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Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara; The Literary Representation of Foucault's Genealogy Between Black Women Authors and Their Black Women Protagonists

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Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara; The Literary
Representation of Foucault's Genealogy Between Black Women Authors
and Their Black Women Protagonists

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“But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women-- our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*-- have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are.”

- Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Garden

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Introduction: A Conversation Between Black Women Storytelling and Foucault's Genealogy

The 1960's and 70's are heralded as the decades of great social and political movements, much of which gave Black women writers a platform to voice their truths in literature. In this time, the works of prominent writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Joyce Carol Thomas, and Toni Cade Bambara were published in unprecedented narratives. This group of women emerged, as Barbara Christian suggests, to fill the narrative gap with their narrative of silence, oppression, and ostracization (162).

In 2001, Cheryl Wall published *Worrying the Line* that argued the need for Black women writers to close the gap of their personal experiences through their Black women protagonists in the narratives that they create. As Black women writers have been historically denied the space to express their experience, Wall believes that Black women authors used their characters throughout their stories to develop a narrative to place a voice to a population that never historically had one. She writes, "through the work of the protagonists, authors manage to close the gaps between the available written knowledge and the connections to the

past they seek.” (Wall 17) This need to infuse present-day literary discourse with a “connection” to the “past,” is supported by the genealogy theories of Michel Foucault (17).

In 1992, Michel Foucault published *Society Must be Defended*, a book that examined power, sexuality, and punishment. Foucault’s theory on the power and agency dynamics of marginalized groups lends itself to this text because it examines the limitations of the disenfranchised and further, how that limitation may be breached through genealogical literary practices. He wrote:

Genealogy consists in: a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or legitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge, in the name of the rights of a science that is in the hands of a few. (Foucault 7)

Foucault’s definition of genealogy defines a resistance of an ongoing process of creating and naming truth while “pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of unfamiliar, unchallenged modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.” In the same way, Black female authors can be said to play “disqualified”

female voices against the unitary patriarchal/societal structure in writing and in society.

Unburied and Disqualified Knowledges; Foucault's Genealogy As Critical Approach

Foucault's general critiques during the 70's mirror a groundbreaking critique on the shift that he believes were occurring in society, during the same time that Black women writers were birthing narratives and accounts that reflect their experiences, along with paying homage to the other Black women writers who came before them. Foucault's work gains relevance to this groundbreaking time, simply because his theory places these authors at the forefront of women-bonding and building a literary community. Foucault's transitioning critique extends his argument in what it means to both have a voice and go from a docile body- of knowledge and presence- to an active body -one with various forms of rhetorical devices disenfranchised individuals must use to engage in dialogue about this particular literary influence.

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault discusses a type of knowledge that he believes are changing institutions and practices throughout Western

thought. Foucault's study of examining power and human subjectivity features a very great observation that is worth mentioning. Foucault states,

“... I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as sufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity,” (Foucault 7)

The “knowledges” that Foucault explains can be seen as various communities of thought whose experiences can defer against the dominant knowledge. Foucault sees this as “a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all the knowledges that surround it..” He furthers his critique that “...the disqualified knowledge people have contained the memory of combats, the very memory that had until then been confined to margins.”, which accepts the community’s experiences- which are, in fact, the “memory” that holds true to who they have become.

Buried knowledges, in this regard, can be defined as suppressed narratives and experiences within a community that has been revisited and can further prove that it resisted a dominant knowledge within a specific time of society.

Disqualified knowledge, a more graduated belief, then becomes the knowledge of the current ideology that believes that they are currently dealing with the impact of the buried and the continuing resistance. Both buried and disqualified work together- unburying an experience, followed by disqualifying the current ideas in communities can reflect the experience that Black women writers highlight in their personal narratives and in their their work. This tradition of Black women writers committed to storytelling and being aware of the women who created their own personal accounts before them proves the work of buried knowledge, while their narratives has a general critique of being disqualified, due to the “naive”, “hierarchically inferior”, and “knowledges that are below the required level of erudition” that Foucault also discusses.

Foucault introduces the term *genealogy*, which he defines as “a rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights.” (Foucault 9) which has two very significant knowledges- “the buried and the disqualified”. These two knowledges are deeply rooted in a belief that are not validated and suppressed from the common body of knowledge. It allows this buried, disqualified knowledge to gain a collection of experiences, and a collection of accounts that all are common within this community. It unburies the suppressed, and qualifies the ongoing accounts and experiences of the people within the community of thought. Genealogy’s characteristic of rediscovering also gives the community of knowledge a chance to develop a sense of history within the commonality of

thought and experience. Black women writers proving a commonality amongst their experience and their work throughout generations, prove genealogy to be applicable to women-bonding and the understanding of their communal variations, despite the resistance of their voices being heard through their narratives.

Foucault's idea of disciplinary power highlights a very interesting dynamic, one that challenges his concept of genealogy and the buried and disqualified knowledges and shine lights on his very own perspective about these different knowledges. In *Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power*, Sandra Lee Bartky describes Foucault's later response to power and forms a unique theory of disciplinary power, a dynamic formed specifically for the docile bodies that Foucault references in his book, *Discipline and Punishment*. In comparison to genealogy, can disqualifying knowledges render bodies docile? Furthermore, how can the lack of agency, both intellectually and physically, give disciplinary power a patriarchal advantage to Black women writers?

Bartky states,

“Foucault seems sometimes on the verge of depriving us of a vocabulary in which to conceptualize the nature and meaning of those periodic refusals of control which, just as much as the

imposition of control, mark the course of human history.” (Bartky
150)

Bartsky argument may disqualify Foucault’s idea of not understanding this specific type of control over female docile bodies, but only makes his argument stronger about knowledges that begin to question the dominant knowledge, where all other knowledges are not seen as truth or reality. Foucault’s unintentional acknowledgement about female bodies when discussing power proves his very own disciplinary power over his own systemic knowledge or the common thought that he benefits from in his critiques. Foucault’s work is both valid and limited. His very own ignorance of a body of knowledge distinctly proves the issue that he is discussing.

This analysis in both Foucault’s buried and disqualified knowledges and how much it relates to the aforementioned Black women authors; where these women have relied and sought influence in their personal experiences when writing their fiction narratives. Foucault’s concept of genealogy can show a place of ancestral influence between prominent Black women authors throughout different periods of time which shows characteristics of both unburied and disqualified knowledges. I will place a higher challenge on all three authors: to uncover the intentions within their texts, from a political and social standpoint; one where they all include the struggles of their characters that lead them to women-bonding, but

also one from a place of triumph and breakthrough from the patriarchal structure that is said to disqualify their voice.

The focus of this thesis is to identify a literary influence between the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara using Foucault's theory on genealogy in order to uncover unburied and disqualified truths and challenge assumptions of Black women-bonding that identifies the patriarchal structures that they are faced with within their own narratives. More specifically, this thesis will take the figure of the black woman as its main subject, focusing on the literary genealogy of the black woman as character, author, and interpreter of the black female experience, which intersects keenly here at three distinct works by Hurston, Walker, and Bambara. The way in which the authors project these characters and their narratives are how they are able to play off against a "true body of knowledge" (Foucault 6), or a traditional way of creating characters and expressing them in literature. I seek to show the connection not just between Black women protagonists, but also between the authors that create them. This thesis will be an investigation into the connection between the Black woman as character and the Black woman as author, and furthermore, the Black women experience in general.

I argue that the role of the protagonist in these narratives represents deeper figures; one that shapes a new-formed reality and the authors are using women

characters as models to create a different representation of Black women. These authors, according to Foucault's idea of genealogy and interpretation, use their work to offer critiques about the experience of Black womanhood and their author's storytelling dynamics, through forms of unburied and disqualified knowledge.

Through storytelling, the authors use their protagonists to interpret and challenge their truths and the women they represent. I also argue that these female characters establish agency through each other, that ultimately empowers them and the other women in their texts.

Foucault's idea of genealogy and the responsibility of an interpreter challenges Hurston, Walker, and Bambara to create work that according to Alice Walker "saves the lives that we writers are about." (Walker 14).

In searching the writings of black female authors, there are three novels that stand out not only as staples of their time, but also as the formation of a quilt-like narrative of the black female experience. The first of these is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the "matriarchal" text in a line of works by Black female authors that deal with the Black feminine conscious in an oppressive society. The second, and no less foundational to Black feminist writing, is Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The third is Toni Cade Bambara's

The Salt Eaters, a masterpiece of social and spiritual truth. A close analysis of these three novels, their protagonists, and the influence between these authors, explores a claim that can be made as a literary lineage.

In order to examine the inter-textual and inter-character bonds, these texts must first be understood in their social-historical contexts to see the ways in which the different Black women; Janie, Celie and Shug, along with Velma, Minnie, & Old Wife all pass through their unique journeys of resistance using their relationships with other women.

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a staple text that depicts African-American folklore and self-discovery, themes that Walker has related to and wrote on, and has influenced Toni Cade Bambara's work. Hurston provides the narrative of the complex Janie character and lays the foundation of how Black women interact with others and self-reflect throughout these three stories. I will focus on Janie's marriages and her relationships with the women in Eatonville and how these connections between the other characters in the text allows Janie to fulfill her personal journey. These relationships between her and the women in this text were symbolic of breaking away from societal structures and pressures, and becoming a person through self-discovery.

In Walker's *The Color Purple*, I pay very close attention to Walker's intentions for writing this book, making the argument that her intentions for this written work is

not only spiritual, but written to understand the dynamics of Black women coexisting with each other: building truth, growing in their own light, and finding love - all which were influenced from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and ultimately a progressive way of showing patriarchal resistance from Hurston's work. I will focus on the relationships between Celie and her sister Nettie, Shug, along with the other women in text. This book highlights each of the women character experiences, and show a clear depiction of active women-bonding through their triumphs and struggles.

Finally, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* captures the stages of mental and spiritual healing in the Black community set in a time of political turmoil. Mainly based on thoughts and mnemonic events of the characters, this work is saturated with elements of storytelling and the yearning for healing. I am highly interested in the bond that Velma and Minnie have throughout Velma's healing process, along with the bond that the Old Wife and Minnie Ransom have through their work with healing others.

Bambara's attention to preserve the history of both Hurston and Walker in *The Salt Eaters* by allowing women to coexist, while shedding light on the overt patriarchal need for men to lead, and how the women of Claybourne resist and challenge these ideals. Bambara's work shows the progression of both Hurston and Walker, and how utilizing concepts of her predecessors can still be inclusive and a very real element of women-boding. In *The Salt Eaters*, Velma's trauma

had a direct correlation with her active work in the social movements during the 1960's.

In response to Wall's critique, the gaps of these three protagonists is the resistance seen in Janie's character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, followed by the need for women to coexist in *The Color Purple*, followed by a progressive way to show women coexisting *and* resisting, creating a transformative protagonist in *The Salt Eaters*. This flow of progression and the transfer of stylistic approaches between Hurston, Walker, and Bambara shows the graduated experiences of Black women throughout these texts and also uncovers a linear truth of Black womanhood that is reflected upon characters that these authors create.

Zora Neale Hurston's Literary Genealogy; The Unburied Knowledge.

Using Foucault's approach to genealogy and his theory on unburied knowledge, the oldest author in this tradition, Zora Neale Hurston, presents the initial body of work that inspires the link of the work through Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara.

Hurston's theme of leaving in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been marked a common theme in the text- whether it was Janie leaving her first husband,

Logan Killicks, or leaving a town that her second husband, Joe Starks founded and embracing a new life with her third husband, Tea Cake. Comparable to the other women, Janie's experience differed from the women simply because she was granted the privilege to leave. Each experience that Janie is able to embark on stems from her yearn for freedom and self-fulfillment. Foucault's genealogy helps us to form the notion that the patriarchal structure is said to disqualify the protagonist's voice.

This staple character, great with her intuition and her yearn to find herself, will be the birth of a quintessential character that can model to a community of Black women writers who can relate to Hurston's protagonist and relate to developing a narrative that comes close to these characteristics- all a key transition in understanding Foucault's idea of resisting the common knowledge and claiming a new knowledge that can be seen as disqualifying.

These social challenges first tackled by Janie are further challenged by Celie. Walker's embrace of Hurston's sociological challenge is representative of Walker's literary genealogical placement and Walker's responsibility to show healthier bonds between the women in her texts in *The Color Purple*, different from the bonds between the women in Eatonville. Walker's way in which she develops a progressive form of how the protagonist interacts with the characters in her text, comparable to women who have been isolated and ridiculed, is an indication to

what Walker believes is missing in Hurston's women-bonding in her narrative. The aspect of storytelling is now critiqued through a different lens: the bonds that have been created amongst the women in *The Color Purple*. Walker's role in revisiting the unburied narrative and creating a graduated concept of women interacting has now spread from a one-character depiction of Janie, to a community of woman characters who uses their communal bond to explore societal boundaries.

To understand the connection between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, one of Alice Walker's first published work, *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, paid homage to Zora Neale Hurston. This solid admiration to someone who has an influence on her literary work allows this literary influence to begin at Hurston's stylistic approach of depicting Black women protagonist and shifting to the way in which Walker portrays her characters in writing.

Alice Walker writes:

It is not irrelevant, nor is it bragging (except perhaps to gloat a little on the happy relatedness of Zora, my mother, and me). To mention here that the story I wrote, called "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" based on my mother's experiences during the Depression, and on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920's, and on my own response to both out of a contemporary existence,

was immediately published and was later selected, by a reputable collector of short stories, as one of the *Best Short Stories of 1974*. (Walker 12-13)

Walker also opens up this essay with a dedication that reads, "*In grateful memory of Zora Neale Hurston*" (Walker 60). Knowing that Hurston heavily influences Walker, a dedication of this caliber can be connected to an ode to Hurston's writing style. This sense of paying homage to Hurston is also seen when Walker discussed having to write the things she wanted to read (Walker 13).

In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity, I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being *with* a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone. (Walker 13)

Walker describing her need and responsibility of evaluating the work of her ancestors and understanding her role as a means of "continuity" brings forward

Foucault's characteristics of unburied knowledge and furthering "local memories" (Foucault, 8) within this literary tradition.

Celie's voice is then graduated from the strength she receives from Nettie and Shug Avery to Velma's search for strength in *The Salt Eaters*, which reveals another level of inheritance, that proactively seeks women-bonding through a more political resistance of patriarchal structure and heteronormativity. Velma's community of women are charged with not only caring and protecting each other, but bonding during a time of notable Black activism and political happenings. These women added another level of resistance and conquered another narrative: supporting each other during a time of societal shift and moral challenge. Velma's personal challenges through her mental health and the attempt of her suicide, places her in the hands of another community of women-healers- that completely embracing the role of caring- both emotionally and physically- for this protagonist.

From Alice Walker to Toni Cade Bambara, there is a great influence and respect that Bambara places on Walker. Bambara, who is known for her work in the Black Arts Movement finds Walker right at her yearn and desire to revolutionary work. Walker's passion to write narratives and create stories that highlights the continuing struggle that Blacks face. In 1980, Bambara published her first anthology, *The Black Woman* that highlights the work of many Black women due

to her judgement of “the lack of African-American women writers”. When asked about her purpose to create this anthology, with Black women at the forefront of her work, Bambara explicitly says,

In a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods (Bambara 102)

Bambara’s reasoning to explore the craft of writers, particularly Alice Walker shows the homage that she pays to the writers who help paved the way for her work, but also her duty to illuminate Alice Walker and her work. Bambara’s straightforward comment on the craft of writers who have disqualified the voices of these women in her anthology, including Walker, reinforces the patriarchal structure that limits her work within the common knowledge. Here, Bambara sees the responsibility that she has and recognizes the meaning that her work, and the work that came before her, give to history.

Through close readings of these three novels, Foucault’s concept of genealogy through these unburied, disqualified knowledges shows a passing down of narratives from different writers who are all discontinuous from traditional methods of storytelling and women-bonding.

Chapter 1: Zora Neale Hurston: The Matriarch of Black Female Embodiment

Zora Neale Hurston can be seen as the mother of this literary tradition which creates a body of work that establishes the first narrative of a well-rounded Black woman protagonist. Through the resistance that Janie faces throughout the text, Foucault's ideology of "playing off disqualifying knowledge" (Foucault), shows how the other characters in the text view Janie's interactions in her marriages, friendships, and her quest to gain self-fulfillment. In the same light, Hurston creates this disqualifying narrative to further "organize" (Foucault) Janie's story with experiences that she has faced herself, which allows her to write an experience as such based off of her experience.

Hurston's Protagonist: Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Janie's yearn for self-fulfillment, and the resistance that she receives, is an ongoing conflict of delegitimization from the other characters in the text. Janie's journey of finding freedom and love was not common in the experiences of the other women nor seen as fulfilling, which resulted in the continuing struggle between her personal purpose and the purpose that others believed she needed to fulfill. These relationships between her and the other characters, specifically some women characters, were symbolic of breaking away from the societal constructs that Foucault labels as a place of "hierarchy" (Foucault) of being a

domesticated wife and not becoming a woman who has fulfilled a journey of self-discovery. Janie's relationship with Tea Cake and the dynamic of how she is able to explore love throughout this relationship reveals the Tea Cake symbolizes an agent for this protagonist to rediscover herself.

Janie's realization of her responsibility to her journey occurs when she is a child.

Hurston writes,

Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard...She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and laughed (Hurston 10-11)

Janie being "summoned to behold a revelation" serves the responsibility that she has to herself to fulfill the revelation that she has been given. Interestingly enough, Janie's initial feeling towards the revelation, which was pain, but also sweet is symbolic of her journey: painful, but also sweet. Throughout the book, Janie is seen revisiting the pear-tree for guidance, for motivation, and most importantly for the reminder of the responsibility she has to seek herself.

But is everyone in search of this specific vision that she has in Hurston's text?

Janie's experience not only reveals the everyday life of the Black woman in the

1920's --which includes oppression, trials and triumphs, and acceptance of herself and her past, but it also shows the responsibility that Janie has to self-express, self-reflect, and ultimately liberate herself through common issues that the Black woman faced during the 1920's. Her vision of the pear-tree continues to be the buzz and ultimately the plight of finding the same feeling she received when she was a little girl.

In terms of the other women, we notice that there is a collective disposition of their attitude toward Janie:

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song. (Hurston 2)

Our initial discovery of the women in Eatonville was the gossip about Janie while she came back in town. Hurston writes, "...they sat in judgment." (Hurston 1). The "mass cruelty" that Janie had to face from those women stemmed from their "envy they had stored up from other times". The women of Eatonville managed to publicly laugh and shame Janie, even though they were envious of who she was

and what she has become. Janie's idea of seeking her own happiness and not being one of the women on the porch has a direct correlation between Janie being able to discern what was best for her in her personal journey and the resistance of it. Janie not only noticed how important it was to continue to seek her self-journey, but she was fully aware of all of the backlash that came with her decision to choose to be happy. Kubitschek calls this the "Eatonville Prophecy" (Kubitschek 11), or the belief that Janie "will return home and broke".

Throughout her marriages, friendships, and even her interactions with the other characters in the text, Janie is well aware of what freedom means to her and the way for her to find it. Relationally, Janie is able to show that her quest for freedom is the result of her commitment to her personal idea of self-fulfillment. Furthermore, through these relationships Janie shows that she is able to persevere through the lessons that she learns from others. Her relationships play a key role in her personal commitment to her freedom.

Hurston describes Janie and Phoebe's first interaction when she returned:

Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing—self revelation. (Hurston 7)

Phoebe's eagerness to hear Janie's story when she is back from the Everglades is a yearn to vicariously live through Janie's experiences. Phoebe's "zest for fear" (Kubitschek 110) stems from her own realization that she could never experience life the way that Janie has. Moreover, her reflection of what she believed was freeing for her own self. This "self revelation" has been revealed from the time spent unpacking her own experience and telling Phoebe the detailed intricacies of the story, which tells her experience and hones into telling a person's truth. Phoebe sees Janie not only as her friend, but one who has broken free from the idea of womanhood in Eatonville and how she was able to self-realize her own truths.

Janie is able to tell a story of her life and the things she has experienced frankly because she was able to leave the comfort of Eatonville and live within a different geographic location, which allowed her to fully be present in her own life (Crabtree 59). Janie's account of telling her own story to Phoebe here is symbolic to the freedom and agency that she has upon herself.

Tea Cake also played an immense role in the responsibility of Janie's freedom and self-fulfillment. Faced with much resistance, Tea Cake was viewed by the town of Eatonville as someone who took advantage of Janie. Just like the resistance Janie felt to discover herself, the resistance of this new relationship not only reminded her of the revelation of pear-tree visions, but the love and marriage that she deserved. Tea Cake becomes the pear tree in her life:

He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom-- a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps....He was a glance from God. (Hurston 106)

Janie and Tea Cake's relationship begins to develop more, showing the trials and tests that the couple has to go through in order to stay afloat. Kubitschek describes these instances as crossing the threshold, or "separating safety from the risk necessary to fulfillment." (Kubitschek 3), which are all important in the development of Janie's self-expression and self-realization throughout the text. These moments occurred when Tea Cake left Janie in their living space for a few days while he gambled, the small incident of Tea Cake "wrestling" with another woman in the Everglades, and finally when she has to choose between losing her life or ending his. All instances show us Janie's decision to chose, and her decision to continue on with the relationship that she is in with Tea Cake.

Tea Cake symbolizes an agent for Janie to rediscover herself. Kubitschek argues that, "Tea Cake is Janie's companion on her quest, not her master or mentor." (Kubitschek 111) Because of his companionship and guidance, Janie would not have been able to leave Eatonville, let alone discover elements of life outside of

the town that she lived in, the curse of generations she has followed, or the marriages that she had to endure prior to reaching this experience.

Zora Neale Hurston: The Influencer and Black Women Writer

Hurston's decision to frame Janie's narrative as such stems from two intentions: (1) to demonstrate a form of storytelling and (2) using storytelling to "organize them [sic] in the name of a true body of knowledge", according to Foucault's idea of genealogy.

Hurston's narrative voice in the text "reinforces Janie's expanding view of the world makes it clear that folklore is integrated into all levels of the text." (Crabtree 64)

Crabtree writes,

Hurston presents Janie's story within a storytelling frame, but equally significant, as a story that is designed to be repeated. In folkloristic terms, Janie's story is a memorate or true experience narrative placed within a fictional framework but nonetheless privileging itself and asserting its own authenticity." (Crabtree 56)

Crabtree asserting that the common use of storytelling --and moreover "the use of folklore"-- gives this narrative an association to a type of writing style that

comes from traditional narrative that is able to identify. Being identifiable allows this narrative to not only seem familiar to a reader but has the impact to get critiqued as a “true body of knowledge”. Hurston is using a common stylistic approach of storytelling to allow the protagonist to receive a voice in the narrative.

The use of storytelling allowed Janie to tell her own story once back in Eatonville. It is almost as if the intentionality behind allowing Janie to tell her story gives the freedom of this Black women protagonist to tell her own story and share her experience. This uncommon way in which Janie’s experience is being told allows Janie’s character multidimensional; where the reader can only learn more about the character, if the character allows us. Symbolic of how Black women protagonist in the past were written as simple, one-dimensional characters, Hurston created Janie as a protagonist of fullness: where her experience is provided to the reader as the protagonist reveals it.

Similar to Hurston’s protagonist Janie, Hurston embodies this agency that Janie shows. In the end, Janie’s narrative is similar to the depiction Zora Neale Hurston’s, *Dust Tracks On A Road*: being able to be the author of your very own life. Thus, *Dust Tracks on A Road*, similar to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* allowed an autonomy to Hurston while creating “characters’ who found their purpose by life a self-fulfilled life.

While Foucault has categorized a form of genealogy to being “disqualified” and “discontinuous bodies of knowledge” (Foucault), Gates introduces a more progressive

concept: one that acknowledges the work of Hurston, and acknowledges how Black women writers are able to create their protagonist to reflect their experiences.

In this way, Hurston wrote herself, and sought in her works to rewrite the 'self' of the 'race', in its several private and public guises, argely for ideological reasons. (Hurston 294)

Gates believes that *Dust Tracks On a Road*, is Hurston's very own way to recreate herself and create a narrative that is telling to who Zora believed she was, despite some fictional events. Using the opportunity to essentially write her own story as one that no one else can tell, Hurston saw it fitting to recreate who she was, simply because she was able to. Recognizing how her story could have potentially been written, Hurston writes a story that highlights her plight, grit, and perseverance to her experiences throughout her career. From here, Hurston begins a literary tradition that other writers, particularly Alice Walker follows.

Chapter 2: Alice Walker: The Daughter and the Creator of Celie in *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker can be seen as the daughter of this literary tradition who recreates Hurston's protagonist and uses her characters to uncoil a community of women who connect based on their experiences. Walker's approach in representing storytelling not only advances the way in which multiple women form connections and share their experiences with the protagonist, but also includes, I argue, more intimate forms of connections that probe the character's experiences. Foucault's discourse on the connection between buried and disqualified knowledge is seemingly parallel between the connection of Hurston and Walker, which is "both a meticulous rediscovery of struggles..." (Foucault 8). Through this literary influence, Hurston's well-rounded Black woman protagonist is now included in a community of well-rounded Black women characters who are able to show the ways of building community amongst themselves. This analysis will show how Walker builds on Hurston's tradition of Black female embodiment, introducing a concept on her own. Here, there is a specific dialogue between

In *The Color Purple*, I will argue that Walker shows multiple ways that storytelling is conveyed; (1) Celie and Nettie's sisterhood through writing letters, and (2) Celie and Shug Avery's sisterhood through a distinct form of intimacy. Walker also shows the resistance of these forms of connections between patriarchal structures through (1) the

redirection of Shug Avery into Celie's life and (2) the climatic discovery of Nettie's missing letters.

Walker's Protagonist: Celie's Sisterhood Dynamics in *The Color Purple*

Walker prefaces *The Color Purple* with a synopsis of Celie's spiritual transformation that she encounters in the text:

"To explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and the help of others, breaks free into the realization that she, like Nature itself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine."

(Walker Preface)

Celie's "spiritual captivity" highlights neglect, trauma, and deceit experienced in her life, who was held in bondage, similar to Janie, but breaks free through her personal transformation, and ultimately the assistance of the other women in the text. Walker places "with the help of others" in this preface to direct the protagonist's journey to what she believes is a different method to freedom for the protagonists: other women characters to share the experience with.

This preface might serve as an ode to Hurston's critical theme of Nature and the divine in Janie's life, but with an addition to the community of women who can be intentionally placed to help the protagonist to grow. It is important to note that in order for Walker's protagonist to experience her journey of self-fulfillment, similar to Janie's, Celie needed

assistance, particularly assistance of other women who shares similar experiences to her journey. Both Janie and Celie's development are parallel to their selfhood and their groundedness in Nature and the Divine, but shows a new way of understanding selfhood through other women, particularly women who Celie is able to learn and experience life with.

Walker explains further in detail in her preface, connecting the very beginning of the book to come back in full circle. "No one exempt from the possibility of a conscious connection to All That Is." Even Celie, a girl who has suffered at the expense of the hand that she was dealt. From suppression of thought and only believing that God was all, to learning through her experiences that ultimately, everything is all. Celie's storytelling experience and the way in which she adapts to her circumstances allow her to broaden her horizons.

Walker's expressive approach of documenting the character's interactions between each other allowed the reader to take a closer look at not only the things that occurred throughout the text, but the inner thoughts of the protagonist and her sister. Nettie writes letters to Celie faithfully, writing on her stay in a village in Africa and her journey with other missionaries.

Celie believes that her innate responsibility is to protect and care for her sister Nettie. Celie has gone to the extent of sacrificing her body; "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick." (Walker, 7) her life; "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (Walker, 17) and her future to ensure that Nettie can live a

life of freedom and innocence. It means the world to Celie that Nettie is protected. This is shown through the tone between both of their writing: Celie uncovering past experiences and uncertainties of her life, while Nettie is able to discover the events of the lives of others in her letters.

Celie's women-bonding is also shown with Shug Avery, an old lover of her husband Albert and a well-known entertainer in their community. Celie loves Shug Avery as a sister friend, as a role model, as an inspiration, and even as a lover. Shug Avery's influence on Celie's life allows her to explore her own sexuality, her potential as a dressmaker, and an entrepreneur and the freedom that she has on herself, allowing the reader to see her entire growth of becoming.

From Celie's star-struck admiration of Shug Avery, to becoming her caretaker, Celie and Shug developed a sisterhood that allowed Celie to explore her most intimate moments. Shug served as a filler for the sisterhood and bond that Celie wished her sister Nettie could possibly have, if Nettie not have been sent away. Shug took on the role of a protector to Celie, something that Celie never had because she protected and provided for everyone else.

Shug and Celie's first intimate moment, Celie combing Shug Avery's hair, was the perfect introduction to this aspiring sisterhood.

"I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia-or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she

melt down a little and lean back against my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. She reach for another cigarette. Start hum a little tune.” (Walker 53)

Proudfit takes a look at Celie’s growth and self-discovery through a psychoanalytic approach, uncovering times and scenes in which her developmental affected her actions and ultimately in her writing. Using the things that Celie went through in juxtaposition to her way of thinking and feeling, Proudfit finds a way to ultimately show Celie’s self-conscious and growth throughout the novel.

According to Proudfit, Shug Avery’s role helps Celie to “complete the development of those capacities that enable her to deal more” (Proudfit 23) with the issues that Celie kept buried inside. Shug challenges the way Celie think and feels, and continue to impart strength and confidence into Celie, something that she has lacked since her adolescent.

In Celie’s writing, she documents her moments with Shug, particularly one where she verbally communicated with someone for the first time losing her virginity. Shug felt so emotionally attached to the emptiness of Celie’s voice and demeanor when revealing what happened to her:

“I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg

and mess up stocking. How he don't never look at me straight after that.
And Nettie.” (Walker 112)

Celie never shows a side of vulnerability. The mere thought of Celie crying is unheard of until she has an intimate moment with Shug. Celie confides in Shug. She not only trust her as someone who she can rely upon, but she looks at Shug Avery for answers that questions her womanhood. This particular moment shows the vulnerability of Celie finally coming to pass. Allowing and trusting someone else to help her heal and grow from her past hurt and struggles, like she has always been for her sister Nettie. “And Nettie” (Walker).

Celie's transformative event happens with the help from Shug Avery, a surrogate-esque sister to provide her with the sisterhood that she needs to help her heal. Both connections with Shug Avery and Nettie provide Celie with a chance to transfigure herself.

A noteworthy shift in Celie's anticipation and yearn to hear from her sister is when she finds out that Albert has been hiding numerous letters that Nettie has sent for her. Celie's rage and anger sets off in her, igniting Celie's resentment towards Albert.

Is she really mad at Albert for hiding those letters? The man who has physically and mentally abused her for years, something small like letters heightens Celie's anger towards him? The anger here can be seen as one of the many ways in which powers to control her and her progression is limited from the freedom that she desperately desires.

Passage believes, “At this point, Celie is still following the patriarchal prescriptions for her life imposed on her by her upbringing, environment, and above all, by her marriage to an abusive partner.” (Moore 70) and this event is a heightened feeling of how being limited from her relationship with her sister provides her with reason to see Albert in a different light.

Babb believes that, “Celie not only loses contact with her sister, but also loses a valuable opportunity for cultural education.” (Babb, 109) She furthermore becomes disconnected to the very person that helped her “fight” along the way. While Celie needs Nettie’s affirming hand, Celie relies on Nettie’s experiences to free herself. Nettie and Celie’s bond and exchange of experiences are not only necessary for each other, but their communication through letters allow them to connect so far away. Celie prevails with her love and nurturing spirit, while Nettie exchanges her knowledge and her path of life-discovery.

Moore also believes that “Celie is naive in the sense that she no knows no other way than what she been taught via patriarchal culture.” (Moore 70) but I can argue that Moore’s idea of “naive” can be viewed as a counteraction to reclaim her personal power and become emboldened that she no longer wants to be restrained from her journey of self-fulfillment and relationship with her sister. Celie’s other “patriarchal prescriptions” includes Albert’s abuse, both verbally and physically, and how she is able to mentally overcome her husband’s control. “...I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how I know trees fear man.” (Walker 23)

Alice Walker: The Influenced and Black Woman Definer

To understand the connection between Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, I want to examine one of Alice Walker's first published work, *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff*, that paid homage to Zora Neale Hurston. This solid admiration to someone who has an influence on her literary work allows this literary lineage to begin at Hurston's stylistic approach to depicting Black women protagonist and shifting to the way in which Walker portrays her characters in writing.

Alice Walker writes:

"It is not irrelevant, nor is it bragging (except perhaps to gloat a little on the happy relatedness of Zora, my mother, and me). To mention here that the story I wrote, called "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" based on my mother's experiences during the Depression, and on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920's, and on my own response to both out of a contemporary existence, was immediately published and was later selected, by a reputable collector of short stories, as one of the *Best Short Stories of 1974*."

(Walker 12-13)

The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff vocalizes Walker's mother's experience by including factual events, but also experiments with Hurston's style of storytelling. With both influences, Walker paints a narrative which carries a tradition of writing that champions the experience of her mother, along with the work of Zora Neale Hurston.

Walker opens up the story with a dedication that reads, *"In grateful memory of Zora Neale Hurston"* (Walker 60). Knowing that Walker is heavily influenced by Hurston, a dedication of this caliber can connect an ode to Hurston's writing style. This sense of

paying homage to Neale is also seen when Walker discussed having to write the things she wanted to read (Walker 13).

“In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity, I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being *with* a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone. “
(Walker 13)

Walker is being extremely explicit about her influences for this essay. Her way of granting a platform to her mother’s experience in addition to including Zora Neale Hurston’s essence of folklore was not only a great ode to her greatest teacher and role model, but it allowed her to explore her own writing and continue the responsibility that was held upon herself to keep the tradition of storytelling alive. Walker uses the words, “historical”, “ancient spirits” and “ancestors” in her remarks of *The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff* which are key indicators that Walker feels it is her responsibility to not only gather experiences, but to write the story for them.

In the same regard, Valerie Babb unpacks the untraditional way in which Celie and Nettie interact: writing letters. Living in a period where Black women were not taught to read and write properly, Babb illuminates how their communication in the book graduates from oral conversations to written words, something that differs in the conversation between Janie and Pheoby in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to the technology of written words in the case of Celie and Nettie. Babb writes,

“...black women take a form traditionally inhospitable to oral cultures, the written word, and transform it, making it, too, responsive to their needs.”

(Babb, 109)

The Color Purple takes on a different approach of storytelling, one where the act of writing produces a tale and allows us to see the communication of these characters from a dimension of telling a series of events through a controlled scope. In regards to the letters produced between the two sisters, Babb recognizes how the communication between the two characters play a bigger part into the role that both Celie and Nettie play in their sisterhood.

“In the first half of the work, Celie uses writing to effect self-actualization, and its standard form is modified as elements of the oral are injected into it. In the second half of the novel, Nettie uses writing to record the oral history of Africa and Afro-Americans, and its function as a cultural element whose appearance generally signals the disappearance of the oral is altered..” (Babb 109)

Walker’s way in which she uses this intentional form of storytelling documented the inner thoughts of this protagonist, along the documentation of historical context in a form of lived experience shows not only literary influence, but the anthropologic impact that Hurston has established in her work.

In *Awkward Influences*, Gilbert and Gubar critique the role that a writer plays in a literary influence, and the responsibility of illuminating the voices of their predecessor. They argue:

“In order for an African American woman writer to participate in a tradition which had until recently offered women very little in the way of accurate representation or authorial canonization, she must actively seek a precursor...who...proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible (Gilbert & Gubar 4)

This “meticulous rediscovery of struggles” (Foucault 8) by Walker is shown through her protagonist Celie in relation to Janie in discovering their true authentic selves, despite the resistance that they received through their antagonist in their texts. Walker’s intentionality to write a story that shows an appreciation to her inspiration, but a forward-thinking body of work that shows the importance of a community of women helping others in their journey of self-fulfillment. Thus, like Hurston, Walker uses her protagonist and the community to generate new narratives about Black female experiences across texts. Furthermore, Like Hurston, Walker uses black female character to embody to the black female past so as to resist individual, patriarchal, and societal oppression. This reveals that a genealogical dialogue on oppression exists between Hurston and Walker.

Chapter 3: Toni Cade Bambara: The Community Scribe and Doyen of Velma in *The Salt Eaters*

Symbolically the grandchild to this literary tradition, Bambara's responsibility to this lineage is how she is able to amplify the voices of Black women writers during an important era of art, civil rights, and the advancements for women in the political realm. Bambara's placement in this lineage places her body of work in a very direct position of recent critique and how she is able to reflect the essence of Walker's work, which was impacted by the work of Hurston, and place use the contemporary discourse of Black women during a significant socio-political time period.

The Salt Eaters, one of Bambara's acclaimed fiction novel, proved how much her predecessors in this literary influence were significant to her writing. The community of women who in this text show similarities and characteristics to the women in *The Color Purple* and the yearn to "help of others", including the protagonist Velma. An even more graduated influence and a progressive theme of the Black woman experience shows how the patriarchal structure of relationships, leadership, and social activism can directly affect the protagonist in a novel, even when the protagonist has a community of women to share their

personal journey of self-fulfillment, and the resilience that is needed from both the protagonist and the community of women to persevere.

Furthermore, Bambara's work is seen as an "alternate socio political paradigm of the African American community" (Alwes 353), and a "visionary novel that enacts the fusion of literary and political, social, and spiritual perspectives.", and further proves Foucault's concept of genealogy specifically when he argues,

"But they have, i think, provided tools that can be used at the local level only when, and this is the real point, the theoretical unity of their discourse is, so to speak, suspended, or at least cut up, ripped up, torn to shreds, turned inside out, displaced, caricatured, dramatized, theatricalized, and so on." (Foucault 6)

In *The Salt Eaters*, I will argue that Bambara shows the many ways in which the protagonist's experience is seen through the tragedy of an attempted suicide of the protagonist, along with how storytelling is used through the flashbacks that led to the suicide attempt. Finally, I will show specific points in the text where the patriarchal structure of this time period allows Bambara to use "the tools" Foucault claims that were given to create a body of work that shows the evolution of this literary influence.

Bambara's Protagonist: Velma in The Salt Eaters

Velma's internal battle between her sanity and the pressures of her active role in her community can be seen through the lense of Foucault's "discontinuous knowledge", or a conflict between her responsibility to the people and the responsibility to herself. Women characters throughout the text offers Velma solace and comfort, as if this type of discontinuous knowledge is a commonality for the other women. This form of discontinuous knowledge, or the gap between her active life and her mental wellbeing is the ongoing battle throughout the text and the plight in which Velma must overcome.

Velma is a community organizer in the city Claybourne who although has great success, suffers from a life filled with the weight of her responsibilities. Velma's exhaust from a burdensome life results a suicide attempt.

"She tried to withdraw as she'd been doing for weeks and weeks. Withdraw the self to a safe place where, husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe. Withdraw herself and prop up a borderguard to negotiate with would-be intruders. She'd been a borderguard all her childhood, so she knew something about it. She was the one sent to the front door to stand off the landlord, the insurance man, the greengrocer, the fish peddler, to insure Mama Mae one more bit of peace. And at her godmother's, it was Smitty who sent her to the front door to misdirect the posse." (Bambara 5)

Velma's "borderguard" life is reflective of the heavy pressures and responsibilities that she had to endure throughout her years at the expense of others. The internal conflict that she has been dealing with in this scene shows how much Velma relies upon her guarded, although very public, life and how everyone is seen as "intruders" to her own thoughts, logic, and decisions that she makes over the years.

Velma's group of sister-friends Palma, Ruby, and Daisy display a strong bond and a place of friendship that gets Velma through her own life struggles. They were mindful of the wellbeing of each other, that they even discussed the danger that Velma could potentially be in:

"I can't get too worked up over Velma's crises anymore, Jan. There've been too many. She'll be fine. Sometimes she takes everything so... seriously, gets disappointed, even when she knows better.' Ruby was drifting, was a student again cutting classes, and going off to war. She was in the drenched tents bathing Velma's muddy, swollen, bruised feet. 'She's so... what's the word? And works so hard to be guarded, defended.'" (Bambara 216)

Palma's faint memory of the issues that Velma has encountered was a clear indication of how their friendship was able to withstand the pressures of the world and Velma's reaction to them. Palma here is seen as supportive, understanding,

and even a helping hand through every upset of Velma's life. This conflict that Palma deals with shows how she is able to relate to the experiences of Velma to a certain extent: one that does not include how Velma can get through it, but Palma, Daisy, Velma, and Ruby all share a bond that allows them to protect and care for one another, and it is proven in the worry that they portray throughout the book on Velma's wellbeing.

Velma's other group of women were her healers- Minnie Ransom and the spirit of Old Wife. These women helped Velma's through her suicide attempt and the uncovering of her the problems, using their spiritual practices to work them out of her. Minnie Ransom and Old Wife were experienced in seeing and healing women who have similar problems. Their capacity to witness in the midst of spiritual warfare has led to this intriguing question:

“What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don't know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore. Tell me, how do I welcome this daughter home to the world, when they all getting to acting more and more like..” (Bambara 44)

Old Wife questioning the state of the “daughters” and how they are not able to “draw up the powers from like before” eludes to her observation of other women who can be dealing with the same pressures that Velma has been dealing with

and not being able to cope with their inner conflicts and find healing. This statement stems from a place of Old Wife as an elder noticing how other women are reacting to their inner conflicts in the same fashion. Old Wife's experience and attention to these "daughters" and her mere concern shows her discontinuous knowledge or the gap of understanding between Velma's reasoning for being healed, and how to understand this new trend of daughters not utilizing their powers of perseverance and spiritual reconciliation.

Furthermore, this level of intimacy was so strong that Velma's tactics of being "borderguard" was lessened. The infamous question, "Are you sure that you want to be well, sweetie?" is a rhetorical response that according to Aptheker, Velma has "been brought to this brink by the pain of person betrayal." (Aptheker 227) but also lands a question that Velma's cure of being well is attainable, through the experiences that the healers have already healed in the past.

Bambara's usage of the word "borderguard" is similar to Aptheker's usage of "betrayal", which is also significant in how she is able to capture Velma's feelings to the replays of her life, which are occurring while she is being healed.

Velma's strength falls short when she begins to share her shortcomings in her own stream of consciousness:

“Thought she knew how to build immunity to the sting of the serpent.....thought she knew how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle, stay poised and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people’s traditions and not be available to madness, not become intoxicated by the heady brew of degrees and career and congratulations for nothing done, not become anesthetized by dazzling performances with somebody else’s aesthetic, not go under.” (Bambara 258)

Foucault’s discontinuous knowledge shows the dynamics between the characters throughout the text. They have all experienced the burden of Black womanhood in their own formalities through their short narratives. While one set of women helped Velma through her mental affairs, another set of women healed her through them. Both becoming supportive in different ways, but both ultimately understanding how to connect and relate to her, simply because they shared the same experience.

However, Velma’s prominent betrayal in the text seems to be from her husband Obie, which she learns that infidelity is the root of conflict in their marriage. Obie battling what seems to be his lack of understanding of Velma’s responsibility gets met with Velma’s resentment:

“We’ve known each other too long, Obie, been through too much, been too much for each other. Why lie about such simple shit. And you been lying for months now, complaining about *my* aloofness, *my* fatigue, *my* job, willing to totally mess with my sense of what’s real in order to throw up this smoke screen. You are sleeping around, Obie, and not very discreetly...” (Bambara 231)

Aptheker proclaims that this scene, “The loss of trust is cataclysmic for Velma, feeds into paranoia. Obie’s personal actions translate into a catastrophic political liability. ” (Aptheker 228)

This upset in Obie and Velma’s marriage is a clear indication of betrayal, but a trigger that might have gaslighted her need for healing. The transition between Velma’s evaluation of herself and how she is “borderguard”, to the usage of Aptheker’s “betrayal” all circulate to a certain argument of Velma feeling misunderstood, muddled, and broken- all proof of a gap of understanding between her responsibilities to her community, and the loyalty from her husband.

Streamlining Velma’s very own consciousness, to the relationships that Velma has with her sister-friends and the healers Minnie Ransom and Old Wife, in juxtaposition to her marriage proves the unfamiliarity, or the discontinuous connection in Velma’s relationships.

Toni Cade Bambara: The Grandchild Acknowledging her Predecessors

Cheryl Wall's work on the literary tradition of Black women writers also includes her critique of Toni Cade Bambara and her literary legacy. In her co-authored book, *Savoring The Salt*, Wall recalls Bambara's work as "the primacy of the urban experience." (Wall 27) and concludes, "Bambara is an indispensable voice, an essential component of the composition of this era." (Wall 27)

Amongst other critics, Bambara was seen "as a community scribe," and was "a central figure in the black literary and artistic renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s." (Aptheker 233) Bambara created a body of work, *The Black Woman*, which brought forth the leading Black women writers –of all capacities- in an anthology that featured their work. When asked about the importance of this anthology, Bambara writes, "...And she is represented in a collection that for the first time truly lets her bare soul and speak her mind." (Bambara xviii)

In reference to Bambara's intent on writing of *The Salt Eaters*, Wall argues:

"The Salt Eaters identifies the spiritual as the missing element in the progressive political movements of the 1960's. It argues that to achieve the goals of sixties idealism and to respond to the new

challenges of the last quarter of the twentieth century...By fusing that knowledge with a progressive political consciousness, a spiritually revived people may chart a path to liberation.” (Wall 31)

Bambara’s missing element of spirituality is also captured within the women characters in her book, along with the protagonist Velma, in which the healing of the protagonist showed the need for healing in the rest of the characters. In *Toni’s Obligato*, Wall describes Bambara’s creation of her characters, particularly Velma, as “a new kind of female protagonist: fearless and bold, feisty, and articulate” (Wall 28) but also highlights the necessity for healing through the protagonist, arguing, “Velma’s emblematic of the process that the community as a whole must undergo.” (Wall 32)

The Salt Eaters becomes a three dimensional book that captures the various characters past, present, and fate for their future that provides a context to show how their complete lives meet at the moment of this suicide attempt. Wall points out that the novel “speaks through various voices as the characters who know and care about Velma--- even as they do not all know each other-- respond to her crisis.” (Wall 31)

Bambara’s storytelling approach of establishing character development through recurring significant flashbacks is distinct in this literary tradition, placing

Bambara's work as the newest spin to how Black woman protagonists are able to express themselves within texts. Bambara's scribe-like intentions in her writing brings forth a new depiction of amplifying the voices of Black women characters in the text and how their reasoning behind how they express themselves- in this case, the exhaust of socio-political resistance and the building of a community.

Bambara creates her protagonist to have an even higher responsibility than her position in the movement during her most vulnerable moment: to infuse the lives of the rest of the characters in Claybourne and illuminate the diverse bodies in this community. During the time period where political activism in the 60's were common dialogues amongst people, *The Salt Eaters* replicated the 60's with racism, sexism, and an urban health crisis that challenges the members of Claybourne to resist against the injustices occurring in their local community. Apart from these characters becoming agents of change, each character is faced with their own personal battles and struggles and Wall concludes that Velma "becomes the figure who brings the workers and activists,...together. " (Wall 33)

Symbolic to Bambara's role in this lineage, her three dimensional storytelling approach mimics her writing to highlight the past, the present, and a clear future for Black women writers who use storytelling to create stories that highlight Black women experiences.

The different levels in which Foucault explains local knowledge emulates how Bambara is able to create a body of work through a storytelling trope of flashbacks, and allows her to pay even more homage to Walker and Hurston. Bambara's tools that she uses at the "local level" is two-fold: the literal significance of the local community that she depicts is in need of healing, but the local, common knowledge or commonality, of this type of experience within Black women during this time period when referenced. It is further proven that these three authors can be a part of Foucault's "theoretical unity" that defines their discourse throughout their characters and their personal experiences as Black women during the time periods that they are writing from.

Toni Cade Bambara's work brings forth a unique edge to this literary lineage: one that is able to highlight the importance of Black womanhood as an experience, through the women in *Claybourne*, and Black women writers during the 60's and 70's.

Conclusion

Gay Wilentz captured the essence of storytelling through Paule Marshall's *From the Poets*. He states:

“From African mother to enslaved mother to African-American/Caribbean mother, these cultural and literary mothers have passed on the traditions and customs of their heritage to generations of children. As Paule Marshall notes, women's tongues were the only weapon against oppression available to them ("From the Poets" 7). Through the stories and morals encoded in the culture's orature present-day writers have focused on what was maintained of their cultures in spite of physical separation, outright persecution, and imposition of the dominant culture. The desire for cultural and generational continuity, passed on in the orature, is of paramount concern in the literature of black women on both sides of the Atlantic” (385).

“Present day writers” can also include Hurston, Walker, and Bambara who at the core of their time periods penned works that were passed down through generations, and “maintained their cultures” despite the patriarchal resistance found in their texts. Wilentz concluding the “paramount concern” in literature of

Black women can be placed in conversation with Christian, who shared the same concern when discussing the narrative gap in need of being filled.

It is important to note that the charge of responsibility to tell the stories of Black women did not lie burden to authors, but the protagonists who also had a significant role, being symbolic that in storytelling, the experiences of Black women can be told *from* Black women, regardless of being a writer or an artist. In the essay *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*, Walker mentions how storytelling was embodied through women, who did not have to be authors, but rather agents of their own experiences:

“But the telling of these stories, which came from my mother’s lips as naturally as breathing, was not the only way my mother showed herself as an artist. For stories, too, were subject to be distracted, to dying without conclusion.” (Walker 240)

In my research, a literary discourse is taking place between African American female storytellers who embody the black female past so as to resist individual, patriarchal, and societal oppression. These texts establish not only a literary influence, but a matriarchal tradition of resisting oppression by passing down narratives of counsel. Foucault’s genealogy is the vehicle for this counsel,

manifesting itself in these writings as information, instruction, and guidance for present day oppression.

Storytelling is the prevalent link between these texts, that acknowledges experiences that the authors write about but again highlights Foucault's unburied, discontinued knowledge. My research also proves that from a "local" level character, author, and interpreter are all able to create discourse, and because of this, the "knowledge" of the Black woman experience in literature can be shown to uncover truths, but also highlight the patriarchal structure within the "knowledge" that these authors possess. Through Hurston, Walker, and Bambara, we see a literary influence, but can also question other literary influences of Black women writers who can share similar connections as women-bonding is seen in my research.

As mentioned, these texts also show the embodiment of the Black woman experience, as author, as character, and furthermore as interpreter- that show that their experience is transcendent and is able to get amplified, but can be common to Black women. This introduces a new concept; the idea that Black women, regardless of character, or author, or interpreter are able to be storytellers, and are able to create discourse about their experiences- and act as interpreters and discourses that recognize the power within their storytelling.

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