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Zora Neale Hurston as Womanist

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Zora Neale Hurston as Womanist

Cheryl R. Hopson

Zora Neale Hurston is today recognized as an American and African American literary great. What Hurston has come to mean for black women writers such as Alice Walker can be gleaned from an assertion made by Walker in her canonical essay, “Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and Partisan View” (1979), included in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Walker writes, “I became aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston’s work some time before I knew her work existed” (83). Alice Walker is greatly responsible for the resurgence of interest in, and the creative and critical reassessment of, Zora Neale Hurston and her work. In her expression of a “need” for Zora Neale Hurston’s work, Walker is writing specifically about Hurston’s first folklore collection *Mules and Men* (1935), but she is also writing about her need of Hurston as a model of black female artistry.

From her reading of *Mules and Men*, Walker discovers in Hurston a woman who values rural Southern black women and black men, and who characterizes these individuals as “complex [and] *undiminished*” by US racial apartheid and white cultural imperialism (Walker 83, italics in original). Cheryl Wall argues that with *Mules and Men* Zora Neale Hurston “asserted that black people, while living in a racist society that denied their humanity, had created an alternative culture that validated their worth as human beings” (77). Wall continues that “Hurston’s respect for the cultural traditions of black people is the most important constant in her career” (77). Zora Neale Hurston is today “triple canonized—in the black, the American, and the feminist literary traditions” (Boyd 438). Hurston’s nonfiction writings *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), an autobiography, and *Mules and Men* (1935), her first folklore collection, both provide Hurston with an opportunity to simultaneously tell and construct her life as a folklorist and writer, as well as a daughter and friend. We see the artist and the anthropologist that Zora Neale Hurston was in these works. *Dust Tracks on a*

Road and *Mules and Men* imaginatively detail aspects of Hurston's familial, professional, and community relationships, and at the same time demonstrate the influence of Hurston's parents, John and Lucy Hurston, and of her friendships with two African American women, on her life and work. What differentiates the work of this essay from previous critical work on *Mules and Men* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, namely the astute analyses by Cheryl Wall, Susan Willis, Valerie Boyd, and Lillie Howard, is my focus on Hurston's interfamilial and friendship relations as read through the lens of Alice Walker's definition of womanism.

My application of Alice Walker's womanist concept to Zora Neale Hurston showcases the ways in which Hurston embodies and perhaps serves as a creative influence for Walker's definition of womanist. I explore Hurston as a womanist in the context of her relationship with her mother, Lucy Ann Potts Hurston, and her father, John Cornelius Hurston, as well as in the context of her friendships with Big Sweet, a woman Hurston meets and befriends while collecting folklore in 1928, and with the famous blues singer/stage performer, Ethel Waters, whose friendship Hurston sought and won in the 1930s.

In her definition of womanist, Alice Walker imagines and includes the dialogue between a figurative black mother and her "female child." In one exchange, the mother answers the daughter's question of "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" with "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented" (xi, italics mine). Here, Alice Walker borrows phrasing—e.g. "just like a flower garden"—from Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Walker does so, I think, to establish a vibrant metaphor for the diversity of skin tones within the "colored race," that is, that we are "just like a flower garden" (Walker xi). In establishing her metaphor, Walker reminds us that language is symbolic and interpretive. Second to this, by incorporating the words and ideas of Hurston, words and ideas which Hurston herself locates within a "Negro" speech culture of her youth, Walker

underscores womanism's rootedness in a shared (through speech) and transmitted (through actions) black folk tradition; a tradition to which both she and Hurston belong.

In Walker's womanist schema, black mothers model and correct the behavior of their daughters. Black mothers communicate ideas and enhance awareness; they notice and know, and they demonstrate for their daughters, capableness and a love of "the Self". Obioma Nnaemeka argues that Walker "inscribes the black woman as a knowing/thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge" (2481). In doing so, Walker interrogates "epistemological exclusions [the black woman] endures in intellectual life in general and feminist scholarship in particular" (2481). If we follow Nnaemeka's argument, Walker specifically inscribes the working or peasant-class, Southern, rural black woman and mother as a knowing, thinking subject who through dialogue and modeling transmits to her daughter (gendered) cultural knowledge as well as a sense of her own capabilities, whether creative, ideological, spiritual, or personal.

Alice Walker's definition of womanist distinguishes itself from any ideological standpoint that discounts or fails to recognize the intellect, knowledge, and perspective of the rural Southern black girl and woman. Womanist conveys a black female activist and artistic tradition and as Walker has before stated, brings to mind for her women such as nineteenth-century abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and early twentieth-century activists and artists such as Ida B. Wells Barnett, Minnie Tallulah Walker (Alice Walker's own mother) and, of course, and as I argue in this essay, the novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston.

In the third section of her definition of womanist, Walker writes that womanist is reflective of the black feminist artists' love for the self in relation to others. A womanist is then a lover whose love extends to "music . . . dance . . . the moon . . . the Spirit . . . love and food and roundness . . . struggle . . . the Folk . . . [and] herself. *Regardless*" (xii, italics in original). Walker's inclusion of the womanist's love of the

moon resembles Hurston's expressed love for the moon as articulated in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as well as in *Mules and Men*. Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks* of her sense as a child that the moon existed to please and "chase" her alone. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston aligns herself with rural Southern black "moon-worshippers" (185). Walker's invocation of the moon might be seen to crystallize Hurston's assertion in *Mules and Men* that "[t]here are moon-worshippers among the Negroes in America" (185).

"You acting womanish"

In the first part of Walker's definition, she states womanist comes from "womanish," a word that has particular resonance in rural Southern African American communities. Alice Walker scholar, Tuzyline Jita Allan takes womanish etymology a step further in arguing that "womanish" might possibly derive from the West African saying "big woman," a pidgin expression "used . . . by adults (male and female, though it is female-derived) to refer to the sassy demeanor of young females" (70). Allan continues that similar to "womanish," "'big woman' provoke[s] the contradictory response of disagreement over the young person's refusal to be circumscribed and tacit approval and admiration for the rebellious spirit" (70). As scholar Maria Lauret argues, by situating womanism within a black female folk expression, Alice Walker continues the work of liberating "black folk speech . . . from its degraded status as defective English . . . a tradition championed by [Walker's] literary model, novelist and Folklorist Zora Neale Hurston" (Lauret 19). Alice Walker has written that when she was a child, being considered womanish was not a positive but rather a negative identification in her home community. To be called "womanish" suggested behavior that was sexually forward and beyond the bounds of gendered propriety (see "Brothers and Sisters" in *In Search*). Walker refashions "womanish" as affirming, celebratory, and a common-place way of being for Southern black females—i.e. girls who are the progenitors of womanism. Womanist is "the opposite of" "girlish," and "frivolous," as

Walker writes. To be a womanist is to be personally, intellectually, artistically, and politically bold and emboldened, and it is to demonstrate a “desire [acted upon] to know more and in greater depth” (Walker xi).

Zora Neale Hurston’s womanish ways as an African American girl and woman, anthropologist and artist, rescued her from a life of marriage and compulsory motherhood, and personal and ideological stunting—that is, from a way of life common for many rural, Southern black females of Hurston’s generation. Hurston’s “big woman” consciousness and talent freed her to pursue a life of learning, travel, writing, and adventure. Hurston early on exhibited in her life and writing an imaginative spirit, a compulsory courage, and a willfulness that won her a certain amount of personal and artistic freedom, as well as a place in the African American and American literary and feminist canons. In the span of sixty years, Hurston transitioned from orphaned child to celebrated black woman writer. Hurston made her way from her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, to Baltimore, Maryland, to Washington, DC, and Howard University, and then on to Barnard College and Harlem of the 1920s—every step of the way gaining a footing in an academic, artistic, and literary world that, according to Valerie Boyd, Mary Helen Washington, and others, had not seen before the likes of her.

Lucy and John . . .

To be womanish, is to desire to know more and in greater depth than is thought “good” for one, according to Walker’s definition. It is to push at physical and psychic boundaries that delimit personhood and freedom, and to do so in an effort to get at the how and why of things, and to create more space for the unexamined and the new. Zora Neale Hurston was like the figurative daughter at the center of Alice Walker’s womanist concept, who hubristically and matter-of-factly says to her mother “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me” (Walker xi). Hurston’s parents, John and Lucy Hurston each in their own way taught their daughter the power of the

spoken (and written) word, and the value of family and community. Each as well jettisoned the status quo of family and cultural custom to pursue the life and persons they desired. Together they gifted the world a daughter who became a celebrated writer and black feminist and literary icon. Womanist as an idea/ideology expresses a humanist impulse, one that values rather than devalues peoples and cultures like and unlike the self. Central to womanism is the idea of (black feminist) women's sexual and nonsexual love for one another, and their commitment "to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female" (Walker xi).

Hurston's relationship with her mother and the loss of that relationship due to Lucy's death greatly influences the direction of Hurston's life and work. And as I see it, her mother's death establishes the possibility of her friendships with Big Sweet and Ethel Waters. As Cheryl Wall argues, in Hurston's friendship with women such as Big Sweet though perhaps especially Ethel Waters it is possible to find evidence for "the desire for the absent mother . . . reenacted" (260). I understand Zora Neale Hurston's relationships with her mother and father, as well as with Big Sweet and Ethel Waters to be of a piece. Similar to the figurative mother-daughter modeling relationship at the center of Alice Walker's womanist concept, these individuals model womanhood and personhood for Hurston, and therefore show influence in her writing, as well as in her interpersonal relationships. It is from her mother as well as from her father that Hurston seems to take her "womanish" tendency to "stand and give battle" (*Dust Tracks* 13). It is in the context of her friendships with Big Sweet and Ethel Waters that Hurston develops her unrelenting artistic and personal belief in the humanness and complexity of Negroes, from the "well-bred" to "the lowlier members of [the] race" (*Dust Tracks* 177, 178).

Heeding the advice if not example of her mother, Zora Neale Hurston made every attempt in her sixty years of living to "jump at de sun" and continuously quested toward the horizon (*Dust Tracks* 13). Lillie Howard writes that Lucy Potts Hurston was "a former country

schoolteacher” who taught “a brood of youngsters” each year to supplement the family’s income (14). Lucy also home schooled her own children, whom she liked to keep close to home. Lucy Hurston “was a bulwark, thrifty and protective,” of her family as well as of her younger daughter, who she was determined would grow up to be bold and not passive (14). Lucy knew that for this to occur, Hurston would need to feel comfortable communicating her thoughts and feelings, and sharing her “lies” or made-up stories (*Dust Tracks* 13). But Lucy Hurston died when her youngest daughter was but nine years old; Lucy herself was thirty-nine.

Similar to her mother, Zora Neale Hurston questioned the authority of giants such as her father. She wondered silently as a child, and out loud in print as an adult, about ideas of God and religious faith. She unpacked in her fiction and nonfiction, and reconstituted beliefs about whites as superior and Negroes as inferior, and vice versa, and she challenged the wisdom of previous generations. By the time Zora Neale Hurston was fourteen, she and her seven siblings, one sister and six brothers, were dispersed and all but abandoned by their father. Hurston was self-supporting from then on, working variously as a domestic; a lady-in-waiting for a theater actress; a waitress; a manicurist at a segregated barber shop in DC; a secretary and driver to the famed Jewish writer, Fanny Hurst; a writer for Paramount Studios in California; a librarian; a college instructor; a maid; and often as a full-time writer and folklorist. Hurston pursued her education and ultimately her life’s work—writing—with great passion and persistence. She maintained what was, for her, challenging relationships with funding sources such as her patron of many years, Charlotte Mason, a white, American elite who believed fundamentally that black people were primitives with lessons to impart to white people on how to live happy, cheerful lives. Hurston matriculated at Barnard College in New York, a prestigious and predominantly white college, from which she earned her Bachelor of Arts in 1928, and at the age of thirty-seven. She won and lost friendships with members of the black literati the likes of Langston

Hughes, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Alain Locke, her former professor and mentor, and the sociologist and brother to James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson. She was a student of the renowned anthropologist Franz Boaz, who helped start her in her career as a folklorist and ultimately as a celebrated writer. She published essays, plays, reviews, novels, folklore collections and nonfiction works and by the end of the thirties was, as Mary Helen Washington writes, “the best and most prolific black woman writer in America” (11).

Zora Neale Hurston never got along with her father, John, a man who experienced his youngest daughter as willful and impertinent. John Hurston grew up in Alabama and spent several years working as a farm-hand and sharecropping. According to Angela Davis, this mode of work “reduplicate[d] the antebellum conditions” and position of black people (88). John Hurston knew that sharecropping was not going to provide him with a better life or even a livable future. He wanted both. And, so, just a few short years after Zora Neale Hurston’s birth in 1891, he moved his family from Alabama to Eatonville, Florida, the place of Zora Neale Hurston’s childhood, and the topography for much of her fiction. Howard provides that “[i]n Eatonville, John Hurston acquired property and quickly rose to prominence in the community as a carpenter, a Baptist preacher, and finally as moderator of the South Florida Baptist Association” (13–14). John was literate, a gifted orator, charismatic, and handsome. He served three terms as the mayor of Eatonville, Florida, the “pure Negro town,” and helped to write the municipal bylaws (*Dust Tracks* 1). John Hurston was also, in the vernacular of the times, a rounder, that is a womanizer. That he and his younger daughter did not get along is blight on his character and on their father-daughter relationship.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston suggests that part of her father’s disapproval of her was connected to the fact that he already had a daughter he prized, Hurston’s older sister, Sarah. Lillie Howard writes that when John Hurston discovered the sex of his new baby he threatened “to cut his throat” (161). Howard continues that John Hurston

“frequently threatened to violently rid Zora of her high and mighty attitude.” With the help of her mother Lucy, when alive, Hurston “managed to escape the wrath of her father” (Howard 161–62).

John Hurston remarried just weeks after the death of his wife and Hurston’s mother, Lucy. His children became a distraction from his new life and marriage, and were perhaps too much of a reminder of his albeit recent past. As such and “to appease his new wife,” John Hurston “sent Zora, though underage, to attend school . . . in Jacksonville” (Howard 15). From the age of nine until she left home at fourteen, Hurston and her siblings were “‘passed around like a bad penny’ from neighbor to neighbor” (Howard 162). When in the care of her father, Hurston “attended school only sporadically and [came] to know the distinct taste of poverty and unhappiness” (Howard 162).

Big Sweet and Ethel Waters

Similar to her introduction to Big Sweet, a woman and character in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* as well as in her folklore collection *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston hears the blues singer Ethel Waters before she comes to know her. In the same way that Big Sweet draws Hurston in through talk or signifying, and tells Hurston something about herself as a woman (e.g., Big Sweet is to be taken seriously), the sound of Ethel Waters’ voice, whether over the radio or via the stage, told Hurston something specific about Waters (e.g., Waters was a woman Hurston somehow knew already but still needed to know). Hurston writes of being compelled by a sense of Waters’ “great humanness” and “depth [of] soul” (198). This is an idea of Ethel Waters that Hurston brings to their friendship. Susan Willis is correct when she writes that “to rejoin her mother, Zora . . . must travel back to the underworld, to the ‘dark realm’ of her own people, to the friendship with Big Sweet [and Ethel Waters], in order to learn to say what her dying mother could not, in order to name the chain of legendary female figures who can teach her to re-remember and to speak the past” (263).

Perhaps Zora Neale Hurston did not so much seek out the friendships of Big Sweet and Ethel Waters, as she was drawn in by the familiar sound of their black and female voices, voices steeped in a dialect of the US South. These women in their own way helped to reconnect Hurston to black women and men, boys and girls whom she left behind in her pursuit of an education and a career. They must also have reminded her of the vulnerable, motherless, and yet striving child she was when her mother died and her father turned away. Both Big Sweet and Ethel Waters “mother” Hurston in that they provide her protection or some measure of comfort, and the wisdom of their lives. Together they are a listening, fairly nonjudgmental ear for Hurston. “Mama’s child,” as Hurston describes herself, must have heard in the voices of each woman a story waiting to be told (*Dust Tracks* 68).

Both Alice Walker in her definition, and Zora Neale Hurston in her writing, foreground black girls and women, and both render significant mother-daughter/parent-child relations, as well as friendship between black girls and women. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes of her mother’s death as an end to the physical, psychic, and emotional dimensions of the world as she knew it. Boyd argues that “Lucy died at precisely the time when Zora needed a mama to teach her how to be a woman” (47). But I suggest Lucy Potts Hurston did not leave her daughter without a model. Zora Neale Hurston experienced nine years of being her mother’s daughter, nine years in which she was in constant contact with and under the tutelage of her mother. Lucy’s death would in time prepare the way for Zora Neale Hurston’s friendships with Big Sweet and Ethel Waters. Hurston pursued friendships with these women, and benefited from their company. Like Hurston’s parents and Hurston herself, both Big Sweet and Ethel Waters were charismatic and adept at verbal play. Whereas Waters performed on a national stage, and to a largely white audience, Big Sweet “performed”—that is, worked and lived—among the laboring black folk of Polk County, Florida. Both women’s lives and “performances,” which included singing, verbal play, and speaking, were circumscribed by

their race, class, regional and historical locatedness. It is Zora Neale Hurston who in exercising her power as a writer and a trained folklorist provides these women greater voice and perspective. If, as a poor, rural, Southern, black, and female worker Big Sweet could not speak and be heard by the white masses or by the black literati, then Hurston as a folklorist and writer could work to give voice and presence to Big Sweet through characterization. If Ethel Waters found herself silenced and hemmed in by the expectations and demands of her career as a blues singer and stage performer, as well as by the limitations of her upbringing, then Zora Neale Hurston as a writer and folklorist could articulate the unvoiced on behalf of a woman she valued—and thereby showcase for readers a more complex and nuanced Ethel Waters. Susan Willis writes, “Big Sweet cannot directly speak her life to the reader”; nor, for that matter, can Ethel Waters, who neither writes the songs she sings nor the lines she speaks on stage (113). Hurston, through her characterizations of these women, “can embody something of [their] experience and gutsy spirit” (113). As well, both as a writer and an anthropologist, she can provide counter to “the larger system of domination that defines . . . [black women] as marginal and inferior” (113).

Big Sweet becomes a vehicle for Hurston’s characterization and articulation of the lives and experiences of pre-civil rights era, rural Southern and working-class black women. Cheryl Wall argues that Big Sweet significantly influences Hurston’s characterization of certain women in her fiction, such as Pheoby Watson in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Again, Zora Neale Hurston meets Big Sweet in Florida in 1928, and while conducting field research as a folklorist. As Cheryl Wall writes, “Hurston hears Big Sweet before she sees her, and it is her talk that attracts [Hurston’s] attention” (Gates 80). Big Sweet is both feared and respected because of her size and stature—she is muscular and mannish—but also because of her verbal dexterity. Big Sweet protected Hurston while in the field collecting data; served as an entry point to a Black community that at first distrusted Hurston, the well-dressed stranger with the shiny silver Chevrolet; and provided Hurston

with folklore material. But Hurston does not deliver up to readers a “Big Sweet” lacking in complexity. This is to say, that while Hurston characterizes Big Sweet in *Dust Tracks on a Road* as well as in *Mules and Men* as willful, intelligent and strong, she also characterizes her as a vulnerable figure. Big Sweet is in a precarious situation economically and emotionally. She is cheated on by her male lover, verbally and physically attacked by a supposed friend, and she is mocked by other black women because of her size. Big Sweet prostitutes herself for money to live on, though as she tells Hurston in *Mules and Men*, she would rather have remained a virgin. Though Hurston does share intimate details of Big Sweet’s life with readers, she does not give Big Sweet’s actual name, nor, as Wall argues, does she give readers’ specifics on Big Sweet’s appearance. In this way Hurston returns the favor of Big Sweet’s protection by allowing the woman behind the name “Big Sweet” to remain anonymous—even as parts of her “story” are being told.

Zora Neale Hurston’s friendship with Ethel Waters was one Hurston “valued all her life” (Howard 163). By the time of their friendship, Hurston was a well-known and celebrated black woman writer. Hurston writes of her friendship with Waters, “I am due to have this friendship with Ethel Waters, because I worked for it” (197). Hurston’s life and accomplishments to date had been brought about by her love of and respect for herself, her intellect, and by sheer force of will. Surely, Ethel Waters could appreciate such tenacity and verve in a fellow black woman artist.

Josie P. Campbell writes that “Hurston view[ed] Waters as a national treasure who should not be kept within national boundaries” (111). Hurston found in Ethel Waters a mirror reflecting back part of a self that was motherless and, while having fame, still lonely and isolated. Both Hurston and Waters suffered through loneliness as children, and both experienced themselves as outsiders, within and outside of their homes. When Lucy Hurston died, Zora Neale Hurston was for all intents and purposes an orphan. With the loss of her mother came the

loss of the constancy and comfort (and even the possibility) of home. Similarly, when she was as young as seven years old, Ethel Waters was charged with the responsibility of caring and providing for herself. Waters writes in her 1950 autobiography *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* that she was born out of wedlock and into a family that did not value her much as a child, nor provide for or protect her in any real way. Waters was conceived when her mother, at twelve years old, was raped at knife point. For her mother, Ethel Waters was a reminder of a gruesome and violent experience, one that negatively and irrevocably altered her life. As a girl, Waters was well-versed in matters of sex, ran wild in the streets, and was “always a leader of the street gang in stealing and general hell-raising” (1). What Waters craved most in life was “clean surroundings, a decent, quiet place to sleep, some sense of order, and good meals at regular times of the day” (87).

Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston was living and writing womanism long before Alice Walker named it. Like the figurative daughter at the center of Walker’s womanist concept, Hurston was and remained until the end a seeker, that is, a woman who desired and labored “to know more and in greater depth” than was common (Walker xi). Walker’s definition, like Hurston’s writing, foregrounds the individual’s relationship to the self, the family, and to the larger (black and world) community. Alice Walker writes in the fourth and concluding section of her definition of womanist that “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xii). Scholars have debated the meaning of Walker’s construction since it was first introduced. A question that seems to repeat is whether Walker is celebrating black feminists and other feminists of color to the exclusion of white feminists, and, if so, whether womanism is a racially separatist ideology. In her definition of *womanist*, Alice Walker presents the “world” and the “people” who populate it as complex, intergenerational, dialogic, and colorful. *Womanist* represents self-affirming love that spans outward. Zora Neale Hurston was

a questing, imaginative, and self-asserting artist, daughter, and friend. Like her models in creativity, personhood and friendship—that is, her mother, father, Big Sweet, and Ethel Waters—Hurston pushed at the boundaries of circumscription to establish herself as a folklorist and, most especially, as a writer.

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