughout a significant amount of the literary criticism during this time, forming their own critical trope that interrogates race, class, and gender while underscoring their literary similarities and reinforcing the idea of a linear African American literary tradition. Their critical kinship, which permeates the field far beyond the few pieces I've referenced here, is unprecedented in the Black feminist literary tradition, and it begins with Walker's early essays. Collectively, the rhetorical arguments of these motherhood essays and edited collections have elevated Hurston to the status of Black literary foremother. These treatments of the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship, in both creative and critical writings, underscore Walker's literary connection to Hurston via matrilineal themes.

The resurgence of Hurston's work, following Walker's promotion of her in mainstream publications, has in part paralleled the growth of Black feminist

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studies (duCille 2005).[44] Within the context of Walker's reclamation of Hurston, some scholars began to refer to either Hurston the author or Hurston's work (in particular, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) as seminal to understanding the importance of Black women's literary tradition. I do not intend to imply a one-to-one causation between Walker's essays and critical commentaries regarding Hurston's work, but rather an association, as many commentaries echo Walker's representation of Hurston's contribution as a "first of its kind" (duCille 2005, 80–81) and "authentically black." For example, Cheryl A. Wall's "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words" gives "first" status to Hurston in terms of an authentic raced and gendered voice:

> The developing tradition of black women's writing nurtured now in the prose and poetry of such writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker began with the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was not the first Afro-American woman to publish a novel, but she was the first to create language and imagery that reflected the reality of black women's lives. Ignoring the stereotypes, social and literary, that her predecessors spent their energies rejecting, Hurston rooted her art in the cultural traditions of the black rural South. . . . Hers became *the first authentic black female voice in American literature*. (1982, 76; emphasis mine)

Likewise, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," describes Hurston's *Their Eyes* as *the* classic Black women's text. She writes, "The classic black women's text *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, charts the female protagonist's development from voicelessness to voice, from silence to tongues" (1989, 124).

In another example of Hurston's positioning at the center of *the* Black women's literary tradition, Henry Louis Gates begins his anthology of writings of the Black feminist literary tradition titled *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* with Hurston's essay "Art and Such" under the subheading "Constructing a Tradition." Gates details the literary movement of Black women writers since 1970, observing that the output of Black women's literary productions is a "major international literary movement" (1990, 1–3). He also notes that "black female authors often claim descent from other black women literary ancestors, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry" (4), and he lists a number of anthologies edited by Black women that have "played a pivotal role in the institutionalization of black women in literature in the university curriculum" (5). Observing that every anthology "defines a canon and thereby preserves a tradition in what is designated as its most representative parts," (5) Gates considers Mary Helen Washington's ideas concerning the "fiction of

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tradition." Here Washington critiques the marginalization of Black women's literary works from the American literary and African American literary canons (1987, xvii-xviii). Gates acknowledges the complicated politics of defining a tradition, including the possibilities of "reifying it," and describes *Reading Black* as but "one effort" (1990, 6). Gates organizes his collection in terms of "literary revision" wherein Black women writers converse in "formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody" (7). He asserts that his anthology begins with Hurston because her "work and career more than those of any other black woman writer, have become the symbols of a reclaimed literary tradition (9).[45]

Beyond the Walker effect, early defining statements of a Black women's literary and critical tradition often focus on questions of voice and language that supported claims of Hurston's centrality in the Black women's literary tradition. This focus within Black feminist literary criticism formally began with Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," wherein she defines the "principles which I think a black feminist could use" in outlining a specific Black feminist literary tradition ([1977b] 2000, 137). In addition to arguing that it should be attuned to the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Smith argues for Black feminist criticism to make thematic and conceptual connections between writers (137). She suggests as possible directions the connections among "Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker" because they include "the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery" and because "their use of specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters' thoughts" is not accidental (137). Smith's focus on only twentieth-century writers and her drawing of themes from Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers Gardens" further illustrate the influence of Walker's reading of Hurston. Hurston's work is given a central place in marking the importance of Black female cultural practices and language as definitive of a Black feminist literary tradition. However, Smith's attention to language specifically reflects larger theoretical concerns in literary criticism during the period. As Black feminist critics delineated a tradition of Black feminist literature and criticism, they began to draw on feminist discussions concerning female language.[46] In response to Smith, Deborah McDowell, for example, calls for considerations of language by Black feminist literary critics across interdisciplinary boundaries and less attention to broad and specific cultural themes such as those addressed in Smith's argument. McDowell writes in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," "Further, black feminist critics should not become obsessed with searching for common themes and images in black women's works. As I pointed out earlier, investigating the question of 'female' language is critical and may well be among the most

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challenging jobs awaiting the black feminist critic" ([1980] 1995, 14).[47] In effect, discussions of language and voice in early statements of black feminist literary tradition considered Hurston as central to that tradition. These discussions lay a foundation for and signaled the advent of theoretical considerations of language and voice in Hurston's work beyond those defined by black women literary scholars.

The construction of Hurston's distinctive place in Black women's literary tradition, influenced by the Walker effect, was occasioned by a larger commitment to addressing the erasures of Black women's writing in critical discussion. This larger commitment was shaped by critical trends such as establishing possible themes and methods for evaluating Black women's literature and validating the presence and agency of Black women as writers who crafted narratives that addressed and imagined life on their own terms. Themes related to motherhood (foremothers and mothering) and traditions reflected a period of earnest and ardent recuperation, given the critical vacuum and prejudiced disregard for the work of Black women writers. The early efforts by Black women literary scholars to define a Black feminist literary tradition were strategic, their rhetoric reflective of the historical moment and in service to the task ahead: to establish the presence of an identifiable body of literature and, indeed, a community of readers, scholars, and activists who were wholly invested in the restoration and preservation of literature by and about Black women. In addition to Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, and Mary Helen Washington, other scholars such as Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Bell-Scott, Gloria Wade-Gayles, and many, many others established a body of sustained scholarship, reading lists and syllabi, dedicated courses, and centers and programs devoted to Black women's studies, including Black women's literary studies.[48] Without their works, as the larger record shows, generations of readers, writers, and scholar-activists in higher and secondary education might indeed be without the many literary models that, as Alice Walker asserted, were so necessary for their survival.

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