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## **Mothers in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston**

Sociologists and feminist scholars portraying the black mother are faced with a number of stereotypes, on the one hand, and images of motherhood in the twentieth century shaped by predominantly white women's studies scholars, on the other. While black feminist scholars and post World War II literary authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have gone a long way to dismiss such stereotypes, their work was itself influenced by earlier writing, in particular that of Zora Neale Hurston, the premier black female literary author, alternately described as ethnographer,<sup>1</sup> anthropologist and *griot*,<sup>2</sup> who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Hurston's work, especially her three major novels and a few of her short stories, contain many examples of the black mother in the first, second and third generations following the end of the Civil War. Although the novels and short stories were published as fiction, the characters, locations and settings were generally taken from Hurston's own experiences, and her writing is invaluable in forming an understanding of experiences faced by blacks, including the black mother, during the first half of the twentieth century.

Following a brief description of common stereotypes and misconceptions of black mothers in the U.S. popular media, this paper turns to the characteristics of the black mother identified by black feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins (1991; 1999). The following section analyzes the importance of Hurston's work in understanding and describing black mothers in the period after emancipation. The particular roles of bloodmothers and othermothers in her fiction, and the similarities in the plight of mothers and childless women are also outlined, and a conclusion is proposed in which the importance of literary authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and others is emphasized as a source of information for sociologists and feminist/

womanist scholars aiming to understand the struggles that black mothers, black women in general, and their white counterparts face in a society that retains strong elements of both patriarchy and racism.

### **Black mothers: common myths and images of social control**

A commonplace image of black mothers held by the white majority is that of the welfare-receiving single parent. When asked to describe the origin of the high incidence of single-parent black households, this same majority tends to engage in vague backwards projection linking today's family patterns with a perceived origin during the times of slavery and emancipation. Further prodding might bring to light conceptions about disruptions of family life during slavery, giving rise to matriarchal households, a pattern retained after emancipation (Kain, 1998: 318-9). However, Gutman (1976) documented that, contrary to popular belief, matriarchal households were not commonplace during the last decade of slavery and the first generation of emancipation when nine tenths of black households either had both parents present or contained a father living with his children.

How and why did myths such as the matriarchal family emerge? Patricia Hill Collins (1999: 142-148) explains that the image of the black matriarch, together with that of the mammy, and the welfare mother, is part of an elite white male ideological portrayal of black women's sexuality, which serves to maintain race and gender oppression. Indeed, the black mammy is invariably portrayed as very dark and heavy set, supposedly not sexually appealing to the white male who covets the slender Barbie image. She is, however, the ideal domestic servant, available 24 hours per day and never demanding a rise in pay. The matriarch and the welfare mother also portray a negative view of the black mother: that of the woman who does not control her sexuality and number of offspring and who is both an "emasculator" of men and a financial liability to responsible hardworking mainstream society. Even scholars who did not consider themselves racists bought into the matriarch viewpoint, with devastating political consequences. Thus, Patrick Moynihan's<sup>3</sup> report of 1965 on the *Negro Family* fostered the idea that the matriarchal black family structure, rather than outright racism lay at the foundation of economic problems faced by African Americans. This negative image of black mothers is further augmented by views that they insufficiently discipline their children, defeminize their daughters and generally discourage their children's academic achievement (Wade-Gayles, 1997: Chapter 3). The dominant white public is thus conveniently left with the hardworking non-complaining domestic servant image as the primary positive portrayal of the black mother, in short, a happy slave. Black men have tended to paint a positive image, which is also biased, namely that of the black mother who has insurmountable strength and genius (Collins, 1991: 117).

To form a more realistic image of the black mother, and her changing role from slavery times through emancipation and into the twentieth century,

requires familiarization with and appreciation of black culture, and development of an understanding of how the interplay of racism, sexism and poverty affect women's treatment of themselves and their children. Let us take a look at black feminist views of the various facets that make up black mothers and then, turn to illustrations of these facets in the characters of Hurston's short stories and novels.

### **Motherhood in black feminist thought**

The negative image of black mothers has increasingly come under attack by sociologists and other scholars of the black family, especially since the 1970s. Reaction to well-intentioned books, like Moynihan's, and examination of the women's movement's achievements also brought to light a subtext of white racism in the scholarship resulting from the movement. As bell hooks put it (1981: 124), feminists must seek to understand "woman's relationship to society, to race and to the American culture as it is and not as we would ideally have it be," and Patricia Hill Collins (1991: 115) added the charge that black feminists need to "honor our mothers' sacrifice by developing an Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood."

The institution of black motherhood can be seen as a dynamic set of relationships with several enduring characteristics at their core. First, motherhood consists of the role played by bloodmothers and that of supportive so-called othermothers in the extended family,<sup>4</sup> who can be siblings, grandmothers, or neighbors (Collins, 1991: 119). Second, mothers socialize their children to survive in a world fraught with racism, patriarchy and the uneven distribution of wealth (126). Third, black mothers foster creativity and strength in their children, i.e., they are mothers to the minds as well as to the bodies of their children, and they themselves are endowed with strength and social status. Fourth, beyond the immediate family, community othermothers may play an important role in social activism (130-2).

These characteristics of black motherhood are apparent in the work of Dill (1979), Wade-Gayles (1997) and others. They are also present in the work of feminist and womanist literary authors, and Zora Neale Hurston's work provides early illustrations, many of which are taken from her real life surroundings.

### **Motherhood in Hurston's fiction**

With Hurston's renewed popularity and the reappearance of her work since the 1970s,<sup>5</sup> came many essays and books analyzing her life and work. Notable among these are Wall (1974), Walker (1979), Hill (1996), Cronin (1999),<sup>6</sup> and Meisenhelder (1999). Most scholars of black fiction who have viewed Hurston's work with a feminist lens have, however, focused on women who have liberated themselves, primarily from patriarchal oppression. This means that the majority of scholars have focused their attention on various aspects of the character of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>7</sup>

However, Janie was not a mother (her first husband was too old, and by the time she met Teacake, she herself was probably beyond her childbearing years), and this fact made her liberation easier than it would have been had she borne children.

It is relevant to examine Hurston's fiction in relation to motherhood, for several interrelated reasons. First, Zora Hurston reached adulthood in the second generation after the Civil War ended. This was a time when black mothers could emotionally afford and needed to nurture and love their children in an environment that was relatively safe from forced separation of parents and children effected by slave owners. Thus one could reasonably expect to observe their children reach adulthood. Second, Zora herself may have been a mother in her younger and not well documented adult years. While she does not mention this in her autobiographical *Dust Tracks on a Road*, published in 1942, this book is so characterized by posturing and self-concealment,<sup>8</sup> that the probability of her own motherhood cannot be dismissed. Third, the figure of the child sometimes appears as a metaphor in Hurston's work. As a case in point, Ray, the deformed and retarded child of Arvay in *Seraph on the Swannee* is a stand-in for the obstacles caused by and to be overcome in Arvay's quest for freedom from objectification and ridicule by her seemingly perfect husband, Jim Meserve. Children and men, especially husbands, are something to grow beyond if women are to obtain emancipation in Hurston's books. In a further metaphor, Zora Hurston herself can be viewed as the Renaissance Mother to a generation of great feminist black artists, including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, who have themselves vividly described socio-economic difficulties faced by black mothers in their own well known books. Finally, Hurston's fictional and autobiographical descriptions of mothers form a set of examples of changing historical patterns of black womanhood that illustrate several, if not all of the characteristics outlined by Patricia Hill Collins (1991; 1999), Gloria Wade-Gayles (1997), and other black feminist scholars.

### **Motherhood in the Short Stories**

Hurston's depictions of women as mothers in her short stories (see the collection *Spunk: the Selected Stories of Zora Neale Hurston*, 1985) are incidental and fragmentary. Violence against and economic exploitation of women is the rule in these stories, some of which are set in the rural black community of Eatonville, Florida, while others take place in Harlem during the Renaissance. Motherhood is mentioned only in passing in the popular stories. In *Spunk*, the protagonist Lena Kanty is told by Spunk (1985: 3) that "A woman knows her boss an' she answers when he calls," and in *Sweat*, Delia Jones's husband squanders his earnings on other women while Delia provides for his and her own support by picking up laundry from white families on Saturdays, laundering all week and delivering it back to them the next Saturday, in an endless cycle. On top of this, her husband plots to kill her so he can have the house to share with another woman. Motherhood is touched upon briefly in some of the other

stories. In *Isis*, the protagonist seems to have a non-present father, but nothing is mentioned of her bloodmother. Isis herself is being raised by Grandma Potts, a typical othermother. In the short story *The Gilded Six-Bits*, motherhood is also mentioned, but only in passing: When Missie May becomes pregnant (she is “making feet for shoes” in Zora Hurston’s colorful language), the main question explored is whether she is carrying the child of her husband Joe or of the overweight (“puzzle-gutted”) Otis Slemmons, whom she let share her bed because she coveted his gold coins (which turned out to be gilded quarters). The baby turns out to be the “spittin’ image” of Joe (1985: 67), and the relationship between husband and wife is mended. There is brief mention of Joe’s mother and several older women who take care both of the house and of Missie May while she is recovering from childbirth. In fact, Joe’s mother helps reinforce the idea in his mind that the baby does indeed look like him, in spite of the fact that she “never thought well of you marryin’ Missie May cause her ma used tuh fan her foot ‘round right smart and Ah been mighty skeered that Missay May wuz gointer git misput on her road” (1985: 67).

### **Motherhood in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and other Hurston novels**

The only book to prominently feature black motherhood is *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, published in 1934 as Zora Hurston’s first novel. While it is not the most popular of her work, it is important in that it is to some extent autobiographical. The setting of the town is a collage of various towns near Eatonville, Florida. John Pearson is modeled after her philandering charismatic preacher father, while his child-wife Lucy even has the same name as Zora’s own mother. John’s character combines an African tradition, which blurs the distinction between body and spirit, with a Puritan outlook and a vivid white-evangelical preaching style.<sup>9</sup> There are several mothers in the story in addition to the central character Lucy.

John’s mother, Amy Crittenden, is a sharecropper’s wife who well remembers slavery conditions. While it is not called *rape* in the story, it is made clear that John was fathered by the white plantation owner, a fact that is used among many others to incite violence on the part of Amy’s husband, Ned. Hence, he is called the “yaller child by Ned, “uh ‘nother man’s youngun (Hurston, 1971: 14). Since Amy was 12 when Lee surrendered (1971: 15), she was still a child when she became pregnant. Despite Ned’s repeated violence against her: “you needs uh good head stompin’” (1971: 10), Amy stands up for her son against her husband’s violence, saying, “Ned Crittenden, you raise dat wood at mah boy, and you gointer make uh bad nigga outa me” (1971: 12). She also tries to instill in her husband the need to love children in these new post-slavery times (1971: 16): “Us chillun is ourn. Ah doan know, mebbe hit’ll take some of us generations, but us got tu ‘gin tu practice on treasurin’ our younguns. Ah loves dese heah already uh whole heap. Ah don’t want ‘em knocked and ‘buked.” Here, Zora Hurston is pointing out a critical aspect of emotional adjustment made by black mothers in the first generation after emancipation.

Lucy Potts is also a child about to become a mother. John meets her almost immediately after leaving “over Big Creek” with the support of Amy, who knows that this is the only way she can keep protecting him against his stepfather’s violence. Lucy is almost too perfect: she is smart and perfect at spelling (1971: 54), sings beautifully in church (1971: 56) and is calm and self-assured, although she is not yet twelve years old. Yet, she considers herself ready to become a woman as soon as she “finds a hair on her body, and notices tiny horizontal ridges had shifted her bust a step away from childhood” (p. 116). In fact, when they get married, John declares (1971: 131) “Ahm gointer be uh father and uh mother tuh you. You jes’ look tuh me girl chile. Jes’ you put yo’ pendance in me. Ah means tuh prop you up on ev’y leaning’ side.”

Lucy was still growing, up to the time when her third son was born (1971: 138), and weighed a slight 95 lbs. after having delivered her child. Throughout Lucy’s childbirth experiences, with her husband turning more and more into the philanderer, an othermother assists with the births and the housework. She is Pheemy, a woman raised on the same plantation where Emmeline hailed from. When she meets John after he leaves his family, she declares “Ahm yo’ granny!” (1971: 160) and she is by Lucy’s side on numerous occasions.

While the character of Lucy Potts-Pearson is almost too perfect and can be criticized for being too much like the biased image painted by black men of the mentally and physically strong black mother, Lucy is much more than that. She embodies several of the overlapping characteristics of black motherhood pointed out by Collins (1991) and others. Like John’s mother Emmeline had done before her, Lucy protects her children and provides them with a spiritual and creative boost into their own future. In a manner similar to Zora Hurston’s own mother Lucy, the fictional Lucy tells her daughter Isis (1971: 206): “...’member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat’s de onliest way you kin keep out from under people’s feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin’ ”. Yet Lucy also readies her children for the prejudiced exploitative world they are going to have to live in. Above all, they must learn to fend for themselves (1971: 207): “You got de spunk, but mah po’ li’l’ sandy-haired chile goin’ suffer uh lot ‘fo’ she git tuh de place she kin ‘fend fuh herself.”

Not to be ignored in the discussion of motherhood in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is John’s third wife, Sally Lovelace, who seems to him a reincarnation of his beloved Lucy.<sup>10</sup> In several ways, Sally functions as an othermother to John’s neglected children. She not only rescues the fallen John financially and emotionally, explaining (1971: 298) “[w]ho else Ahm goin’ tuh spend it [my money] on? Ah ain’t got uh chick nor uh chile ‘ceptin’ you,” but she also provides for Lucy’s seven children in the end. After John gets killed by the train, a perhaps fitting end that may also have been the result of a voodoo spell, Sally decides (1971: 310) that the substantial sum of \$7,000 which the railroad has paid to compensate her for John’s death, will be given to John and Lucy’s children.

It is possible to draw parallels between several of the protagonist heroines

of Zora Hurston's three basic novels, although only Lucy Potts and Amy Crittenden of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* were black bloodmothers. The other two women heroines, Janie Crawford and Arvey Meserve, share with these black bloodmothers a quest for liberation in a patriarchal society that exploits people according to gender, sex and race. The three children of Arvey in *Seraph on the Suwanee* can be likened to the three husbands of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Moreover, all of these women had to leave before they could attain a form of feminist liberation: Lucy left in death, Arvey left Jim Meserve to reflect on the fact that she could attain her own liberation without having to change her selfish irresponsible husband, and Janie Crawford left one husband, and buried two others, and returns to town a strong and vindicated woman, albeit one who may herself be dying of rabies after having been bitten by Teacake. The similarities between all of these women, regardless of their race and motherhood status, is not central to the subject of the present paper, however, and they will not be entered into further detail here.

### **Conclusion**

Black mothers in Zora Neale Hurston's fiction portray several, but not all, of the characteristics described above as central to the institution of black motherhood. Clearly present is the relation between bloodmothers and othermothers. Furthermore, both bloodmothers and othermothers socialize children to learn to function in a world where patriarchy, economic exploitation and racism are the rule. Mothers also help their children to visualize being the "bell cow" despite obstacles they have to face when leaving the family fold. What we do not find in Hurston's fiction is the characteristic of the *community* othermother who is central to feminist and race activism. This is not surprising, because Zora Hurston herself never engaged in activism designed to force whites to integrate with the black community. Hurston believed and showed through her writing that African American culture is wonderful. In the long run, the realization on the part of whites of the importance, the dignity, the history, and the beauty of black culture will make whites *want* to integrate. Not surprisingly, Zora Hurston strongly opposed the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. As Bob Callahan states in the foreword to *Spunk*, "[Zora] generally grew so self-reliant in her politics, so singularly determined in her belief in the dignity and independence of Afro-American culture, that she came to vigorously and publically oppose the famous Supreme Court ruling..." (1985: xi). In her view, blacks cannot gain self respect knowing that others are associating with them because of a court order rather than because they want to. Zora Hurston's writing contributes to instilling a desire to *want* to associate with the people she describes, and her portrayal of motherhood is part of this achievement.

When placed in its historical context of the first few generations after the end of slavery, and taken together with the work of other black feminist literary authors, notably Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, the stuff

of Zora Neale Hurston's literary fiction becomes an important source of information guiding sociologists, cultural anthropologists and feminist scholars in general who aim to increase their understanding of the institution of black motherhood in American society over the last century.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Hill 1996: ix and xxiii. The headstone message for Zora Neale Hurston's presumed grave site, written by Alice Walker, describes her as " 'A Genius of the South': Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist" (1979: 307).

<sup>2</sup>The term *griot* refers to the African storyteller, who transmits cultural history and folklore in the form of a combination of one-person theater and storyteller, with a format that retains strong traditional elements (e.g., prescribed ways of beginning or ending the story that is being told).

<sup>3</sup>See Moynihan (1966). Also see Ginsburg (1989) for an analysis of the enduring influence of this report.

<sup>4</sup>The role of othermothers has traditionally been important in West African culture.

<sup>5</sup>Hurston's most popular novel remains *Their Eyes were Watching God*, first published in 1937. Her other two major novels were *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). She began publishing short stories in 1921.

<sup>6</sup>A collection of recent critical essays on the work of Zora Hurston, including those by Pinckney, Story, Strong and St. Clair.

<sup>7</sup>The entire book is included in the collection of Hurston's work edited by Cheryl Wall (1974). Examples of literary analyses focusing on the emergence of Janie Crawford's consciousness are provided in the essays of Missy Dehn Kubitschek (1983), Sally Ann Ferguson (1987), Erik Curren (1995), and Meisenhelder (1999).

<sup>8</sup>See Mary Helen Washington's commentary in the introduction to *I Love Myself When I'm Laughing* (Walker 1979: 7-25).

<sup>9</sup>See Larry Neal's introduction to *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1971: 6).

<sup>10</sup>Now that he is freed from the voodoo spells exerted on him by Hattie, he recognizes how he has wronged his dear wife Lucy, with whom he spent 22 years of marriage.

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*Brigitte H. Bechtold*

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