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In Search of Zora's Grave: Alice Walker's "Looking for Zora"

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Abstract

Besides the special interest and tributes paid to African American women predecessors, through her literary works, Alice Walker has always claimed a matrilineal kinship with these. A kinship that has been manifested in her works, as is the case with Zora Neale Hurston, known for her commitment to black folklore, and to whom Walker devotes her essay « Looking for Zora ». In this article, and through a reading of the essay, we will join Walker in her quest to save Hurston from the oblivion to which racism has relegated her after her death ; an end that Zora had always dreaded. Having as mission the relocation, identification and marking of Zora's grave, Walker has gone through the arduous journey relentlessly, despite multiple obstacles. The journey has been completed with the erection of a gravestone on the grave that sank in forgetfulness. Hence, an homage is paid to Zora by her « niece » Alice.

1. Introduction

Black women have always been central to Alice Walker's work, which vehicle is her preoccupation with black women's ordeals, struggles and triumphs. Being her mothers, grandmothers and/or aunts, Walker keeps celebrating them. In her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), she pays homage to the black women "saints" who managed to cope with their hard conditions and to keep the "spark" of their creativity alive, despite multiple oppression.

Among Phyllis Wheatley, Bessie Smith, Bellie Holiday, and Ma Rainey, Zora Neale Hurston is one of the names who may be added to the long list of named and unnamed black women writers and artists, whom Walker evokes frequently in her writings.

2. Review of the Literature:

Walker's "literary" relationship with Zora Neale Hurston has received a large spate of critical attention, in recent years. This criticism has been carried out under a variety of perspectives; most of which focus on Hurston's influence on Walker. From a "black" dialogical perspective, for instance, Black literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr, in his book *The Signifying Monkey*, which is an appropriation of Bakhtin's dialogical aesthetics to African American literature, centers his study on the inter-textual/dialogical links between Walker's

and Hurston's works. Gates observes that many of Walker's fictional works are revisions and rewritings of Hurston's, or what he calls "signifying" in his critical language.¹

Besides, Maria Lauret, in *Alice Walker*, provides a lengthy study of the literary relation to which she refers with the term "literary coupling" between the two writers and charts the similarities in their fiction. Lauret suggests that Hurston is a "legitimizing presence" for Walker in the African American literary tradition.²

3. Issue and Hypothesis:

One should not overlook what these critics, as representative of others, say about the "literary" relationships between Walker and Hurston; these critics have undoubtedly explored quite important aspects of this relation. Still, they have limited their readings to foregrounding Hurston's literary influence on Walker, as well as detecting the affinities in their works from dialogical and inter-textual perspectives. Moreover, the critics have been essentially concerned with Walker's fiction (novels and short stories), and have tended to overlook her non-fictional works, mainly essays. And even those who referred to Walker's non-fictional works, they limited their studies to influence and affinities.

I intend to go beyond the inter-textual and dialogical matrix and take a step further. It is the purpose of this article to deal with Walker's efforts and role to rescue her predecessor Zora Neale Hurston from literary oblivion and "inconspicuous forgetfulness". Hereafter, I propose a reading of Walker's essay "Looking for Zora" which aims at showing Walker's preoccupation with black women writers, and her journey "in search of Zora's grave", chronicled in the essay, as an illustration of her commitment. I also wish to show Walker as an "audacious and responsible" black woman(ist) who is committed to the "literary" survival of her (grand)mothers and aunts.

Despite her prolific work in fiction and anthropology, rooted in black folklore, Hurston lived in poverty and died in obscurity. Hence, she did not receive any recognition, nor was she given a place neither in the American literary canon nor within the black literary tradition, in her lifetime, or right after her death. This ignorance was due mainly to an intersected race and gender marginalization. Besides, many of her works were (re)discovered and valorized in the 1970s, after Walker had revived publishers and critics interest in Hurston.

The major hypothesis within the scope of this paper is that Walker's southward journey in search of Zora's grave, the identification of the grave and the marker on it can be read as recognition of her achievement and a celebration of her long-neglected genius. Given her concern with black women "artists", starting from her own mother, it is relevant to assume that the latter had a strong impact on Walker's preoccupation with black women and her commitment to their artistic survival, being her grandmothers like Wheatley, her motherslike Harriet Jacobs or her aunts like Hurston. The other guiding assumption is that Walker's attempts, through her journey, to reconstitute Hurston's dismembered family and to claim her as a "literary" relative.

4. Approach and Outline:

My attempt to substitute the major research claim and verify the guiding assumptions will be made through a biographical reading of "Looking for Zora". Instead of the dialogical and

inter-textual approaches that have focused mainly on influence and affinities, I propose a biographical approach thought of as the most appropriate. This appropriation can be explained by the fact that most of Walker's essays are biographical and even autobiographical. The article will be divided into three main sections. The first deals with a short biography of Hurston; focus will be put on the dismemberment of her family, and the circumstances of her death and burial and which will help foreground and better understand Walker's undertaking in the essay. The second part highlights Walker's discovery of Hurston and awareness of the latter's obscure life and death. The third will trace her journey to Florida in search of Zora's grave.

Though much critical attention has already been devoted to the literary relationship between Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, one more piece of research on the two authors would, hopefully, contribute to the enrichment of existing scholarship, especially if the perspective differs from previous ones. The paper aims equally at opening new vistas to the appreciation of Walker's essay as her fiction (novels and short stories) have occupied the lion's part.

5. Lonely and homeless Zora:

Zora's early childhood knew stability and happiness. The family prospered in Eatonville, in a large house built on five acres of land. As mayor, John Hurston helped make the laws governing the black community of Eatonville; while Zora's mother, Lucy, helped direct the Sunday school. Zora used to have several clashes with her father, due mainly to her challenge of the gender roles expected of her as a 'girl', and which Hurston's biographer Loverie King reads as "Zora and her father seemed destined to be at odds from the day she was born a female rather than a male."³ Meanwhile, the mother Lucy, after whom Zora took the strength of character, emerged as the center of the household and Zora's world altogether.

Zora's life changed drastically and her dream world of childhood collapsed with her mother's death on September 18th 1904. John Hurston remarried soon after and the household began to fall apart. Right after that, the father sent his daughter to Florida's Baptist Academy and abandoned her there. Hurston did well despite the white background which made her aware of racial difference and of being colored. Once back home, she felt disillusioned with her family, especially her father. The home which had been a nurturing and secure place, now turned into a site of conflict. Eventually, after several disputes with her step-mother, Zora was "expulsed" in 1905: "I was on my way from the village never to return to it as a real part of the town," ⁴reflects Hurston. She lived with several friends and relatives, shifting from a house to another, and her schooling was, therefore, interrupted. As a teenager, she had several menial jobs, working as a nurse to the whites, as a domestic or babysitter. Zora could not cope with these jobs because of her strong character which did not allow her to be subservient. She even suffered from sexual advances by the men she worked for.

In 1911, she returned home but found the situation there unbearable and she left home anew. She was taken in by her eldest brother who promised to finance her further schooling. Again, after three years there of house work and babysitting but with no schooling in the horizon, she left her brother's for a new adventure. She worked as a maid to a singer in Gilbert and Sullivan Troupe, which offered her considerable knowledge about music, theatre

and allowed her to read many books. Hurston's father died in 1918 in a car accident in Memphis, but she did not attend his funeral.

Zora decided to go back to school and enrolled at the Morgan Academy where she fared well except in mathematics. Then she attended Barnard College as the only black student there and graduated with a Bachelor's degree. Under the supervision of anthropologist Franz Boas, Hurston worked on black folklore for more than twenty years. In 1927, Zora married Herbert Sheen, a fellow student at Barnard. The marriage lasted for four years then ended in divorce. She was unwilling to give in to gender roles under marriage, and which failed because her husband did not accept her determination to have a career. Even later when she found a lover who was intellectually equal to her, the relationship failed because she was unwilling to assume a subordinate role and give up her work.⁵

Langston Hughes introduced Hurston to Mrs Charlotte Rufus Osgood Mason, a wealthy widow, who sponsored African American arts in Manhattan, New York. Eventually, a contract was signed in December, wherein Mrs Mason would finance Zora's research and writing for many years while Hurston would collect material which could not be published without Mrs Mason's permission.⁶ It follows that Mrs Mason and Franz Boas were Zora's godmother and father. They put her on the track of research on black folklore in the American South as well as in the Caribbean. Both had a crucial role in shaping Zora's career. Their mentorship and support mingled with her strong determination culminated in great success.

Hurston's prolific career came to a devastating period, in September 1948, when she was arrested by the New York police and "falsely" charged of committing an immoral act with a 10-year old boy. The case was dismissed; however, the accusation and arrest did a great damage to Zora's psyche who reflected on the whole affair:

Please do not forget that this thing was not done in the South but in the so-called liberal North. Where shall I look in this country for justice? This has happened to me who has always believed in the essential and eventual rightness of my country. I have been on my own since I was fourteen, scuffling my own way through high school and college and as you know, I have never lived an easy life, but struggled on and on to achieve my ideals. I have believed in America. I have fought the good fight; I have kept the faith.

All that I have ever tried to do has proved useless. All that I have believed in failed me. I have resolved to die...no acquittal will persuade some people that I am innocent. I feel hurled down a filthy privy hole.⁷

The moral charge marked the beginning of Zora's end as it engendered a decline in her prolific career.

The final decade in Hurston's life was characterized by extreme financial conditions. Between 1951 and 1956, she lived in Eau Gallie, Florida, on scanty incomes, from teaching and other jobs. Starting from 1957, she survived on welfare assistance. Shortly before her death, she refused to attend a family reunion because she was too proud to let her family know about her

situation. Zora continued to work until she could produce no more. And in 1959, Hurston had a stroke which forced her into a welfare home in St Lucie County. She died in January 1960 of heart disease at the age of 69, in Fort Pierce, Florida. Her family attended neither her sickbed nor her funeral, hence Zora's vision "I knew that I would be an orphan and homeless. I knew that while I was still helpless, that the comforting circle of my family would be broken, and that I would have to wander cold and friendless until I had served my time,"⁸ Comes true.

6. Discovering "Zora's lost World":

In a lecture at Barnard College, Alice Walker tells of her journey to discover Zora Neale Hurston. At school, Walker never found any stories about blacks whom she had always been fascinated with, thanks to her mother's stories. She went through Grammar School then High School and her junior year at high school was the year Zora died. Walker, however, did not even know that Zora existed. A neighbor used to bring Greek plays and other books like Jane Eyre but greedy-reading Walker had never heard of Zora Neale Hurston and had no idea that there were any black women writers. At Spelman, a black women's College, nobody heard of Hurston. Then later at Sarah Lawrence, only white literature was taught. Muriel Rukeyser, a teacher at the College, first mentioned Zora whom she knew but she did not tell Walker anything about her.⁹

When Hurston wrote to W.E.B DuBois, in a 1945 letter, "let no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness", she did not know what was in store for her. Still, provided her extreme financial situation, Zora, in writing the letter, might have predicted her death in total poverty and loneliness. Indeed, her neighbors collected donations to fund the funeral, but the money collected was not enough to pay for a headstone and Zora's grave remained unmarked for more than a decade. Hurston's proposal could have benefited Negro artists; the idea of the cemetery lay on the premise that Negro artists should be rescued from forgetfulness, otherwise their spirits would 'evaporate'. The proposal, stemming from her concern about Negro artists and most probably about herself, met with DuBois's refusal. In a short reply, he declined it altogether and preferred to stay away from it.¹⁰

Literary critic Robert Hemenway revealed the secret about the successful but forgotten Hurston who had lived and died in poverty and obscurity then was buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery, in Fort Pierce, Florida, which Hemenway reads as "symbolic of the black [woman] writer's fate in America."¹¹ Hurston, who had been deeply concerned about a proper burial and a survival of Negro artists even after death, was ironically buried in an unmarked grave. Had Dubois taken up the project, Hurston's grave would have been known.

Hemenway's findings had a great and decisive effect on Alice Walker who received them with consternation that a woman who had given so much of her life to blacks was "consigned to a sneering oblivion."¹² In a comment echoing Hemenway's, she says "America doesn't support or honor us as human beings, let alone as blacks, women and artists."¹³ Walker's *prise de conscience* was strong enough to incite her to rescue Zora Neale Hurston from oblivion. Zora's "we must assume the responsibility of their *graves* being *known* and *honored*"

(emphasis mine),¹⁴ now becomes Walker's quest, a natural duty she accepts "as a black person, a woman and a writer."¹⁵

7. "Bone by bone": the search for the grave:

"We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away: and if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and if necessary, bone by bone", ¹⁶ writes Alice Walker, who filled with indignation, she embarks on a journey in search of Zora's grave, chronicled in "Looking for Zora". On August 15, 1973, Walker lands in Eatonville, Florida which she describes in vivid words. Hurston's hometown has previously lived in Walker's imagination; it now turns into a reality with its "houses, stores, and sandy soil". Her curiosity to see about Zora's hometown is mingled with fascination with the town Zora had written so abundantly about.

Pretending to be "Miss Zora's niece", Walker arrives in the City Hall in search of anyone who might have been acquainted with Hurston. The simple, but useful lie, lies on the premise that Walker was so eager to find healing answers to her ailing questions that she wanted to inspire confidence and overcome any reluctance on the part of the people who could satisfy her eagerness. She discovers to her shock and dismay that schools there do not teach Zora's books and that only a few people in Eatonville have ever read her books and known her great achievements.

Walker is then directed to an 82 year old woman, "Mrs Mathilda Moseley", the only living person who might remember Zora. Mrs Moseley "a neat old lady in a purple dress and with white hair" was Hurston's school mate at Hungerford School. The old woman looks suspiciously at Walker and is reluctant to talk about Zora at first. When she becomes talkative, she talks more about herself and her husband than about Zora, to Walker's dissatisfaction. Inquisitive Walker wants to find out "why is it that thirteen years after Zora's, no marker has been put on her grave?"¹⁷ The reason according to the old lady is that "she was buried down in South Florida somewhere. I don't think anybody really knew where she was."¹⁸ The old woman's reply foreshadows a difficult mission for Walker who strives to find and mark Zora's grave. The 'somewhere' is the substitute of the 'cemetery' that could have been established for Negro artists at Zora's proposal but which had not seen light.

Consternated by this forgetfulness about Zora's life and death, Walker goes to Fort Pierce, Florida. At the Lee-Peek Mortuary which had organized Zora's funeral, Walker meets Mrs Sarah Peek Paterson, the director of the Mortuary who seems willing to provide her visitor with information about where the grave is. Walker continues to identify as Zora's niece, a lie which comes with "perfect naturalness". "She is my aunt-and that of all black people as well," says Walker who now deliberately makes up for Zora's family who had abandoned her and attended neither her sickbed nor funeral. Mrs Patterson unveils the mystery of Zora's grave that Walker longed to hear: "she is in the old cemetery, the Garden of Heavenly Rest, on Seventeenth Street. Just when you go in the gate there's a circle, and she's buried right in the middle of it. Hers is the only grave in that circle because people don't bury in that cemetery anymore."¹⁹ Even after her death, Zora lies in neglect and loneliness which echo her life wandering alone and confirms her vision.

Having secured such invaluable information, Walker and her white companion Charlotte Blunt from Florida and who was writing her graduate dissertation on Hurston, head for the cemetery. Walker's mission was no easy one, amidst weeds, bushes, ant hills and even snakes. Even Mrs Patterson's diagram of the location of the grave proves of little help. Nevertheless, Walker decides to move forward in her hazardous search and penetrate deeper into the cemetery which looks rather like an "abandoned field". She "plunges" into the waist-tall weeds and progresses towards the center of the cemetery following Mrs Patterson's directions which are now Walker's map of Zora's garden of heavenly rest: "I pull my long dress up to my hips. The weeds scratch my knees, and the insects have a feast...sandspurs are sticking to the inside of my skirt, and ants cover my feet."²⁰

Amidst these difficulties Walker comes so close to desperation, especially as "finding the grave seems positively hopeless,"²¹ and she stands there with her companion. Hence Zora's vision "two women waited there for me. I could not see their faces, but I knew one to be young and one to be old. One of them was arranging some queer-shaped flowers such I had never seen."²² The two women are Walker and her companion. The bigger the obstacles she encounters on her way, the greater her determination to discover then recover Zora's grave. Walker defies the ants, weeds and snakes and advances, yelling "Zora", "Zora". All of a sudden, she stumbles upon something "my foot sinks into a hole. I look down, I am standing in a sunken rectangle that is about six feet long and about three or four feet wide. I look up to see where the gates are."²³ Walker explores the area and measures the hole she has found against Mrs Patterson's diagram then identifies it as Zora's long forgotten grave, to her great pleasure at finding it but equally great dismay at the state of it.

Walker then moves a step forward in her journey and endeavors to mark the newly discovered grave. With her white assistant, she goes to the Merritt Monument to order a headstone. Her eyes fall on a "tall black stone" which "looks as majestic as Zora herself" and which Walker believes would best honor her "aunt". However, the "Ebony Mist" as she learns from the engraver far exceeds her means. Frustrated at not being rich, Walker purchases a "plain gray marker" instead; the only one she can afford, but which is nothing like Zora. She then hands the engraver an inscription to be bestowed on the 'modest' headstone reading: "ZORA NEALE HURSTON. 'A Genius of the South'. NOVELIST, FOLKLORIST, ANTHROPOLOGIST 1901-1960."²⁴

Zora Neale Hurston was aware of the attitude of young black writers towards her. She believed that "the first thing too many Negroes do when they want to be writers...is to grab something from me, and then hate me for being alive to make their pretensions out a lie. And then take all kinds of steps to head me off. 'Block that Zora! is a regular slogan."²⁵ Walker wishes she had seen Zora before her death and regretted and resented the neglect and oblivion surrounding her in school curricula; an oblivion which delayed Walker's discovery of Hurston and her work. Walker rather considers her a lesson, a "cautionary tale" that all blacks and especially black women must learn from.²⁶ Walker's pride of Zora is expressed on several occasions "What is amazing is that Zora, who became an orphan at nine, a runaway at fourteen, a maid and manicurist (because of necessity and not from love of the work) before she was twenty-with one dress- managed to become Zora Neale Hurston, author and

anthropologist, at all.”²⁷ The trials Zora encountered in her life were as big as Walker’s pride of her ‘aunt’.

Walker then strives to rescue Zora’s legacy and celebrate her thereby replacing the slogan “block that Zora” with “Zora Neale Hurston a genius of the South”, borrowed from Jean Toomer’s poem. This is best read as a commemoration and recognition of Hurston as a distinguished and exemplary black woman writer who inspired Walker’s budding career and with whom she identifies so proudly. Deborah G. Plant interprets Walker’s calling Zora a “genius” as undermining white racist discourse whereby blacks had always been seen as inferior thus having no genius. A discourse which dates back to Thomas Jefferson who believed and overtly claimed that blacks were incapable of thinking, commenting on Phyllis Wheatley’s poetry which was problematic at the time. Even Abraham Lincoln, known as ‘the Great Emancipator’ entertained similar views.²⁸ Walker retorts that not only could blacks think and produce work, they could excel in that as well, and Zora is the best example. Once Zora’s grave is marked Walker’s mission is accomplished. The headstone on the grave, which is of a great significance, substitutes the cemetery proposed by Hurston but declined by DuBois. DuBois’s short answer is also opposed by Walker’s long and arduous but legendary journey in search of Zora’s grave and which culminates in the grave being “known and honored”.

Hurston ends her vision in an appealing passage “when I had come to these women, then I would be at the end of my pilgrimage, but not the end of my life. Then I would know peace and love and what goes with these, and not before.”²⁹ Zora’s garden of heavenly rest was an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Seventeenth Street. The grave unmarked and covered with weeds, as it were, was no garden nor was the rest heavenly. It is only when Walker rescues it from oblivion that Zora finds peace, love and rest. The end of Zora’s pilgrimage implies the end of her life journey in search of black folklore and which she probably saw as a pilgrimage, a sacred cause for her. Nevertheless, it is not the end of her life as Walker’s pilgrimage to Zora’s grave brings about a resurrection and revival of Zora who is brought back to life and rescued from literary oblivion and forgetfulness. Walker reflects on finding Zora’s grave at the end of “Looking for Zora”:

There are times_ and finding Zora Hurston’s grave was one of them_ when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they bear no real relation to the depth of the emotion one feels. It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is. Partly this is because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too it is because there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity.³⁰

8. Conclusion:

Through her journey in search of Hurston’s grave and marking it, Walker commemorates other black women artists and writers who met with exclusion and marginalization

in American society and literature. Thanks to Walker, Zora's grave became known and her literary works revived. Walker's celebration through the journey and essay can be extended to all black women artists. In the same manner, she identifies with Zora and other black women artists, as literary foremothers. In conclusion, Walker has been as much committed to the revival and rescue of Zora from oblivion as Zora had always been committed to the collection and preservation of black folklore and Negro artists from forgetfulness. The 'aunt' and the 'niece' both belonged to a 'people' who do not throw their geniuses away.

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