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Black women writing black mother figures: reading black motherhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Meridian*

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BLACK WOMEN WRITING BLACK MOTHER FIGURES:
READING BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AND *MERIDIAN*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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by
Alexis Durell Powe
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER 1	
INTRODUCTION	
Vanquishing the Black Superwoman:	
Zora Neale Hurston’s Corrosive Influence.....	1
Hurston’s Disciples	3
The Motherly Mentorship Between Zora and Alice.....	11
Endnotes.....	15
CHAPTER 2	
“FAILED” MOTHERS: COMPARING NANNY AND MRS. HILL.....	18
Endnotes	34
CHAPTER 3	
ASSIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR	
WRONG-DOING IN <i>THEIR EYES</i> AND <i>MERIDIAN</i>	35
CHAPTER 4	
CONCLUSION: REMAKING THE BLACK WOMAN	48
REFERENCES.....	54
VITA.....	59

ABSTRACT

This research explores connections between Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*, two important novels in the African American canon rarely studied in conjunction. I examine the novels' portrayals of Black mothers, comparing and contrasting Nanny Crawford and Mrs. Hill as central mother figures. I also examine Leafy Crawford, Meridian Hill, and other minor Black mother/women characters. Though Hurston's and Walker's presentations of Black mothers differ, both authors work toward dismantling traditional stereotypes of Black motherhood, particularly the Black superwoman stereotype, and, thereby, ultimately redefining Black womanhood. In defending this claim, I explore Hurston's "motherly" influence upon Walker and other contemporary writers who have questioned traditional (usually male) portrayals of Black mothers. Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams, for example, acknowledge(d) Hurston as a literary foremother and have drawn from her writing in generating their own work. Walker also acknowledges Hurston's weighty presence in, among other works, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* and *Meridian*. In the latter, Walker directly alludes to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Perhaps most interesting, however, is how differently Walker and Hurston portray motherhood in these novels. Whereas Hurston's Nanny seemingly fits the affectionate, overly-caring Black mammy stereotype, Mrs. Hill resents her children and withdraws emotionally from them. Yet the characters are eerily similar in that both withhold valuable sexual information from their (grand)daughters, lie to force Janie and Meridian into lives similar to their mother figures' unenviable existences, vent their frustrations and disappointments upon their children, and use guilt in an attempt to keep the young

women under their control. Both, in other words, represent traditional stereotypes of Black women and, therefore, become obstacles the daughter figures must defy to achieve personally fulfilling lives. Drawing from Hurston's and Walker's memoirs, I explore the authors' personal views of motherhood (how they claim to feel about their own mothers and/or grandmothers, and how Walker claims to feel about becoming a mother) and how those views translate into their writing. Finally, I work to clarify and distinguish my take on the two authors' portrayals of motherhood from other critical perspectives.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Vanquishing the Black Superwoman—Zora Neale Hurston’s Corrosive Influence

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the *mule* of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry. We have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” and “Mean and Evil Bitches.” Not to mention “Castraters” and “Sapphire’s Mama.”

–Alice Walker,
from *In Search of Our Mothers’
Gardens*, p. 237

In the above quote, Alice Walker lists many of the dominant stereotypes that have been applied to Black women since slavery, including the, perhaps, most damaging one to their psyches: the Black superwoman myth, which draws from other stereotypes to form colossal social and personal barriers for Black women. In *Southern Mothers*, Nagueyalti Warren explains that post-Civil War, numerous Black women adopted the cult of True Womanhood ideal that white women were busy discarding—one which required them to be innately maternal, ever loving and supportive. She notes that slavery had denied Black women “those very customs [white women were attacking], for they had not been lady-mothers but mammies, not housewives of their own homes but servants or slaves in the master’s mansion” (184). Warren, though sympathetic, criticizes the trend among Black women writers to embrace these romantic ideals, claiming that they evolved into “the superwoman syndrome” (183). She asserts, “African American [women] writers often create mothers who are superwomen: self-sacrificing, long-suffering, all-powerful figures whose sons and daughters worship [them] and ironically glorify the very attributes of self-abdication that imprison and diminish the[ir] mother[s]’ soul[s]” (182). Warren, to her credit, does indicate that some Black women were not so much eagerly assuming these “ideals” as having them forced upon them by Black male

writers complicitous with these portrayals¹—fantasies to which, Warren claims, many Black women writers succumbed. As examples, she lists Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Hallie Q. Brown.

Stephen Henderson notes, however, that as the twentieth century progressed, Black women writers increasingly expressed their sense of betrayal by their male contemporaries, whose ideas of the Black community were divorced from what emerging women writers knew to be realistic images of Black men, marriage, and, particularly, motherhood. He states:

the contradictions between knowledge and action that surfaced in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements forced sensitive and intelligent women to reexamine their own positions vis-à-vis the men and to conclude that they were the victims not only of racial injustice but of a sexual arrogance tantamount to dual colonialism—one from without, the other from within, the Black community. (xxiii)

As a consequence, many rebellious Black women writers began “free[ing] themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts, where, depicted as queens and princesses, or as earth mothers and idealized Black Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals” (Henderson xxiv). In her germinal study of mythic racial discourses, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), Michele Wallace counter-charged that the superwoman stereotype remains a strong tradition from which very few Black female authors have strayed; consequently, the myth continues to mislead Black adolescent women. Warren concurred, stating that as recently as 1999 “a fundamental expectation that women make others instead of making themselves, and that women naturally want to sacrifice their own freedom in order to nurture children and husbands” (187-88) remains operative in

Black communities. Wallace's comprehensive definition of the superwoman stereotype, one to which I will turn repeatedly during the course of this thesis, deserves quoting:

From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.

Through the years this image has remained basically intact, unquestioned even by the occasional black woman writer or politician. (107)

Alice Walker quotes Wallace in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984), taking strong exception to Wallace's final sentence. "It's a lie," Walker maintains. "I've been hacking away at that stereotype for years, and so have many other black women writers" (*Mothers' Gardens* 324). Significantly she lists Zora Neale Hurston, one of her literary mentors, among this group.

Hurston's Disciples

That Hurston was among the earliest to lash out at an image restrictive of Black women should not surprise anyone familiar with her life. Free-spirited and irreverent to all things considered literarily sacred, Hurston was less interested in social revolution than in creating believable, engaging characters. To demonstrate, when writer and social activist Nick Aaron Ford, author of *The Contemporary Negro Novel; a Study in Race Relations* (1936), inquired why she chose not to write about the race problem, Hurston responded ("condescendingly," Ford remembers), "I think only in terms of individuals. [. . .] I am not interested in the *race* problem, but I am interested in the problems of *individuals*, white ones and black ones" (8). In her works, she attacks unrealistic

depictions—whether negative or positive—indiscriminately, particularly those applied to the Black community. As a consequence, Hurston won a fair number of male detractors, especially those belonging to the “Talented Tenth.”² Among them was Ford, who considered Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), a failed masterpiece. He wished instead that Hurston had written about a Black “Ben Hur, bursting the unjust shackles that had bound him to a rotten social order and winning the applause even of his enemies” (10). Hurston’s second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), met with still more unfavorable criticism. The novel’s heroine, Janie Woods, rebels against social convention and her dead grandmother’s expectations in favor of love and a desire to explore the horizon. Though Janie physically conforms to the “Mother Earth” image encompassed by the Black superwoman stereotype, with her swinging hair, full breasts, and grapefruit-sized buttocks, by the novel’s end she develops into an independent woman unfettered by the constraints accompanying either marriage or motherhood. The truly revolutionary element in the novel, however, is Janie’s grandmother, Nanny Crawford, who knowingly works against Janie’s future happiness under the guise of love, directly countering the Black superwoman ideal. Male critics found these female characters disagreeable. More so, however, they vehemently objected to Hurston’s Black male characters, particularly Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, whom some felt primitivized Black men.³ Despite her jeering male contemporaries, however, Hurston now occupies a place of honor among the most esteemed contemporary Black women writers precisely because she flouted traditional stereotypes—especially those aimed at Black women—and helped clear a creative path for other women writers to follow. Toni Cade Bambara, in “Salvation Is the Issue,” once observed that Hurston “wrote against the stereotypes of

the day and gave us, particularly those of us who list her among our critical foremothers, new categories of perception (women's images) and new ways to consider the stuff of our lives (folkways as the basis of 'art')" (45). Among others, Toni Morrison, Sherley Anne Williams, and Alice Walker followed in Hurston's wake, likewise portraying Black women, particularly mothers, in ways traceable to Hurston's writing.

The alteration of perceptions and inclusion of folk culture that Bambara observes in Hurston's work are also critical elements in Morrison's writings. In a 1985 discussion with Gloria Naylor, Morrison observes that "many people who are trying to show certain kinds of connections between myself and Zora Neale Hurston are always dismayed and disappointed in me because I hadn't read Zora Neale Hurston except for one little short story before I began to write" (213-14). Nevertheless, Hurston's influence can still be traced in Morrison's early writing (as Morrison readily acknowledges, identifying those similarities as proof of a Black female tradition), particularly in her choice of mystical subject matter. In Morrison's later work, too, Hurston's influence resonates, as in Morrison's frequent depictions of "outrageous mothers, particularly in *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) [who] paved the way for a closer, more critical look at black motherhood" (Warren 185). Especially eye-opening is Sethe Suggs, the protagonist of Morrison's most acclaimed novel, *Beloved*. Morrison shows readers a slave mother so adamant that her children not enter slavery that she slashes her toddler's throat, nearly decapitating her, then tries to bash her infant's skull against a wall. Though Morrison clearly denotes Sethe's motivation as motherly love, neither Sethe's surviving children nor readers ever quite recover from the mental image of Sethe wielding a blood-spattered saw. Compounding readers' horror is the dissolution of slavery shortly after the murder,

transforming Sethe's good intentions into unnecessary tragedy. When the toddler's adult ghost returns to haunt Sethe, the readers' sympathies divide, thus complicating readers' conceptions of slave mothers.

In *Beloved*, Morrison shows an ugly, little-addressed side of Black motherhood during slavery, as well as the dangers of motherlove. Within the same work, Morrison, defying the Black superwoman tradition, also shows mothers who do terrible things to their children for reasons other than motherly love, such as Sethe's mother, who literally throws away her other infants because they are fathered by white men. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sees it, in "cases in which the separation [of slave mother and child] was forcefully perpetrated by sale, the results were devastating but could at least be attributed to the malevolence of an external force. But," asks Fox-Genovese, "what if it were perpetrated by the mother herself through running away, suicide, or infanticide?" (794). The "difficult part" of *Beloved*, she continues, is that "the transformation of slaves from passive victims—mere objects—into active resisters of their own dehumanization necessarily invoked their accountability for their actions, however desperate, however constrained" (793). Accordingly, Morrison attacks traditional depictions of slave mothers as mere pawns entirely governed by the system and holds them personally responsible for their actions, whatever their motivations. Yet while *Beloved* is revolutionary in itself, its theme of holding slave mothers accountable for their treatment of children harks back fifty years to Hurston's characterization of Nanny in *Their Eyes*. Unlike Sethe's mother, Nanny does not kill Janie, the granddaughter entrusted to her care, but she does throw away Janie's life, in a sense, by forcing her marriage to Logan

Killicks, lying to Janie and damaging her spirit in the process—something for which, in the end, Nanny pays dearly.

Joining Hurston and Morrison in challenging traditional notions of Black women is Sherley Anne Williams, who presents another ground-breaking type of Black mother in *Dessa Rose* (1986). Williams discovered Hurston in graduate school, when Hurston's books were so rare that finding a copy of *Their Eyes* was a struggle. After reading it, Williams declared, "I became Zora Neale's for life" (98), taking her place among Hurston's parade of followers. Carole Boyce Davies has observed links between *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*, the latter centering on a slave revolt led by a pregnant Black woman. Davies finds several elements of both novels revolutionary, including Dessa's utilizing "her pregnancy to her benefit, to stay her impending execution and gain for her[self] the space and time to defy all expectations" (49). Dessa, contrary to the Black superwoman stereotype, exploits her pregnancy rather than revels in it. She uses that extra time both to plan a rebellion and to tell her own story, not to the white recorder—whom she confuses by "offer[ing] her double-coded oral narratives, songs, gestures, and [re]-markings, which he cannot decipher" (49)—but to her own descendants. Davies notes that perhaps the most intriguing element of Williams's novel is Dessa's use of the Black oral tradition. While Davies describes *Beloved* as an example of "mother-as-written" (56), she notes that "*Dessa Rose* ends with her writing/righting her own story for her grandchildren," therefore ensuring "that the children know the story and that it is written down and then re-oralised" (56). Dessa tells her own story in her own way, trusting no one else to do it correctly. Davies deems this "a much more empowering gesture, with more human agency, than is Sethe's" and considers Dessa's transformation from the

“mother-as-she-is-written” into the writer “one of the text’s most radical strategies” (56). As with Morrison, though, Hurston’s radicalism predated Williams’s. According to Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Janie also emerges as the writer of her own fate by publicly denouncing Jody Starks: “Janie, in effect, has *rewritten* Joe’s text of himself, and liberated herself in the process.” She “writes,” Johnson and Gates claim, “herself into being by *naming*, by speaking herself free” (74). Yet the fact that Williams’s radicalism is preceded by Hurston’s in *Their Eyes* does not weaken *Dessa Rose*, which serves as powerful homage to Hurston and to the Black oral tradition that Williams found splendidly portrayed in Hurston’s *Their Eyes*.

Williams found most impressive about Hurston her commitment to capturing the orality so characteristic of Black culture. “In the speech of her characters,” Williams wrote, “I heard my own country voice” (98). Hurston’s characters literally spoke from the pages. Even more impressive was that the women who spoke to Williams did not conform to what Williams listed as the three popular stereotypes of Black women: “the ham-fisted matriarch,” “the amoral, instinctual slut,” and “the tragic mulatt[a]” (98). Williams saw genius in Hurston’s ability to record speech in writing, noting that “her ear for speech rhythms must have been remarkable,” but that “[m]ost importantly, she had the literary intelligence and developed the literary skill to convey the power and the beauty of this heard speech and lived experience on the printed page” (99). Williams emulated Hurston’s style in her writing, conceding that Hurston’s genius had “not been equaled” or even fully appreciated, despite still “ring[ing], even across forty years, with an aching familiarity that is testament to Hurston’s skill and to the durability of black speech” (99). Williams’ career was her acknowledgement of Hurston’s own durability.

Finally, though Morrison and Williams have contributed invaluablely to Black literature by presenting surprising “new” portrayals of Black women, Alice Walker distinguishes herself from this triumvirate of Hurston’s disciples and, thus, deserves special attention. Arguably, of Hurston’s literary descendants, none feels her influence more profoundly, or has honored her more, than Walker. About Hurston and Walker’s connection, Lillie P. Howard writes: “To those who have read both Walker and Hurston, it is consistently and abundantly clear that [. . .] Alice Walker has responded to Zora’s call, taking up her themes, varying and giving them a strident voice that resonates, unmistakably, back to Zora” (11). According to Bettye J. Parker-Smith, Walker follows Hurston’s example, defying the superwoman ideal by creating flawed Black women crippled by “inherent weakness [. . .] prevent[ing] them from having the innate ability to extricate themselves from their denigration and immoral situation,” unlike the superwoman, who would naturally rise above her condition. Parker-Smith adds that “the notion that [Walker’s] women are weak is not at all in keeping with the generally held belief that Black women are superstrong” (486). Interestingly, Parker-Smith implies that weakness in Black women may not so much attack the ideal as put an ironic spin on it, pointing out that “the ‘mule of the world’ concept [. . .] does not necessarily denote strength in the positive. In the first place, a mule is not very smart; it lacks the innate ability to shake off its load” (486). Although I agree with Parker-Smith’s observation that Walker’s women are not born inherently strong, as the superwoman myth dictates, I find her criticism of Walker misguided in that she believes Walker’s women remain weak throughout, their only true redemption coming in embracing either God or death. The title character in Walker’s *Meridian* (1976) single-handedly negates this finding. While

Meridian Hill seems accepting of religion near the novel's conclusion, she in fact rejects traditional notions of God and is attracted to church instead by Black voices singing in unison. Moreover, Meridian dismisses the notion of death as salvation. As she lies dying on the floor in the closing chapters, Meridian decides that Black history has too many martyrs and leaves to regain her physical health. Like Hurston, Walker frequently depicts, to borrow Barbara Christian's term, "wayward" (457) artist-women who begin as frail and dependent and evolve into spiritually strong, independent characters controlling their own lives and severing themselves from anything that diminishes their hard-won sense of self, most notably domesticity.

Morrison, Williams, and Walker have all publicly noted Hurston's influence on their writing, and each of the three has, in turn, exerted her own influence on a newly-emerging crop of Black women writers, here and abroad. African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head, dissatisfied by Black male writers' romantic depictions of African motherhood, have also followed suit, making Hurston's and her disciples' influences global. Together they have proven to be the Black superwoman's kryptonite: they have not destroyed her, but their efforts have emboldened many other Black women writers who are increasingly banishing her to the outskirts of Black literature. This is an important development for Black women, both writers and readers. While many of the Black community once considered the Black superwoman role liberating, the tide has turned, as twenty-first century Black women increasingly reject it as exhausting and burdensome, thus shaking the heavy load from their collective back.

The Motherly Mentorship Between Zora and Alice

Having examined Black women writers' indebtedness to Hurston for releasing the stranglehold the Black superwoman ideal had upon Black literature, I want to further explore the link between Hurston and Walker, since few modern-day writers would have ever heard of Hurston without Walker's intervention. After *Their Eyes* failed critically,⁴ Hurston's personal popularity waned until she finally died in anonymity, her writings effectively forgotten until Walker embarked on her own literary career and unearthed Hurston's name while searching for credible information about African American voodoo practices. Additionally, Walker discovered in Hurston "a model. A model, who, as it happened, provided more than voodoo for my story, more than one of the greatest novels America had produced [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*]*—though, being America, it did not realize this*" (*Mothers' Gardens* 12). The "more" Hurston provided was a record of her life, a string of works ranging from novels to anthropological data to her personal letters and memoirs. Inspired by Hurston, Walker overcame fears of garnering mean-spirited criticism by associating herself with Hurston, driven instead by her need "to fight for Zora and her work, for what I knew was good and must not be lost to us" (*Mothers' Gardens* 87). Thus Walker went looking for, and found, a kindred soul in Hurston. Her 1973 crusade to locate Hurston's unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida, and subsequent publications "Looking for Zora" and "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" (1975) effectively recentered Hurston in the African American literary canon—within which both Hurston and Walker are now prominent figures and *Their Eyes* a mainstay. Concerning *Their Eyes*, Walker writes, "*there is no book more important to me than this one*" (*Mothers' Gardens* 86).

Rudolph Byrd asserts that Walker's "fateful discovery" of Hurston and her works "not only endow[s] Walker's first published story with authenticity and force, but also join[s] Walker's life and work to the life and work of Hurston who, as Walker tells us, is her mentor, her model and her 'aunt' ('Looking' 102)" (Byrd 44). Young Black women writers frequently find mentors in the previous generation of writers, particularly those they consider revolutionaries: examples include the mentorships between Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks and Lucille Clifton, Gloria Naylor and Morrison, and Naylor and Carolivia Herron. However, few mentors reach the "mothering" influence Zora Neale Hurston exerts posthumously over Alice Walker. Unsurprisingly, that influence appears frequently in Walker's writings and has prompted numerous critical pairings of works by both authors. For instance, exhaustive comparisons have been drawn between Hurston's *Their Eyes* and Walker's best known novel, *The Color Purple* (1982),⁵ in which the physically and emotionally repressed heroine, Celie, abandons her marriage and independently achieves emotional fulfillment and financial success.

What *is* surprising, however, is how few comparisons between *Their Eyes* and Walker's *Meridian* have been published, especially since Walker directly alludes to *Their Eyes* in *Meridian*—an allusion scholars have apparently overlooked or dismissed, since none mentions it. In *Their Eyes*, Janie's second husband, Jody Starks, beats her "until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store" (72), after which she realizes that the handsome, idealistic person she fell in love with has become a jealous tyrant who confirms his manhood by belittling her. This realization leaves Janie dumbfounded, literally at a standstill, "until something fell

off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered” (72). In *Meridian*, Truman Held, experiencing a similar disillusionment, realizes that the young civil rights worker he married has morphed into an embittered, wrathful woman spewing racial slurs, at which point he “felt as if his soul, hanging precariously for a lifetime, had fallen off the shelf” (150). With that line, Walker calls readers to make other comparisons between the two novels.⁶

The few critics who have responded, most notably Byrd, have found plenty worth noting. “When examining the body of work Walker has produced,” Byrd observes, “it is astoundingly clear that the work which bears the unmistakable imprint of both *Cane* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” is *Meridian*, the “neglected but most important of Walker’s novels” (45). Byrd traces the influence of both Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) and *Their Eyes* on *Meridian*. “In terms of structure, characterization and theme,” he argues, *Cane* “has had a greater impact upon *Meridian*.” Nevertheless, he continues, “Hurston’s novel was doubtless the foundation not only for Walker’s exploration of the sexuality of African American women, but also for her exploration of the institutions of marriage and motherhood” (49)—concepts at the heart of *Meridian* and the whole of Walker’s repertoire.

Just as with anything resembling a mother-daughter relationship, however, a component of the Hurston-Walker mentorship is rebellion. Byrd sees Walker taking an opposing stance to Hurston in *Meridian*, writing out of an “insistence upon a balanced and realistic view of human experience” (50), which for Black women historically includes sexual abuse. For Byrd, Walker’s inclusion of stories about Fast Mary, Wile Chile, and Camara—acknowledgments of the “shared history of sexual exploitation and

sexual violence” (52) of Black women—signals a break between Walker and Hurston. Byrd notes that this element is “disturbingly absent from Janie’s romantic dreams of love and marriage and that [it] is strangely relegated to the background of her experience in spite of the examples of both Leafy and Nanny” (52). He also notes that

Walker omits in her metaphoric evocation of the sexuality of African American women [. . .] the concept of marriage; indeed, in Hurston it seems that one is inconceivable without the other. Interestingly, Walker does not replicate this formula, and by refusing to do so she is suggesting that a woman’s exploration of her sexuality need not occur *only* within the framework of marriage [. . .] (52)

Byrd concludes that “this extremely important departure from Hurston’s model [. . .] is certainly a veiled criticism of the limitations” (52-53) of *Their Eyes*. Despite this departure, though, Byrd ultimately finds in *Meridian* a companion to *Their Eyes*. “Plainly,” he observes, “the discourse between Hurston and Walker is largely complementary, not entirely adversarial”:

More than a criticism of Hurston, this omission of marriage in her exploitation of the sexuality of Black women is evidence of Walker’s decision to expand further the discourse inaugurated by Hurston. While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an insightful critique of the institution of marriage, *Meridian* is an insightful critique of the institution of motherhood. [. . .] As these are questions central to the lives of these heroines, so also are these questions central to the writers who created them. For Hurston, the question is the possibility of a woman’s fulfillment in marriage, and for Walker the question is the possibility of a woman’s fulfillment in some role *other* than mother [. . .] (53)

Thus Walker’s *Meridian* has “extended” (Byrd 54) her mentor’s novel instead of making it obsolete. Joseph Brown actually sees *Meridian* as a tribute to Hurston, surmising that Walker likens her courageous protagonist to Hurston. He claims: “The journey to seek the wisdom of the old is a quest common to both. The deliberate odd behavior and quirkiness in dress and utterance, the arresting presence and the Delphic aura noticed in the real Hurston are echoed more than coincidentally in the fictional *Meridian*” (311).

That Walker chooses to model a character who faces down a tank after Hurston is certainly complimentary, as is the further echoing among characters in *Their Eyes* and *Meridian*.

Mrs. Hill's character, in particular, resonates back to Nanny. The two mothers have much in common—so much, in fact, that Mrs. Hill comes across as another Nanny, only aged a few generations and with more anger. A comparison of the two characters demonstrates Walker's ability, as Lillie Howard observes, to expand upon Hurston's themes while, at the same time, making them her own. In *Meridian*, Walker picks up where Hurston leaves off in *Their Eyes*, continuing the fight against the Black superwoman ideal that, if left unchecked, would re-enslave Black women.

Endnotes

¹ Following emancipation, many Black male writers were eager to shed traditional, often derogatory stereotypes that whites had applied to African Americans. In their enthusiasm to disprove classic depictions of Black women (which fell roughly into the categories of mammies or harlots), Black men appropriated a white ideal of womanly perfection. For a discussion of this appropriation in conjunction with Zora Neale Hurston, see Lorraine Bethel, "'This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition."

² In his essay "The Talented Tenth" (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois coined the title phrase in reference to what he perceived as the brightest, most talented percentage of the Black population, especially those who were college educated and had professional careers. Du Bois believed that the Black population should focus on "developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (102), thereby helping reduce racial prejudice. In turn, he charged the Talented Tenth with the responsibility of "ris[ing] and pull[ing] all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground" (103). Hurston, however, identified less with the Black middle-class and more with the poor, uneducated members of rural Black communities, elevating them and their folk culture instead of middle-class Blacks in her literature.

³ Several prominent men, including Alain Locke, Darwin Turner, Sterling Brown, and, in particular, Richard Wright, criticized *Their Eyes* as either downplaying the "race problem" or simplifying Black characters to appeal to white sentiments. Similarly, Nick Aaron Ford, in reference to *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, accused Hurston of depicting Black

men as laughing “clown[s] of the human family” (10). Modern-day Hurston scholars overwhelmingly disagree with Wright’s and Ford’s harsh interpretations of Hurston’s characters. In *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy*, John Lowe proposes that Hurston’s comedic style may have caused Wright and Ford to misread her “primitive” characters. Lowe asserts that “it was Hurston’s genius, in her fiction, her essays, and in her life itself, to demonstrate that folk culture was anything but simple, anything but serene” (33). He adds: “Hurston gives us the ability to read so-called ‘primitive’ humor this way; on its several levels, illuminating its profundity and its connection to the deeper being of the people who created it, as well as to the meaning of our current lives. But she was also at the time offering up a reflection to her people of a magnificent culture that few of them could see whole” (33-34).

⁴ Richard Wright, whose “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) and *Native Son* (1940) ushered in a resurgence of Black protest literature, found outrage on behalf of the race lacking in Hurston’s writing. In turn, Hurston disliked Wright’s style of angry social critique, exclaiming: “I am not tragically colored. [. . .] I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are hurt about it” (“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” 153). Wright’s brand of protest literature became the new trend, whereas Hurston quickly lost footing in Black literary circles and with publishers.

⁵ See Sandra Alps’s “Concepts of Self-Hood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*,” Valerie Babb’s “Women and Words: Articulating the Self in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*,” Eva Boesenberg’s “The Danger of Fulfillment: Perplexities of *Bildung* in *The Color Purple*,” Jane Davis’s “*The Color Purple*: A Spiritual Descendant of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Emma J. Waters Dawson’s “Redemption Through Redemption of the Self in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*,” Alice Fannin’s “A Sense of Wonder: The Pattern for Psychic Survival in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*,” Elizabeth T. Hayes’s “‘Like Seeing You Buried’: Persephone in *The Bluest Eye*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Color Purple*,” Molly Hite’s “Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Tadao Kunishiro’s “‘So Much of Life in Its Meshes!’: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” James Robert Saunders’s “Womanism as the Key to Understanding Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” Geraldine Smith-Wright’s “Revision as Collaboration: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Source for Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” and Mary Ann Wilson’s “‘That Which the Soul Lives By’: Spirituality in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker.”

⁶ Though exceeding the scope of this thesis, the allusion oddly pairs Janie Starks with Truman Held. First, Walker reverses the circumstances of the situation: whereas Janie’s image of her husband is shattered, Truman feels the same sensation, but toward his wife. Secondly, *Their Eyes* focuses on Janie’s developing autonomy, an integral part of which

is her disenchantment with Jody Starks. *Meridian*, meanwhile, maps the similar journey of the title character, while relegating Truman to a supporting role. Alternately, Walker's intention in comparing Truman with Janie may be to show his spiritual maturing, though arguably Lynne experiences greater spiritual growth than Truman. Further analysis of the intriguing coupling of Janie and Truman would undoubtedly prove enlightening to both novels.

CHAPTER 2

“FAILED” MOTHERS: COMPARING NANNY AND MRS. HILL

Nanny and Mrs. Hill may initially strike readers as dissimilar characters. In fact, at a glance they may seem starkly opposite. On one hand, Nanny comes across as the loving, overprotective mammy type while, on the other, Mrs. Hill more closely resembles the tough, emotionally distant matriarch. Ruth Feldstein deems both prototypes of “bad” Black mothers.¹ Whether or not Nanny and Mrs. Hill actually fail as mothers is a matter of perception, especially given the social conditions under which each operates. More to the point, however, is that they are substandard mothers when measured against the strict dictates of the Black superwoman stereotype. Though Nanny and Mrs. Hill seemingly foil one another, I believe Hurston and Walker use each toward similar ends—Nanny and Mrs. Hill work to dismantle the mythic Black superwoman by embodying realistic, obviously flawed (and sometimes just plain mean) Black mothers. This chapter argues that the juxtaposition of Nanny with Mrs. Hill demonstrates unmistakable commonalities between the two characters, suggesting that Walker had Nanny in mind when she constructed Mrs. Hill. Close analysis reveals that Nanny and Mrs. Hill each withhold critical sexual information from their (grand)daughters, openly lie to manipulate Janie and Meridian into socially-accepted lifestyles, project their own frustrations of life onto the girls, and finally attempt to pressure the resistant girls into submission using guilt. Both of the elder women are motivated by their desire for social respectability and their resentment about their own wasted lives, far different from the love and benevolent nurturing that perpetually drive the mythic Black superwoman.

Nanny’s first questionable decision in mothering Janie is her refusal to discuss sex and love—concepts which Janie innocently equates—with Janie, leaving the

sixteen-year-old girl starved for information, with only her newly-developed sexual urges and a blooming pear tree to satiate her curiosity. Watching the tree evolve “from barren stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy white blooms [. . .] stirred her tremendously” (10).² Janie experiences her first orgasm as she watches bees fertilizing the opening flowers, producing what Carla Kaplan deems “one of the sexiest passages in American literature” (115):

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (11)

The tree oozes sensuality which, though completely unknown to Janie until now, seems vaguely familiar to her, “like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again” (10). From this feeling, Janie’s sexual curiosity consumes her, “follow[ing] her through all her waking moments and caress[ing] her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observations and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness” (10-11). Janie, herself bearing “glossy leaves and bursting buds” (11), finds “a personal answer for all other creations except herself.” She wonders where her “singing bees” are, discovering that “nothing on the place nor in her grandma’s house answered her” (11). Nanny turns a deaf ear to Janie’s questions about sexuality, forcing Janie to seek answers from Johnny Taylor, a young cutabout she kisses over the fencepost one day. Only after the kiss does Nanny address love and, in so doing, lies to force Janie into what Nanny deems a socially-acceptable lifestyle, preying upon the young girl’s unrealistic, naive notions about sex, love, and marriage.

For Nanny, the only suitable option for a sexually curious girl is marriage, ideally before she graduates to sex. Thus Nanny immediately arranges for Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks after witnessing the kiss. Though Janie has no desire to commit, she likes the idea of marriage. The language Hurston employs in describing Janie's emotional reaction to the pear tree—"love embrace," "ecstatic," "delight," "a revelation," "remorseless sweet"—reveals Janie's romantic preconceptions about marriage. Nanny capitalizes on Janie's girlish innocence to convince her granddaughter that marriage to Killicks will be everything she dreams and more. Hurston implies Nanny not only manipulates Janie, but she also lies outright:

Finally *out of Nanny's talk* (italics mine) and her own conjectures she [Janie] made a sort of comfort for herself. Yes, she would love Logan after they were married. She could see no other way for it to come about, but Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so. Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so. (21)

After the wedding, Killicks drives Janie to his isolated home, where Janie "wait[s] for love to begin" (22). When that love fails to develop after a few months, Janie, now suspicious, confronts Nanny, saying, "Ah come to get a lil information from you" (22). She pleads, "you told me Ah mus gointer love him, and, and Ah don't. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it" (23). Janie mournfully confesses to finding Killicks physically repulsive, to which Nanny hollowly replies, "wait awhile, baby. Yo' mind will change" (24). Nanny knowingly manipulates Janie into a loveless marriage, though she believes she does so in Janie's best interests, since Nanny has no patience for foolish ideas of love. She sees Janie as a child blinded by romantic notions, and she does not want Janie to waste her life in pursuit of something that Nanny believes does not exist. "Lawd have mussy!" she exclaims to Janie. "Dat's de very prong all us

black women gits hung on. Dis love!’” As her grandmother, Nanny feels she must do the practical, responsible thing for Janie whether her granddaughter thanks her or not, telling Janie that love is “‘whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night. Dat’s how come de ole folks say dat bein’ uh fool don’t kill nobody. It jus’ makes you sweat” (23). Janie insists on love in her marriage, however, saying, “‘Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think’” (24). Nanny hides the truth—that Janie’s mind will never change—to sedate her into accepting the marriage, which she feels offers the best life now available to her sexually-awakened granddaughter: marriage to a rich man offering stable financial support. Janie eventually recognizes Nanny’s deceit, however, when she returns to Killicks’s farm, where love remains elusive and, worse, Killicks intends to make her a farmhand, complete with straps and a mule. Janie finally realizes that “the familiar people and things had failed her [. . .] She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (25). Janie had counted on love and guidance from her grandmother, but she gets deception, and never forgives Nanny’s betrayal.

In creating Nanny, Hurston provides an example of a woman who cannot achieve the impossible Black superwoman ideal. Though Nanny loves Janie, she has personal flaws: she dismisses Janie’s desires as frivolous, becomes blinded by material concerns, and connives against the very person she, as a Black mother, is supposed to serve. The superwoman ideal dictates that Black mothers operate solely out of love; yet Nanny, true to real life, allows her sometimes questionable motives to mar her genuine affection for Janie. In other words, Nanny is human, with weaknesses and desires, and, thus, a failure

in regard to superwomanhood. Nanny seems to recognize her failure and apparently cannot forgive herself. While believing she does her granddaughter a favor by securing her a respected (and relatively powerful) societal position, Nanny instinctively feels that she wrongs Janie, as demonstrated by her praying throughout the night for forgiveness and by her deteriorating health and death, presumably brought about by her own guilt, soon after Janie returns home to Killicks.

That Nanny fails to meet the high standards of superwomanhood, however, does not absolve her from accountability for her actions. The overwhelming guilt she feels is well-deserved. Nanny expresses disappointment in Janie because she does not meet Nanny's own high expectations, though clearly she herself, in anticipating disaster, brings about Janie's downfall. For Nanny, emancipation had come too late: she had a newborn, produced by a forced sexual relationship with her white master, and lacked the luxury of choosing what she wanted to do instead of what she had to do for survival. Nanny tells Janie "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16). She recounts:

"Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you." (16)

Her own daughter, Leafy, falls short of Nanny's high aspirations (or perhaps lies flattened beneath them). Nanny, therefore, redirects all of her personal goals and aspirations onto Janie, hoping that at least her granddaughter will become her spokeswoman. "It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did," she maintains. "Ah even hated de way you was born. But all de same Ah said thank God,

Ah got another chance” (16). Kaplan interprets these comments as Nanny’s intent to make Janie “a feminist activist like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, or Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a woman who can ‘preach’ in public about the rights and dreams of black women” (125). Yet Nanny never reveals these plans to Janie or warns her against boys, so Janie kisses Johnny completely unaware that this one action will determine how Nanny envisions Janie’s life path.

Imagining her dream slipping away in the kiss, Nanny calls in unsuspecting Janie with a “voice so lacking in command and reproof, so full of crumbling dissolution” (12). She bitterly slaps Janie, “forc[ing] her head back so that their eyes met in struggle” (14), as much to punish her for her failure as to beat her back into submission. In that moment, Nanny relinquishes hope that Janie can become anything more than another mule of the world, though she at least wants Janie to be respectable, not scandalous like her mother. She opts to marry off Janie immediately, thereby “protect[ing] her from the tyranny of the unpossessed phallus” (Kitch 69). She tells Janie mournfully, ““Somebody done spoke to me ’bout you long time ago. Ah ain’t said nothin’ ‘cause dat wasn’t de way Ah placed you. Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain’t yo idea, Ah see’” (13). With that, Nanny does pass a text down to Janie, though not that of the preacher/activist. Instead, she saddles Janie with the burden of domesticity and the dreaded Black superwoman text, to which Nanny, her daughter, and eventually her granddaughter all fail to live up.

Leafy, the tragic mulatta harlot who abandons her infant, is the antithesis of the Black superwoman. She is also, perhaps, testament to Nanny’s greatest failure in regard to the superwoman stereotype: turning one’s back on one’s child. Nanny’s tearful

discussion with Janie after the kiss reveals that Nanny gives up on Janie—just as she does on Leafy—at the first hint of sexuality. Textual evidence suggests that Nanny also avoided discussing sex with Leafy, forcing her to experiment sexually as well. The only provided sexual encounter Leafy has with a man is her rape by the schoolteacher. Without implying that the encounter is anything but a brutal rape or that Leafy somehow provokes the attack, attention should be given to Nanny’s version of the attack. Nanny tells Janie that Leafy disappears one night, sobbing “‘de next mornin’ she come crawlin’ in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run off just before day” (19). As an adult, Janie (apparently more informed) tells her friend Phoeby Watson that the schoolchildren who teased her “‘bout Mr. Washburn and de sheriff puttin’ de bloodhounds on de trail tuh ketch mah papa for what he done tuh mah mama” had left out that “‘he wuz seen tryin’ tuh git in touch wid mah mama later on so he could marry her. Naw, dey didn’t talk dat part of it atall” (10). Nanny also omits this information, making one wonder if she hides a past romantic relationship between Leafy and her schoolteacher from Janie. Perhaps seventeen-year-old Leafy carries on a consensual, though not necessarily consummated, relationship/flirtation with the teacher that turns violent, climaxing in rape and Leafy’s subsequent pregnancy. Nanny also counters Janie’s initial resistance to marriage by saying, “‘so you don’t want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh? You wants to make me suck de same sorrow yo’ mama did, eh?” (13-14). Her statement is somewhat ambiguous: she could refer to Leafy either prior to or after the teacher’s attack, for whether or not Leafy sexually experiments before the rape, she

certainly does so after Janie's birth. Nanny had wanted Leafy to achieve something more than bearing children to no-good men, as she herself has; in actuality, Leafy does just that and worse, abandoning her newborn and self-destructively spiraling into promiscuous sex and alcoholism. Nanny recounts that Leafy "'took to drinkin' likker and stayin' out nights. Couldn't git her to stay here and nowhere else'" (19). Readers find Leafy's behavior understandable, attributing it to both her traumatic rape and the fact that she is still a sexually curious teenager. Nanny considers Leafy's behavior unforgivable, however, and withdraws from her, quite atypically of the unconditionally caring Black superwoman. Utterly disappointed in Leafy, she redirects her efforts toward Janie, telling her, "'Ah loves yuh a whole heap more'n Ah do yo' mama'" (15) before Janie also fails to meet Nanny's expectations.

Janie defies both her grandmother and social convention when she climbs out of the trap set by her grandmother, but she must overcome the guilt she feels toward the older woman to do so. Before her death, Nanny uses guilt to convince Janie to marry Killicks, telling her, "'Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed'" (16), which has been reduced to seeing Janie safely married off to Killicks. After her death, Nanny continues exerting control over Janie from beyond the grave. When dashing Joe Starks strolls past the Killickses's farm the following springtime, Janie longs to escape her loveless marriage, yet, as the narrator observes, "still she hung back. The memory of Nanny was still powerful and strong" (29). Not until Killicks implies that he has done Janie a favor by marrying her does she finally break free from the idea that she owes either him or Nanny anything. She elopes with Jody, resolving that "from now on until death she was

going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom” (32). Jody is a bully, but his death heralds the arrival of Tea Cake, an endearing scamp who teaches Janie to play checkers and takes her fishing at midnight. The town grumbles about Janie’s flirtation with Tea Cake, citing his unsuitability for a woman of her status. Janie promptly dismisses such remarks, however, boldly announcing to Phoeby her intent to marry Tea Cake. ““Ah done lived Granma’s way,” she says, ““now Ah means tuh live mine”” (114).

Janie’s comment is a clear condemnation of the domesticity that Black society has traditionally prescribed as a woman’s place. In her life with Tea Cake, Janie achieves what Nanny never dreamed possible for her: a loving and fairly equal partnership, a place on the porch with the men, and emotional and spiritual fulfillment outside of the home. She becomes a new kind of Black woman to which latter generations of female readers could aspire, even while some male critics clucked disapprovingly. Likewise, Walker, in Meridian’s character, provides her female readers with another alternative to traditional Black womanhood, uglified by Mrs. Hill.

Mrs. Hill mirrors Nanny in her behavior toward her daughter—withholding sexual information, misleading Meridian about marriage and motherhood, taking out her resentments about her life upon Meridian, and finally using guilt in an attempt to confine her own daughter to an equally dreary existence. Yet Mrs. Hill’s motivations do distinguish her from Nanny, whose “bad” mothering seemingly derives from love, or what Janie calls “mislove” (90). Mrs. Hill, on the other hand, chooses to be a bad mother because she despises the confines of domesticity. In Mrs. Hill, Walker offers a much different version of Black motherhood than Hurston presents in Nanny, making Mrs.

Hill's character an example in which Walker pays tribute to her mentor while simultaneously breaking free from her, as Rudolph Byrd observes in his comparison of *Their Eyes* and *Meridian*.

Like Nanny, Mrs. Hill also avoids discussing sex with Meridian, who begins sexual experimenting at age twelve and suffers much graver consequences from her mother's nondisclosure than Janie does. Upon reflection, an older Meridian realizes that she had known "nothing about what to expect from men, from sex. Her mother never even used the word, and her lack of information on the subject of sex was accompanied by a seeming lack of concern about her daughter's morals" (60).³ Mrs. Hill takes an approach seemingly similar to Nanny's: "having told [Meridian] absolutely nothing, she had expected her to do nothing" (60). But she knows this is unlikely for an adolescent girl, especially since Meridian's friends are already being impregnated. Meridian remembers that her mother "only cautioned her to 'be sweet,'" not realizing that "this was a euphemism for 'Keep your panties up and your dress down,' an expression she had heard and been puzzled by" (60).⁴

Hurston envisions Janie's sexual awakening at sixteen as natural and beautiful, growing to maturity and "blooming" as naturally as the pear tree, whereas Walker portrays her preteen heroine's sexual awakening as horrific and premature. Meridian regards her body only as a bargaining chip, eagerly accepting candy from the town undertaker in exchange for "a swift, exploratory feel. When she became older—fifteen or so—he would take out his wallet crammed with money, and leave it on the sofa between them while he felt her breasts and tried to pull her onto his lap" (66). Apparently Meridian loses her virginity to the undertaker's assistant, who has her watch

him having sex with his wife's baby-sitter. Meridian sees the assistant roughly handling the girl, tossing her into different sexual positions: "At the end, he watched her as if from a distance, his voice a monotone, his face, greedy obscene and ugly. When the girl tried to bury her face in his chest and force his arms around her, he pushed her away" (67). This gruesome seduction, though horrific to readers, succeeds: Meridian, unable to pinpoint anything actually wrong and knowing no alternative to this type of exploitation, agrees to have sex with the assistant. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston shows the irony that Nanny does nothing to educate her granddaughter about sexuality and then reacts hysterically to a single kiss. Walker, in contrast, outright condemns Mrs. Hill for failing to educate Meridian about sex, thereby dooming her daughter to consequences far worse than a kiss: subjection to degradation and abuse from countless men. While Nanny avoids discussing sex out of hope that Janie can achieve something great if only she remains chaste, Mrs. Hill's omission, knowing what awaits her daughter, lends an element of cruelty to her person inconceivable in Black superwomanhood.

In another act reminiscent of Nanny in *Their Eyes*, Mrs. Hill also fails to tell her gullible teenaged daughter that marriage and motherhood, in particular, can sometimes inspire more resentment than love, a lesson Mrs. Hill learns too late and upon which her fate turns. Unlike Nanny, however, Mrs. Hill conceals this from her daughter not because she sees no better alternative to marriage, but because she appears determined that Meridian's life not surpass her own torturous routine. Meridian belongs to a generation in which women increasingly opt against marriage and child-rearing for careers (as Mrs. Hill originally does during her brief stint as schoolteacher), but only if they are aware that such possibilities exist. Mrs. Hill sets a deliberate trap for her

daughter when she does not tell Meridian about such opportunities or warn her against promiscuous sex, thereby dooming Meridian to an unwanted pregnancy and subsequent loveless marriage. Walker writes, “with her own daughter she [Mrs. Hill] certainly said things she herself did not believe. She [. . .] seemed, to Meridian, never to understand. But all along she understood perfectly” (51). Mrs. Hill, determined that Meridian not escape, further baits the trap by telling Meridian that Eddie is a fine man and stressing that abortion is sinful. Meridian finds herself married before she fully realizes what has happened. Like Janie, Meridian thinks love automatically follows marriage and slowly realizes her mistake:

She wondered sometimes why she still did not love Eddie. It perplexed her. He was still good-looking, still sought after by women (several, by now, had caught him, at least for a time), and he treated her with gentleness and respect. But the longer they lived together the more she became obsessed with the horrible thought that Eddie, like his name, would never be grown up. She thought he would always be a boy. Not that she knew what a man should be; she did not know. (70)

Meridian falls for the ruse, just as her mother intends, and finds herself saddled with a child husband and a baby she fantasizes about killing. Meridian’s thoughts of infanticide originate from motives less nurturing than Sethe’s in *Beloved*. In contrast, Meridian likens the squalling infant to a “ball and chain” (69). Despite the older neighborhood women’s assurances, motherlove and nurturing come no more instinctively to Meridian than to her mother. Neither does Mrs. Hill or Meridian demonstrate the Black superwoman’s propensity for misery, the former reduced to a monotony of sewing prayer pillows, crafting paper flowers, and canning fruit, while the latter daydreams about different methods of suicide.

While Nanny blames her thwarted dreams on slavery and hopes to live vicariously through Leafy and then Janie, Mrs. Hill blames her bitterly disappointing life on her

children and the older Black women who fail to forewarn her against motherhood. As a young woman, Mrs. Hill had a life of “scurrying” away from Black and white men, during which “only one thing kept her going: her determination to be a schoolteacher” (123). Upon reaching her goal, living independently and earning a hefty \$160 annually, Mrs. Hill’s belief that married mothers enter a “state of euphoria” (50) prompted her to marry and have children, sacrificing her career and sense of self. Mrs. Hill found marriage distasteful and was completely ill-prepared for motherhood. For this, “she could never forgive her community, her family, his family, the whole world, for not warning her against children” (50). After her six children are older “and not so burdensome—and they were burdens to her always” (51), Mrs. Hill wants to resume teaching but fails the exams and develops a disliking for schoolchildren. She spends her days ironing children’s clothing while she herself dresses like the schoolteachers she idolizes. Mrs. Hill cannot bring herself to truly nurture her children; instead, she openly demonstrates hostility toward them. She particularly retaliates against her daughters, who do not even know they should scurry away from men. Mrs. Hill watches with satisfaction as Meridian blindly plunges into the trap of domesticity, believing that now Meridian, too, will have to help Black womanhood carry the crushing weight of the Black superwoman ideal. Meridian, however, has other ideas.

Like Janie, Meridian also escapes her loveless marriage and the burden of child-rearing. She decides not to waste her life, as she feels her mother has, and devotes herself to a cause she finds meaningful: the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Hill, fearing Meridian’s eventual escape from the domesticity trap, tries to make Meridian feel guilty for committing herself to something other than the baby. She lashes out at the

Movement, undermining its importance with comments like “‘as far as I’m concerned [. . .] you’ve wasted a year of your life, fooling around with those people. [. . .] It never bothered *me* to sit in the back of the bus, you get just as good a view and you don’t have all those nasty white asses passing you” (85). Later Meridian jumps at Mr. Yateson’s offer to attend Saxon College on scholarship, puts the baby up for adoption, and leaves her husband, telling her mother, “‘This is the only chance I have, mama.” Mrs. Hill reacts with predictable rage, attempting to shame Meridian into conformity. First she berates Meridian for her premarital pregnancy, huffing self-righteously, “‘I always thought you were a good girl. And all this time, you were fast” (87). The tactic backfires, prompting Meridian’s exclamation, “‘I was something [. . .] But I didn’t even know what fast was. You always talked in riddles. “Be sweet.” “Don’t be fast.” You never made a bit of sense” (87-88). Mrs. Hill then calls Meridian a monster and invokes religion, telling Meridian and her friends, “‘this is a clean, upright, Christian home. We believe in God in this house” (89). Unable to dissuade Meridian, Mrs. Hill—jealous and teary-eyed—tells Meridian, “‘everyone else that slips up like you did *bears* it. You’re the only one that thinks you can just outright refuse . . .” (88). She cannot forgive Meridian for choosing her own life, whereas she, hopelessly ensnared, has no choices.

Meridian endures years of guilt afterwards, “her thoughts turn[ing] with regularity and intensity to her mother, on whose account she endured wave after wave of an almost primeval guilt” (96):

It seemed to Meridian that her legacy from her mother’s endurance, her unerring knowledge of rightness and her pursuit of it through all distractions, was one she would never be able to match. It never occurred to her that her mother’s and her grandmother’s extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice. (124)

She also believes she has failed traditional “Black Motherhood” (91):

Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from “Freedom” was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with *her* precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (91)

Walker’s entire point in this passage is that Meridian is not alone in her feelings, nor in her decision to abort a pregnancy during college. Martha McGowan writes that Meridian’s “abortion and impulsive, self-punishing sterilization” in response to Truman Held’s abandonment “exacerbates in turn the guilt she feels toward black womanhood” (32). After the surgery, Meridian definitely lacks the “infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves” (Wallace 107) thought inherent to Black women, leaving her struggling for identity and emotionally ravaged. Meridian’s guilt almost kills her; she suffers physical illnesses and experiences traumatic nightmares, during which she begs for her mother’s forgiveness. Though she finally receives forgiveness, it comes from Miss Winter, one of her college teachers, because, as McGowan concludes, “actual forgiveness from Mrs. Hill can never come, nor can love for her daughter” (31). Years later Truman finds pinned to Meridian’s wall Mrs. Hill’s hateful letter, “the gist of which was that Meridian had failed to honor not just her parents, but anyone” (23). By this time, however, Meridian has overcome her guilt and moved beyond the grasp of the Black superwoman ideal. “*I am strong,*” Meridian tells Truman, “*I’m just not Superwoman*” (32).

In opposition to the Black superwoman myth, Nanny and Mrs. Hill directly and purposely contradict the stereotypical qualities of “the quintessential mother” Michele Wallace describes (107). Instead, Hurston and Walker reveal Black mothers who manipulate their daughters and set them up for failure—either misguidedly (Nanny) or deliberately (Mrs. Hill)—and who are often driven more by their disillusionment with life than by love or benevolence. Moreover, Nanny and Mrs. Hill are far from the emotional rocks devoid of “the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women” dictated by the stereotype. Instead, readers see Nanny struggling with the lies she feeds Janie and the subsequent guilt that consumes her, while Mrs. Hill is emotionally barren. Barbara Christian writes about the danger of the myth of Black Motherhood, noting that only stories of strong, successful mothers are passed on:

that tradition that is based on the monumental myth of black motherhood, a myth based on the true stories of sacrifice black mothers performed for their children [. . .] is [. . .] restrictive, for it imposes a stereotype of Black women, a stereotype of strength that denies them choice and hardly admits of the many who were destroyed. (*Black Feminist Criticism* 89)

Nanny and Mrs. Hill are two of those destroyed women. Nanny, once an ambitious woman who dreams of preaching equality for Black women, becomes a shell of her former self:

Nanny belonged to that other kind [of person] that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. (90)

The romanticized stereotype first seduces Mrs. Hill and then leaves her spiritually crushed:

Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood and she learned—much to her horror and amazement—that she was not even allowed to

be resentful that she was “caught.” That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say “It’s not fair!” And in understanding this, she understood a look she saw in the other women’s eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children. (50-51)

Mrs. Hill and her predecessor, Nanny, provide brave yet controversial departures from an image many African American writers have held up for praise in order to destroy the crippling stereotype. In trying to meet the impossible Black superwoman ideal, the two women inevitably fall short, leaving Nanny tormented by self-blame and reducing Mrs. Hill to a pile of wasted potential and regret. Hurston’s and Walker’s mother characters show that very few, if any, Black women succeed in their efforts to be Black superwomen. Indeed, Janie and Meridian, refusing to try, unapologetically walk away from traditional ideas of what Black women should be.

Endnotes

¹ In *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (2000), Feldstein provides the mammy and the matriarch as the two labels most often used to describe “bad” Black mothers. She notes, too, that white mothers were also vulnerable to attack. “Bad” white mothers were labeled “moms.” Feldstein asserts that “momism,” a phrase coined by journalist Philip Wylie in *Generation of Vipers* (1942), was blamed for “a perceived weakness in the ‘American man.’” She explains that “according to *Generation*, ‘moms’ were (implicitly) white women whose apparent maternal love masked their narcissism and desire for power” (41). Wylie believed “moms” were parasites who enslaved their sons’ spirits and used their positions to control the economy.

² Unless otherwise specified, quotations from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are direct.

³ Unless otherwise specified, quotations from *Meridian* are direct.

⁴ See Nagueyalti Warren, “Resistant Mothers in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* and Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways*,” for further discussion of Meridian’s lack of sexual knowledge.

CHAPTER 3
ASSIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR WRONG-DOING
IN *THEIR EYES* AND *MERIDIAN*

As in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the theme of holding Black women accountable for their actions instead of displacing that accountability onto the surrounding social circumstances runs strongly throughout both *Their Eyes* and *Meridian*. This is a key element to Zora Neale Hurston's and Alice Walker's attacks on the Black superwoman stereotype. If readers were to attribute Nanny Crawford's and Mrs. Hill's "failures" as mothers solely to white and/or male oppression, then they would fail to recognize the women's flaws as individuals. The danger, in other words, is that readers might surmise that Nanny and Mrs. Hill *are* Black superwomen whose only hindrances are those imposed by racist and paternalistic societies—women who uphold the ideal instead of being destroyed by it. Such a misreading would counteract the authors' careful work to show that possibly no Black woman can ever truly meet the superwoman ideal, which is what makes it so psychologically scarring. This chapter addresses the different ways that Hurston and Walker assign accountability to their "failed" mother characters. It further explores the authors' personal views of motherhood and how they inform Nanny's and Mrs. Hill's characters.

Hurston and Walker employ different methods of holding Nanny and Mrs. Hill accountable. Hurston uses Janie as her agent, and Walker utilizes readers. Hurston portrays Nanny as a woman in sympathetic conditions—a former slave physically and sexually abused by her white owners, forced into servitude in a white home, and witness to first her daughter's spiral into self-destruction after a brutal rape and then her granddaughter's regrettable marriage. It seems for a moment that Hurston is releasing

Nanny from blame for manipulating Janie—or at least priming her readers to do so—but instead she does the opposite. Hurston refuses to excuse Nanny’s lies and manipulations just because she leads a dismal life, and, instead, reminds readers, even impresses upon them that Nanny does her granddaughter a tremendous disservice, albeit out of love. Readers want to forgive Nanny because she is a Black woman victimized by an unjust system; yet regarding Black women as mere puppets denies the fact that Nanny makes conscious choices to victimize her granddaughter in turn. Janie, herself a Black woman with her own burdens to carry, sympathizes with Nanny but still holds her grandmother accountable for her betrayal. Twenty years after Nanny’s death, Janie, newly widowed by her second husband, considers returning home to visit Nanny’s grave but quickly decides against it, realizing that “she hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity” (89). Janie finally understands that the sympathy she feels for her dead grandmother masks a stronger emotion—deep, unadmitted anger:

She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn’t love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn’t overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside her and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. (90)

Janie finds Nanny’s betrayal unconscionable, no matter her motivation, and nurses her anger for decades (and presumably the remainder of her life). If Hurston were to excuse Nanny’s treachery, the character would come dangerously close to the stereotypical “quintessential mother” perpetually driven by love and a nurturing desire, veering from that path only when circumstances conspire. Instead Hurston depicts a woman who is loving and pitiable but also shrewd, ambitious, calculating, and fully aware of her

actions' consequences for Janie. If Nanny had prevailed in her wishes, she would have condemned Janie to a lonely life of physical and sexual servitude ultimately to fulfill her own desire for respectability.

In addition to attacking traditional stereotypes of Black women, Hurston's ultimately negative depiction of Nanny may be rooted in her feelings for her own maternal grandmother, Sarah Potts. Similarly to Nanny, Mrs. Potts was born a slave and estranged from her daughter, Lucy, having been disappointed by Lucy's marriage to John Hurston, who, at the time, Lucy "outranked" socially. Following Lucy's premature death when Zora was fourteen (Howard 4), Mrs. Potts temporarily reared Zora, much like Nanny parents Janie in Leafy's absence. Nanny apparently treats Janie tenderly, however, whereas Hurston recalls physical abuse from her grandmother:

God knows, grandmother would break me or kill me, if she had her way. Killing me looked like the best one, anyway. All I was good for was to lay up and wet the bed half of the time and tell lies, besides being the spitting image of dat good-for-nothing yaller bastard [John Hurston]. I was the punishment God put on Mama for marrying Papa. I ought to be thrown in the hogslaps [to be eaten], that's what. She could beat me as long as I last. (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 72)

Perhaps the most damning likeness between Mrs. Potts and Nanny is their shared lack of vision. In her autobiographical *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Hurston recalls telling fantasies to her indulgent mother while her grandmother "glared at me like open-faced hell," ordering Lucy to

"Grab her! Wring her coat tails over her head and wear out a handful of peach hickories on her back-side! Stomp her guts out! Ruin her! [. . .] Why dat lil' heifer is lying just as fast as a horse can trot. Stomp her! Wear her back-side out. I bet if I lay my hands on her she'll stop it. I vominate a lying tongue." (71-72)

Unlike “people who could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships” (90), Mrs. Potts and Nanny are the scrap-dealing kind. Janie hates her grandmother for her narrow vision, just as Hurston bitterly hated hers for the same reason.

Those skeptical of the link between Nanny and Sarah Potts should note that Hurston apparently bases numerous elements of the novel upon personal experience. Most famous is Hurston’s affair with Columbia graduate student Percival McGuire Punter (Boyd 271), the inspiration for Tea Cake and about whom she wrote, “The plot [of the novel] was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (*Dust Tracks* 260). Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway writes, “This affair is instructive because it illustrates how Hurston used personal experience for her fiction” (71). In fact, Hurston’s *Their Eyes* and Walker’s *Meridian* are both strikingly autobiographical in content. There are the obvious similarities to Hurston’s real life: she grounds the novel in a town named for and modeled after her own childhood home, over which John Hurston served three terms as mayor, reminiscent of Jody Starks. But there are also subtler similarities. Hurston describes her hometown as abundant in flowering fruit trees (*Dust Tracks* 18-19), like the pear tree inspiring Janie’s fantasies. In addition, John, like Tea Cake, was extremely insecure about his wife’s male admirers and occasionally violently abused her during jealous fits, to which Lucy quietly submitted (*Dust Tracks* 17), much the way Janie accepts Tea Cake’s beating. Hurston interprets such displays on her father’s part and submission on her mother’s part as evidence that “Papa and Mama [. . .] were really in love” (*Dust Tracks* 18)—the same way she explains Tea Cake’s and Janie’s behavior. Further proof of that affection, Hurston felt, were Lucy’s own fits of jealousy. Hurston

recalls that her mother once “rode herd on one woman with a horsewhip about Papa, and ‘spoke out’ another one” (*Dust Tracks* 17), reminiscent of Janie’s attack of the flirtatious Nunkie. Undoubtedly Hurston’s real family informs her characters in *Their Eyes*, just as her childhood relationship with her grandmother provides a basis for Nanny’s characterization as a “bad” mother.

Intriguingly, Walker takes an opposite approach from Hurston when portraying her own major maternal character, Mrs. Hill, whose hard-hearted dismissal of her children overwhelms any sympathy readers may feel for her by the novel’s end. What results is another interesting juxtaposition between *Meridian* and the novel that has such influence upon it. While Hurston enlists Janie to condemn her grandmother, Walker reverses the roles, leaving readers the satisfaction of crucifying self-righteous Mrs. Hill while *Meridian* appropriately assumes the role of her defender.

While as a reader I am tempted to overlook Nanny’s lying and manipulation, I flat-out refuse to forgive similar behavior by Mrs. Hill, though *Meridian* does so easily. If Walker intends readers to sympathize with Mrs. Hill, she succeeds only partially. Although Mrs. Hill’s life is pitiable, she comes across predominantly as a mean woman, alternately vindictive and apathetic, who deserves her misery. It seems more likely that Walker does not intend for readers to sympathize wholly with Mrs. Hill; instead, she wants us to see *Meridian*’s own emotional and spiritual growth in her ability to forgive what seems unforgivable.

Meridian understands why Mrs. Hill does not warn her against marriage and motherhood—“though she was unable to understand how this [her mother’s life] could possibly be her fault” (51). *Meridian*, predictably, does what she does best—forgiving

those who wrong her—“understanding her mother as a willing know-nothing, a woman of ignorance and—in her ignorance—of cruelty, [but] she loved her more than anything”

(30). Any bitterness Meridian harbors toward her mother gives way to reverence:

To Meridian, her mother *was* a giant. She had never perceived her in any other way. Or, if she did have occasional thoughts that challenged this conception she swept them out of her mind as petty and ridiculous. [. . .] That her mother was deliberately obtuse about what had happened [Meridian’s pregnancy, marriage, disappointing stint as mother, etc.] meant nothing beside her own feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Besides, she had already forgiven her mother for anything she had ever done to her or might do, because to her, Mrs. Hill had persisted in bringing them all (the children, the husband, the family, the race) to a point far beyond where she, in her mother’s place, her grandmother’s place, her great-grandmother’s place, would have stopped. (122)

Compounding Meridian’s awe is her own hellish experience with motherhood, an ordeal that further impresses upon Meridian the strength her mother had to raise six children. It also allows Meridian to whole-heartedly sympathize with Mrs. Hill as a woman.

Even when Meridian, who suffers the most under her mother, forgives her, readers are likely to be dissatisfied, demanding Mrs. Hill be made accountable, or at least made to see the error of her ways. We identify with Meridian’s best friend, Nelda Henderson, who, already trapped and pregnant again, is less tolerant:

For a moment, as she looked at Meridian’s mother, there was hatred in her sad eyes. Hatred and comprehension of betrayal. She had lived across the street from the Hills all her life. She and Meridian played together in the Hills’ back yard, they went to school together. Nelda knew that the information she had needed to get through her adolescence was information Mrs. Hill could have given her. (88)

Walker uses Nelda to assuage the readers’ need to place blame, and to show that Mrs. Hill’s nondisclosure is intentional, not merely oversight. To make this perfectly clear, the novel’s narrator, voicing the readers’ thoughts, claims, “There had been about Nelda,” and presumably Meridian, by association, “a naïve and admirable sweetness, but there

was also apparent, if one knew to recognize such things (and Mrs. Hill might certainly have done so), a premonition of her fall” (88). In *Mrs. Hill*, readers bear witness not to the male antagonists Walker usually provides, but instead to a Black mother antagonist.

Walker’s reasons for using the readers to assign blame to Mrs. Hill instead of doing so herself also seem to relate back to her own personal feeling about her mother, on whom she partially bases Mrs. Hill’s character. Surpassing Hurston, whose novel hints of autobiographical elements, Walker bases large and little-disguised chunks of *Meridian* on personal experiences. She also apparently models several of the characters on family members, particularly her mother and older sister (an effective way, I might point out, to avoid the unrealistic portrayals of Black women against which Walker so adamantly crusades). In an essay entitled “Brothers and Sisters” (1975), included in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker recalls an upbringing, like *Meridian*’s, completely devoid of sexual information for girls. She states that while her father “went around talking [to the boys] about bulls getting something on their sticks,” her mother “went around saying girls did not need to know about such things. They were ‘womanish’ (a very bad way to be in those days) if they asked” (327). Walker’s mother pretended instead that “all her children grew out of stumps she magically found in the forest” (327). Walker writes that she “never found anything wrong with this lie” (327) as a child, only as an adult. In effect, Minnie Lou Walker’s idea of “teaching” her daughters about sex was to teach them nothing and turn her head, forcing her daughters to seek information elsewhere. While Walker feigned disinterest in sex, one of her two older sisters (name unspecified) learned about sex by observing amorous farm animals and “respond[ing] eagerly to boys” (328) with a naïveté that rivals *Meridian*’s. Her sister “would moon over some mediocre,

square-headed boy” and later “fell for the first man who loved her enough to beat her for looking at someone else, and when I was still in high school, she married him” (329). In adulthood, Walker has published mixed emotions about her mother. On one hand, Walker enjoys a loving, respectful relationship with her mother, while, on the other, she also clearly harbors some resentment toward her for her and her older sister’s upbringing:

Sometimes, when I think of my childhood, it seems to me a particularly hard one. But in reality, everything awful that happened to me didn’t seem to happen to me at all, but to my older sister. Through some incredible power to negate my presence around people I did not like, which produced invisibility (as well as an ability to appear mentally vacant when I was nothing of the kind), I was spared the humiliation she was subjected to, though at the same time, I felt every bit of it. It was as if she suffered for my benefit, and I vowed early in my life that none of the things that made existence so miserable for her would happen to me. (*Mothers’ Gardens* 327)

Undeniably Walker blames that existence at least partially on her own “know-nothing” mother.

Walker expresses further resentment toward her mother and older female acquaintances for sugarcoating motherhood, recalling that her mother encouraged her to have another child only a year after Walker had her daughter, Rebecca—something she criticizes as “uncharacteristically bad advice” from her mother (*Mothers’ Gardens* 363).

As Walker observes:

Such advice does not come from what a woman recalls of her own experience. It comes from a pool of such misguidance women have collected over the millennia to help themselves feel less foolish for having more than one child. This pool is called, desperately, pitiably, “Women’s Wisdom.” In fact, it should be called “Women’s Folly.” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 363-64)

Walker remembers that her mother actually lies in a futile attempt to pressure Walker into having more children, telling her, “until my fifth child I was like a young girl. I could pick up and go anywhere I wanted to.” Walker, however, “remember[s] a woman

struggling to get everyone else dressed for church on Sunday and only with the greatest effort being able to get ready on time herself” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 364). When Walker responded that childbirth was too painful to repeat, she recounts her mother’s string of lies:

“That little pain,” she scoffed (*although, caught in a moment of weakness, she had let slip that during my very own birth the pain was so severe she could not speak* [. . .]). “That pain is over before you know it.” This is response number one [drawn from the supply of Women’s Folly]. Number two is, “The thing about that kind of pain is that it does a funny thing to a woman [. . .] looks like the more it hurts you to give birth, the more you love the child.” (Is *that* why she loves me so much, I wonder. Naturally, I had wanted to be loved for myself, not for her pain.) Number three: “Sometimes the pain, *they say*, isn’t even real. Well, not as real as it feels at the time.” (This one deserves comment made only with blows, and is one of the reasons women sometimes experience muscle spasms around their mothers.) And then, number four, the one that angers me most of all: “Another thing about the pain, *you soon forget it.*” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 365-66)

Walker attributes her mother’s lying to “folly” and “misguidance,” loathe to publicly attack her own mother. Yet we see her mother reflected in Mrs. Hill. To clarify the image, Walker endows Mrs. Hill with qualities easily recognizable in Walker’s mother, such as religious fervor, outspoken condemnation of abortion, and even a fondness for flowers. Despite lingering resentments toward her mother, however, Walker chooses to portray the character based upon her mother semi-sympathetically, perhaps proving Walker’s reluctance to eviscerate another mother—even a (partially) fictional one—after having experienced firsthand the hardships of motherhood.

Seven years prior to publishing *Meridian*, Walker herself bore a daughter (after previously aborting one pregnancy and miscarrying another), though admittedly more out of curiosity and boredom than an actual urge to mother. That experience undoubtedly informs her depictions of mothers and daughters. Walker had been fearful that children would stifle her artistically, as they do Mrs. Hill; instead, having Rebecca endowed

Walker with a wealth of new perspective which she found artistically fascinating. Walker feels her daughter's "birth, and the difficulties it provided us," joined her to a "body of experience and a depth of commitment to my own life hard to comprehend otherwise." She adds that Rebecca's "birth was the incomparable gift of seeing the world at quite a different angle than before, and judging it by standards that would apply far beyond my natural life." Motherhood, Walker claims, forced her "to understand, viscerally, women's need for a store of 'Women's Folly,' and yet feel on firm ground in my rejection of it. But rejection also has its pain" (*Mothers' Gardens* 369). Her new insights led Walker to explore motherhood and related issues increasingly in her writing. Walker's novels, specifically *Meridian*, *The Color Purple*, *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), "are by and about women who are daughters, mothers, and artists," Maureen Reddy eloquently writes. "In every case, the woman author's, and her hero's, experience of motherhood is central to, and inseparable from, her life as an artist, with this experience impinging upon the actual and imagined texts in a variety of subtle and complex ways" (Reddy 223). Walker feels that having one child is an important experience for women artists, providing them with a complexity of emotions and experiences only available to mothers, which then carry over into their art.

Upon first reading *Meridian*, I interpreted Walker's somewhat lenient portrayal of Mrs. Hill as squeamishness on Walker's part to negatively portray another mother, but Reddy interprets it as empathy accompanying Walker's newly-developed maternal thinking. Reddy explains that "this way of thinking seeks to understand difference but not to change it, to recognize the immutable separation of knower and known without

trying to subsume the other into the self” (224). Both Walker and Meridian achieve maternal thinking not only through the actual process of childbirth and child-rearing, but also by trying to understand their mothers and the social conditioning that influences their mothers’ actions and beliefs, even while simultaneously rejecting those same actions and beliefs themselves. In so doing, Reddy claims that a woman (or fictionalized character) can achieve an even higher form of maternal thinking—politicized maternal thinking. To reach this level of thought, Reddy explains, “a woman must learn to care about her own mother and about all the women who came before her” (229). Reddy builds upon Sarah Ruddick’s idea that politicized maternal thinking requires “learning to expect and respect maternal thinking,” including “really listening when mothers speak” (39). Reddy, in turn, claims that politicized maternal thinking rejects “myths of motherhood that oppress not only mothers but all women, as it does not require accepting those myths or romanticizing mothers, ignoring their failures, or perpetuating their experiences” (229). This last sentence is key, and not merely because it speaks directly to the purpose of this thesis. Reddy warns that “one barrier to learning to think maternally may arise from a woman’s experience as a daughter, from witnessing her own mother’s shortcomings” (228). Heroines must overcome their own bias and anger against their mothers—self-destructive thoughts that distort their perceptions—and, instead, learn to “recognize and to reject destructive ways of thinking, then [find] constructive ways of thinking that allow the correct identification of virtues” (Reddy 229). Walker does this, letting Meridian reject her mother while simultaneously forgiving her and believing she is a good woman. Thus Meridian ultimately achieves her own sense of self-forgiveness and purpose.

The question maternal thinking poses is whether motherhood lends a complexity to a novel that is missing from novels by non-mothers. Reddy seemingly asserts that maternal thinking instills a deeper level of meaning to *Meridian* than it would have had if Walker had not been a mother, as in Hurston's case. Reddy asserts that maternal thinking can be learned in ways besides actual mothering, such as by reading *realistic* literary portrayals of mothers, though, as previously pointed out, such portrayals have been scant until relatively recently. Perhaps subscribers to Reddy's theory could argue that the mother-daughter relationship in *Meridian* subsumes the one presented in *Their Eyes*, since Meridian eventually sees Mrs. Hill as a complete person, whereas Janie's anger is not tempered by motherhood. She remains, in other words, convinced that Nanny is nothing but small-minded and petty. Yet the danger in subscribing to this idea is that it negates the possibility that non-mothers, too, can write novels rich in their explorations of and grappling with depictions of Black mothers, as I believe Hurston does in *Their Eyes*. In any case, Rudolph Byrd argues that the novels should be studied as partners instead of competitors, noting that each book presents different questions about marriage and motherhood, respectively, in moving toward one goal: "the questions each poses is a means of critiquing, extending and amplifying the work and the intellectual concerns of the other, as well as a means by which we may apprehend the changing condition of women in American society" (53).

Nanny and Mrs. Hill are two women caught up in that change, trying to bind their resistant (grand)daughters to traditional depictions of Black womanhood while Janie and Meridian, yearning for more than domesticity, struggle to break free. Hurston and Walker show readers, in no uncertain terms, that the older women seek to confine the

younger women's spirits, and for that they must be held accountable. At the same time, however, neither Nanny nor Mrs. Hill strikes readers as *purely* antagonists with *purely* hostile intentions, which speaks to the authors' skill. Very rarely are realistic characters entirely angels or devils, or devoid of weakness. Instead readers see Nanny and Mrs. Hill as sympathetic, unfulfilled women, who, like the actual people inspiring them, "fail" as Black superwomen.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: REMAKING THE BLACK WOMAN

Both *Their Eyes* and *Meridian* are revelatory novels, not only because they show the authors' personal questionings of marriage and motherhood, but also because they seek to expose the superwoman ideal held up for Black women as a cruel sham. Both novels serve as cautionary tales. Within each, Hurston and Walker show Black women their options and the possible consequences that result from their choices. On one hand, women may choose to conform to society's ideas of what Black women should be, while, on the other, they may increasingly take possession of their own lives instead of merely suffering through them. Walker points out that Black women's centuries-long adherence to the dictates of white society and Black men has provided them with little in return:

When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. (*Mothers' Gardens* 237)

Sentiments like these have drawn criticism from what Carol P. Marsh-Lockett calls maternal feminism, "which celebrates, embraces, and finds empowerment in motherhood" (102). Yet neither Hurston nor Walker actually attacks Black women who choose marriage and/or motherhood—quite the contrary. Hurston herself married three times (though all were short-lived), and Walker has a daughter and considers motherhood an enriching experience, particularly for Black artists, married or unmarried. Moreover, *Their Eyes* presents a very favorable portrayal of Janie's final marriage to Tea Cake, during which the two form a true marriage, complete with equal footing and mutual respect for both participants. In fact, Janie is so fulfilled by her marriage that Tea Cake's rabidity almost drives Janie to commit suicide, far different from the relief she

experiences at the conclusions of her prior marriages. Additionally, *Meridian* does not “present motherhood itself as restrictive” (Christian 90). In *Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Christian notes that while “many radical feminists blamed motherhood for the waste in women’s lives and saw it as a dead end for a woman,” Walker does not. Lynn Pifer adds that *Meridian* “does not object to children, or mothers bearing children, but to the role a woman is expected to play once she becomes a mother” (86). I might add that it objects, also, to the additional expectation that Black womanhood will inevitably lead to Black motherhood, as if this were a “given” in a geometric proof. Hurston and Walker present marriage and motherhood as perfectly valid, fulfilling options for Black women, just as long as they remain options, not (as white society and Black men have previously suggested) the only path to a Black woman’s self-fulfillment.

As an additional or alternate route to fulfillment, Hurston and Walker insist that Black women seek their emotional independence (though not necessarily through physical isolation) and above all their creativity, which is their sole obligation to their Black women ancestors. Mary Anne Wilson points out that for both Hurston and Walker “spiritual survival is linked to such creativity rather than to any institutional religion or system of beliefs. Seeing the creative spark in life, both women came to believe in the spirituality of the creative process itself” (57). Walker sees utilizing their creativity as the current generation of Black women’s duty to the ones who came before them, writing that past generations of Black women were tortured by “springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality—which is the basis of Art—that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane” (*Mothers’ Gardens* 233).

This appears to be the case with both Nanny and Mrs. Hill, denied outlets for their creativity. Walker continues that, in contrast to these characters' generations, her generation "must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (237), as Janie and Meridian do. Both Janie and Meridian, pondering death near the conclusions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Meridian*, almost waste their glorious new-found creativity. After shooting Tea Cake, Janie nearly turns the gun on herself, while Meridian listlessly awaits her own death; however, each consciously chooses life over death because they have found outlets for their creative selves. Janie returns home to assume the role of storyteller, whereas Walker implies that Meridian leaves to carry the Movement to yet another community. In doing so, they also develop emotional independence.

For Hurston and Walker, if marriage and/or motherhood help Black women foster creativity and emotional autonomy, then so much the better. Walker herself acknowledges such possibilities in *Mothers' Gardens*, citing, as example, Buchi Emecheta's dedication of *Second Class Citizen* to her five children, "without whose sweet background noises/ this book would not have been written." Walker marvels at Emecheta's ability to draw creativity from domesticity, writing that "it is exactly the kind of dedication I could not imagine making myself" (*Mothers' Gardens* 66), causing Walker to question "traditional Western ideas about how art is produced" and why exactly "our culture separates the duties of raising children from those of creative work" (*Mothers' Gardens* 70). It is when marriage and/or motherhood begin interfering with Black women's creativity that they become limiting and must be shrugged off in the

interest of self-preservation. When Meridian does so, her mother smugly deems her a monster. Mrs. Hill's response initially evokes guilt from Meridian, yet if dissatisfaction with her condition makes Meridian a monster, then, as Nagueyalti Warren asserts, Meridian eventually "claims the monster in herself" (191). Warren notes that "can you kill?" is actually two questions collapsed into one: "whether she [Meridian] can kill the enemies of freedom for her people and whether she can, in fact, destroy the enemies obstructing her freedom as a woman. Can she kill the mother and claim the monster in herself? Should she?" (190). Meridian discovers that the answer to both of these questions is yes, despite the guilt Mrs. Hill's condemnation elicits.

Janie and Meridian both eventually overcome the obstacles between them and freedom, including not only white society and Black men but also other Black women, particularly their own mother figures. Hurston's and Walker's novels demonstrate that one of the biggest challenges for Black women is other Black women still chained to traditional ideals of wifedom and motherhood. The authors in turn eviscerate their protagonists' gossipy female critics, whose contempt and judgments fracture the Black female community instead of unifying it. *Their Eyes* and *Meridian* show the tragedy that women like Janie and Meridian, brave enough to choose self over a lifetime's worth of sacrifice, must also endure attacks from the very population their actions stand to liberate.

Scholars of Hurston and Walker tend to see their works as attempts to instill a sense of wholeness among the Black female community instead of pulling it apart. I concur that the authors do share intentions of making the Black community stronger; yet, as any builder can attest, making something ultimately stronger and more sound sometimes involves first making it weaker, even stripping it to the bare bones to reveal

the problems beneath the surface. *Their Eyes* and *Meridian* do this, exposing to the Black community and the women within that they have built their house on a faulty foundation, first perpetrated by a white patriarchal society and then by Black men and women eager to disprove racist stereotypes. For the most part, the Black women characters in the novels are not ready to accept alternative notions of Black womanhood, but Janie and Meridian do inspire their own small followings to carry on the revolution. After hearing Janie's story, Phoeby Watson declares that she will make her husband take her fishing, and Truman Held and Anne-Marion Coles assume Meridian's vacated position, forcing their re-evaluations of Black women's capabilities.

Meanwhile, Janie and Meridian are content to be lone revolutionaries divorced from the other Black women in their communities. *Their Eyes* and *Meridian* are not only about fostering community. They are also about offering wisdom "to oppressed women universally for dealing with the realities of their lives" (Fannin 55) and, borrowing from Walker, who borrows from Flannery O'Connor, saving the life that is one's own. In "On the Issue of Roles," Toni Cade Bambara writes, "revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart" (109). In Janie's and Meridian's cases, doing so requires that they separate themselves from other community women or risk losing their newfound independence and creativity. And that would be the real tragedy because, as Walker's mother says, "If the Lord sets you free," then one must "be free indeed" (*Mothers' Gardens* 364).

Hurston and Walker seek just that—to set women free. First, the authors' novels refute the notion that the Black superwoman stereotype has not been, or cannot be,

challenged by Black women writers, providing clear evidence to the contrary. Secondly, they show exactly how limiting the Black Superwoman ideal is for Black women. The stereotype denies the fact that “good” Black women can be anything except perpetually loving, nurturing, and altruistic, especially in their dealings with their children. Hurston and Walker scoff at the possibility of such a lofty notion while also pitying those women who have been destroyed in pursuit of it, showing Nanny and Mrs. Hill as examples. Thirdly, in portraying Nanny and Mrs. Hill as fallible, Hurston and Walker lend them humanity, but also charge them with accountability for their wrongdoings. Finally, having torn down the Black superwoman tradition at which Black women have aimed for generations, Hurston and Walker provide readers with examples of “new” Black women who focus on finding outlets for their creativity and independence instead of on upholding a ridiculous construct of domestic “perfection.”

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