Michael Awkward

INSPIRITING INFLUENCES

Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels

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In loving memory of my mother, Anna Marie Awkward (1929–1986), who, in her inimitable way, taught me that life is no crystal stair, and insisted, despite this daunting fact, that I keep climbing.

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Inspiriting Influences

Introduction

"Mah Tongue is in Mah Friend's Mouf": Toward An Intertextual Reading of Afro-American Women's Novels

So in the beginning of this was a woman . . .

Zora Neale Hurston
Their Eyes Were Watching God

Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing in the old way is impossible. In the past ten or fifteen years the crucial task of reconstruction has been carried on by a number of scholars whose work has made it possible to document black women as artists, as intellectuals, as symbol makers. The continuities of this tradition, as Hortense Spillers tells us, are broken and sporadic, but the knitting together of these fragments has begun.

Mary Helen Washington
"Introduction," *Invented Lives*

[A]ll readers, male and female alike, must be taught first to recognize the existence of a significant body of writing by women in America and, second, they must be encouraged to learn how to read it within its own unique and informing contexts of meaning and symbol. Re-visionary rereading, *if you will.*

Annette Kolodny
"Map for Rereading"

NTOZAKE SHANGE'S moving and provocative feminist choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,* begins with what is perhaps the dominant image in the recent creative and critical writing of Afro-American women: the struggle to make articulate a heretofore repressed and silenced black female's story and voice. Against a backdrop of patently stereotypic misreadings of black women ("are we ghouls?/children of horror?/the joke?/ . . . are we animals? have we gone crazy?"),[1] Shange's woman in brown plain-

tively cries out for accurate, revelatory representations of Afro-American women's lives:

somebody/anybody
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you . . .
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty . . .
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
the makin of a melody
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly (2-3)

The remarkable recent outpouring of sophisticated, compelling literary works by Afro-American women writers suggests the almost life-sustaining urgency felt by black females to "sing a black girl's song." If the early 1970s Afro-American woman reader, confronted by a literary canon overwhelmingly male in its focus and authorship, was unfamiliar with "the sound/of her own voice," she most certainly has achieved (re)birth and warm handling in recent texts by such novelists as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan. Indeed, the last decade alone has witnessed the arrival of such a remarkably sophisticated body of black female expressivity that the criticism devoted to its explication has only begun to analyze in full and illuminating ways the discursive power of Afro-American women's literature. That important work has, however, indeed begun; as Mary Helen Washington has asserted, black feminist criticism at the present time can be said to "represent an effort to piece together those 'broken and sporadic' continuities that constitute black women's literary tradition."[2]

The most influential early efforts to connect the disparate pieces of an Afro-American woman's expressive tradition are found in Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," an essay which profiles her own (and, by extension, contemporary black women writers') artistic genealogy. Walker credits black female folk artists, ancestral figures whose creativity found expression in such forms as quilting and gardening, as having "handed on [to contemporary Afro-American female writers] the creative spark."[3] Such ancestral figures, whom Walker refers to as "our mothers and grandmothers" (240), serve as important artistic precursors because of their daring and willful expression of their artistic sensibilities in the face of the obstacles of racism and sexism that had seen other black women "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (233). These Afro-American female precursorial figures, in short, "kept alive," in previously undervalued, nonliterary, everyday use artistic forms, "the vibrant, creative spirit that the [contemporary] black woman [writer] has inherited" (239).

Walker's concern with black female genealogical connections is shared by Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism." Unlike Walker, however, whose primary focus in the aforementioned essay is the establishment of artistic connections with black female folk artisans (including her own oratorically and horticulturally skilled mother), Smith's specific concern is textual manifestation of the Afro-American woman's creative spirit, is *literary* ancestry. She insists that an essential feature of black feminist criticism must be a delineation of an Afro-American woman's literary tradition. Smith asserts:

> Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. . . . [T]heirs [is] a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country. . . . [T]hematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share.[4]

For Smith, the Afro-American woman's literary tradition results from its writers' common "cultural experience" as gendered and racial outsiders in a patriarchal white American society. It is this common experience which explains, for Smith, the thematic and formal similarities between texts in the black female tradition and "results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures" (174).

As the following pages demonstrate, this study, which is an intertextual analysis of four novels in the Afro-American woman's tradition—Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*—is influenced in several ways by the formulations in Smith's groundbreaking essay. I am not, however, fully in accord with her assertions about the conditions which shape the Afro-American woman's literary tradition. I believe that the textual affinities between black women's works generally exist not simply as the result of a common sexual and racial oppression, but, rather, most frequently occur as a function of black women writers' conscious acts of refiguration and revision of the earlier canonical texts.[5] In this respect, my views are closer to those of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who has argued about the Afro-American literary tradition generally: "It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying."[6]

Such acts of authorial self-definition are necessary first steps for a female aspiring to become a writer in what has historically been as overwhelmingly male—and sometimes virulently misogynist—an expressive tradition as the Afro-American literary canon. The novice Afro-American female writer, seeking to participate in a tradition which had until recently offered women very little in the way of accurate representation or authorial canonization, could struggle to become a writer "only by actively seeking a female precursor," as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar—in a deft revision of Harold Bloom's theories of male literary influence—have argued, "who . . . proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible"[7]

In order to comprehend the contours of the black female literary tradition where the "chartable formal literary relationships" of which Gates speaks is concerned, it is helpful to distinguish at this point the nature of intertextuality in the Afro-American women's novels on which this study focuses from that which exists between male-authored canonical works. For theories which successfully describe the frequently competitive act of writing the male self into the male canon fail to provide adequate models for descriptions of black female literary relationships.

Certainly the most widely known theories of canonical influence are Harold Bloom's psychoanalytically informed studies of what he designates "the anxiety of influence." Bloom elaborates a complex system of Freudian defense mechanisms to describe a literary manifestation of what the Afro-American critic James Snead believes is a general mainstream Western culture's resistance to repetition. According to Snead, a philosophically progress-oriented Western hegemonic culture "resists all non-progressive views [and] . . . develops," frequently by imposing, by means of willful acts of self-deception, "a character of progression and improvement onto . . . often non-progressing" phenomena.[8] For Snead, then, mainstream Western culture views repetition as a phenomenon that must be mediated in the name of progress.

Snead's discussion of a (white) Western cultural resistance to overt manifestations of repetition offers a fruitful means of understanding what Bloom describes as the problematic nature of the repetition and revision of cultural signs, codes, and figures by successive generations of Western white male poets bent on absorbing their precursors and establishing their own "non-repetitive" priority. Western culture's insistence on improvement, its intolerance in the face of nonprogressive repetition, forces writers such as the poets with whom Bloom is primarily concerned to employ various defense mechanisms in order to create what the culturally informed reader and critic will accept as "strong" texts. According to Bloom, "Strong poetry is strong by virtue of a kind of textual usurpation."[9] Such usurpation is essential for Western male writers who, in order to create strong, culturally informed work, must, through definable revisionary ratios, revolt against their literary "fathers."

It is not coincidental that Bloom's "influenced" writers are all male. For if intertextuality—by which I mean a paradigmatic system of explicit or implied repetition of, or allusion to, signs, codes, or figures within a cultural form such as the novel—is problematic in the (predominantly white male) Western literary tradition, such problems must, I believe, be seen as the function of what psychoanalytic paradigms have demonstrated is the competitive nature of male identity formation. Indeed, it is possible to characterize this psychodrama of Euro-American male artistic maturation as, in the words of the feminist critic Judith Kegan Gardiner, the novice "boy" writer's attempt to "become a separate, autonomous individual, like his [literary] father."[10]

A general emphasis on male gender identity as a means of explaining an anxiety of literary influence seems quite appropriate, for Bloom's paradigm of violent verbal revision accurately describes not only white male-authored poetic texts, but is also useful in an analysis of canonical literary works by Afro-American men. Indeed, two black critics, Gates and Robert Stepto, see a revisionist tendency in the Afro-American canon that leads to oedipal linguistic battles in which black (predominantly male) writers attempt strenuously to overthrow the

theories of Black life and fiction held by their precursors, striving always to establish their own priority. Gates, for example, discusses the parodic intertextual—or, *signifying*, to use the Afro-American vernacular term that describes ritualistic verbal jousting—relationship between Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man:*

> Ellison in his fictions signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference. . . . The play of language . . . starts with the titles: Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, connoting race, self and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, invisibility an ironic response, of absence, to the would-be presence of "blacks" and "natives". . . . Wright's reacting protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison signifies upon with a nameless protagonist. Ellison's protagonist is nothing but voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale . . . (293)

According to Gates, the goal of what he defines as cultural signifying is a criticism by Ellison of Wright's use of naturalism as both a literary and a life-interpretive device. Gates asserts:

> By explicitly repeating and reversing key figures of Wright's fiction, . . . Ellison exposed Wright's naturalism as merely a hardened conventional representation of "the Negro problem," and perhaps part of "the Negro problem" itself. . . . Ellison recorded a new way of seeing and defined both a new manner of representation and its relation to the concept of presence. (294)

Ellison's signifying, then, like the revisionary gestures delineated by Bloom, is considered by Gates progress-oriented. Implicit in the discussion adduced by Gates is his assumption that Ellison strives for not only a "new way of seeing" and representing Afro-American life, but a *better* way. Ellison is, thus, defined as clearing imaginative space for himself and his novel by attempting to negate, through intertextual signifying, the accuracy and importance of Wright's achievement.

The intertextual relationship between Afro-American women's novels differs markedly from the Western male systems of canonical repetition and revision. While male texts in the Afro-American canon follow a traditionally Western male pattern of textual competition, women's novels seem to form a more harmonious system, characterized aptly by Alice Walker's almost obsessive efforts to "save" Zora Neale Hurston's texts and personal history from obscurity, efforts

which include a search for and placing of a tombstone upon the precursor's unmarked grave. Indeed, Walker's textual relationship with Hurston lends quite compelling support to Gilbert and Gubar's claims concerning female literary influence. When, for example, Walker speaks about becoming "aware of my need of Zora Neale Hurston's work some time before I knew her work existed" (83) and discusses her temporarily debilitating fear of being met by the type of condemnatory, largely masculinist responses to which Hurston's life and corpus had previously been subjected, it is possible to perceive of Walker's act as a self-conscious search for a rebellious and successful Afro-American female literary precursor. That is to say, Hurston provides for the younger writer not only specific models of what Walker has termed "womanist" figurations of Afro-American life, but, as importantly, an immensely talented example who "proves," in Gilbert and Gubar's words, "that revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (49). According to Gilbert and Gubar, "The woman writer . . . searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her 'femininity' but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavors" (50).

Judith Gardiner's assertions that the differences between male and female identity "traits have far-reaching consequences for the distinctive nature of writing by women" (183), then, seem, where the Afro-American literary tradition is concerned, quite accurate. Unlike the novice black male writer concerned with usurping his black male precursor, the Afro-American woman writer attempts to establish with her female predecessor the type of positive symbiotic merger which, according to Gardiner, Nancy Chodorow, and others, characterizes the patterns of female identity formation. Thus, while the male, socialized to believe that independence and autonomy are signs of maturity's achievement, sees writing as yet another area in which he must attempt to establish his priority over male parental figures, the female, who has been taught to "develop capacities for nurturance, dependence, and empathy" (182) in her relationship with her mother, views the creation of fiction as an occasion for cooperative textual interactions with maternal figures.[11]

The sense of legitimacy which Hurston provides for Walker or, for that matter, Hurston and especially Toni Morrison provide for Gloria Naylor, results from what Gilbert and Gubar call "unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture" (51). It is this sense of bonding, of energetic explorations for and embrasure of black female precursorial figures, which distinguishes the Afro-American women's novels that are explored in

the following chapters from competitive black male intertextual relations. Instead of an anxiety of influence, in other words, this study argues that these novels constitute a textual system characterized by what I call "inspiriting influences." Even when the younger female writer presents perspectives that are apparently critical of or antithetical to those of the precursor—Gloria Naylor's deconstruction of *The Bluest Eye*'s narrative strategies, Alice Walker's delineations of the achievement of (comm)unity in response to its ultimately quite dubious possibilities in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—such perspectives are offered as supplemental to, and made possible by, the precursor's courageous example. In these novels, it is clear that, as Gilbert and Gubar argue about nineteenth-century white female influence, the black female precursor represents not "a threatening force to be denied or killed" (49), but a literary forebear whose texts are celebrated even as they are revised, praised for their insights even when these insights are deemed inadequate to describe more contemporary manifestations of Afro-American women's peculiar challenges in a racist and sexist society.

In addition to non-expropriating refigurations of precursorial texts, the system of Afro-American women's novels with which I am concerned here is revisionary in its adaptations of the Western genre of the novel to reflect Black cultural imperatives. Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the necessity of discursive appropriation serves as a means of situating the revisionary impulses which Afro-Americanist scholars have argued are generally operative in Afro-American expressive culture. Bakhtin asserts:

> Language . . . becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.[12]

Following my own appropriative, afrocentric impulses, I refer to this revisionary tendency in Afro-American culture as *denigration*. While the verb "denigrate" is taken by the vast majority of English speakers to mean, as *The American Heritage Dictionary* states, "To belittle or calumniate the character or reputation of; defame,"[13] my employment of the word suggests an attempt to infuse it with my "own semantic and expressive intention" by returning to the latinate word

("from *denigrare*, to blacken: *de-*, completely + *nigrare*, blacken, from *niger*, black" (352)) its original, non-pejorative meaning. It is clear that the same virulently racist perspectives that allowed whites to figure blacks as evil and other both during and after American slavery motivated the connotative transformation of the word "denigrate."

I use *denigrate* in this study to describe the remarkable appropriative impulses extant in many areas of Afro-American expressive culture, including the black women's novel. By *denigration*, I mean here precisely those appropriative acts by Afro-Americans which have successfully transformed, by the addition of black expressive cultural features, Western cultural and expressive systems to the extent that they reflect, in black "mouths" and "contexts," what we might call (in Bakhtinian terms) Afro-American "intention" and "accent."

Toni Morrison's comments about her own work suggest how Afro-Americans *denigrate* Western verbal systems. She says in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation":

> There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art . . .
>
> I don't regard Black literature as simply books written by Black people, or simply as literature written about Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language. . . . There is something very special and identifiable about it.[14]

Two of the elements of Black art Morrison utilizes in her fiction are a "participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience" (341) and a formal employment of a chorus in the narrative events or content (and, in the case of *The Bluest Eye*, the narrative strategies or form) of her texts. Using these features that are dominant in systems of Black expressivity such as music and religion, Morrison "incorporates into that traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is, in my view, Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art" (342). In addition to establishing intertextual relationships with other Afro-American expressive systems, Morrison *denigrates* the genre of the novel by infusing it with the spirit and specific elements of an Afro-American cultural perspective.

The *denigrative* potential of Afro-American expressive systems plainly suggests that Black culture has survived its barbaric transportation to the West and manages to express its communal beliefs through

Western cultural systems that are philosophically opposed to such beliefs. It survives in a language system in which blackness is negative, absence and evil in a formal *denigration* (Black English) which adds to the English language system Black "meaning, nuance, tone and gesture."[15] It survives in a religious system (Black Religion)—despite the fact that white slaveowners justified the inhumanity of their institution by means of self-serving "interpretations" of this religion's scriptures—to which blacks have added elements of West African religions such as spiritual possession and antiphonal (call-and-response) preacher-congregation verbal interaction. And it survives in a Western literary system, the novel, as a function of the kind of generic adaptations referred to by Morrison.

Afro-American linguist Geneva Smitherman's discussion of the traditional African world view suggests the specific patterns to which the merging of opposites such as Black cultural elements and Western religious, verbal, and artistic systems should conform. She says that in Black culture,

> there is a fundamental unity between the spiritual and the material aspects of nature . . . [in which] the spiritual domain assumes priority.
>
> The universe is hierarchical in nature. . . . Though the universe is hierarchical, all modes of existence are necessary for the sustenance of its balance and rhythm. . . . Thus we have a paradigm for the way in which "opposites" function. That is, "opposites" constitute interdependent, interacting forces which are necessary for producing a given reality. (75)

Blacks in America have united Western "material" or systems with Black expressive elements to create Afro-American systems in their forms recognizably Western, but dominated by Black cultural "spirit" or essence.

This *denigration,* this infusion of Black cultural "spirit" into Western "matter" which alters that matter in essential ways, occurs quite interestingly in the novels that the following chapters explore. Earlier I alluded to Morrison's statement that the use of a chorus in her work is one of the ways in which she incorporates into her fiction major characteristics of Black expressivity. The "chorus" in *The Bluest Eye*—which Morrison states is the first-person narrator of the novel, Claudia—in fact plays an integral part in the structure of the novel itself. Because Morrison wants both a presence which empathizes with the novel's tragic protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, and a narrative scope capable of delineating the past of its adult characters, she employs

two narrators in *The Bluest Eye:* Claudia, Pecola's contemporary, who narrates the story of both Pecola's and her own experiences, and an omniscient narrator who relates the incidents in the novel of which Claudia is unaware. The result is the intricately woven text which contains, in addition to two narrators, two prologues, four sections—"Fall," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer"—each of which is subdivided into three chapters, of which Claudia narrates the first and the omniscient narrator the following two. Not only, then, can appropriative acts add "unorthodox novelistic characteristics" to a novel's content, but they can also help dictate the "unconventional" narration and structures of Black texts.

Literary critics have observed a general authorial fascination with intricate structure (the "matter") in Afro-American novels, and have attempted to account for its presence. Raymond Hedin's "The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction" offers a case in point, suggesting a link between Afro-American novelists' manipulations of structure and strategic attempts to encode in their texts a racial anger that is a function of oppression in America. Hedin argues that Morrison's narrative strategy in *The Bluest Eye* is a means for the author to call attention to her own personal anger:

> In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* . . . the central character, Pecola Breedlove, is too vulnerable and uncomprehending to be angry at what happens to her. It is Morrison who is angry, and the careful form of the novel intensifies rather than deflects the reader's sense of that anger.[16]

While some implicit relationship may exist in Afro-American texts between structure and anger (the existence of verbal indirection in such Black verbal behaviors as signifying and spirituals suggests that blacks do encode anger), a more convincing interpretation of the cultural codes employed in Morrison's novel insists that other cultural phenomena account for *The Bluest Eye*'s structural complexity. Hedin correctly observes the eventual fate of the protagonist—"she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia" (50)—but he fails to draw any connection between Pecola's psychological splitting into two voices and the double-voiced narration of the novel. We could read the lonely, isolated girl's schizophrenia in the ways that Morrison's comments about her novel suggest—that is, as Pecola's desperate manufacturing of a "chorus" to respond to what, in her insanity, she believes to be "The bluest eyes in the whole world."[17] But the dual voices of narrator and protagonist are also, in fact, coded intertexts of W. E. B. Du Bois' discussion of a Black "double con-

sciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk.* Morrison's narrative is most adeptly described in accordance with Du Bois' formulations. Du Bois' much-quoted statement reads:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of [whites]. . . . One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America. . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.[18]

According to Du Bois, it is the merging of the binary opposites "spirit" and "matter" for which the Afro-American strives. Morrison's double-voiced narration in *The Bluest Eye* encodes not the anger of the author as Hedin argues, but her employment and refiguration of this Black cultural code. Pecola's means of achieving peace—double voicedness—is Morrison's means, through the complexity of her narrative structure, of positioning her novel in relationship to other Afro-American texts that explicitly explore *structural* means of merging two almost antithetical "selves." *The Bluest Eye* resonates in the company of Du Bois' *Souls* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Indeed, while Morrison's novel is an intertext of a number of works (Du Bois and Ellison come immediately to mind), its primary precursor is *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* In fact, Hurston's work is positioned vis-à-vis contemporary Afro-American women's novels as what Michel Foucault calls an "initiator of discursive practices."[19] Hurston's novel not only refigures the dual consciousness code defined by Du Bois, but also delineates strategies that lead to a unity between the "selves" of its protagonist. Foucault says of discursive initiators: their "distinctive contribution . . . is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibilities and the rules of formation of other texts" (131).

The following study suggests that Hurston's position as initiator of an Afro-American woman's tradition in novels can be seen in subsequent Afro-American women writers' refigurations of Hurston's

complex delineation of black female unity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in their novels' content and form. Hurston's thematic focus and narrative strategies are consistent with her refiguration of Du Bois' double consciousness code in the content of her novel and represent most elaborately her response to the formulations of the esteemed black male writer and her *denigration* of the genre of the novel.

Janie's double consciousness results from her husband Joe Starks' insistence on her silent subservience. She is able to merge her dual selves, her "inside" and "outside," only through an immersion in the wisdom of Black culture. While the text confirms unquestionably that Janie has gained a cultural voice and is quite capable of narrating her story, such a narration, despite Janie's announcement to Pheoby that she will tell her own tale, does not occur in the text. As I will discuss more fully in chapter 1, Janie refrains from such narration because of the same cultural imperatives that allow her to feel no compulsion to tell her story to the females who contemptuously see her return to Eatonville in the novel's initial scene. Janie is uninterested in her personal narration of her tale: she trusts her friend Pheoby to narrate it accurately for her. She says to Pheoby: "You can tell 'em what Ah says if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause *mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf.*"[20] What is important to Janie is not individual textual control, but that the narrator of her story be a "friend" upon whom she can "depend . . . for a good thought" (19). Just as Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell her story to the town's hostile female community, she allows the text's omniscient narrator—whose sensitive rendering of Janie's tale makes it apparent that she shares Janie's afrocentric and feminist inclinations—to tell her Afro-American feminist story to a potentially hostile reading public.

The figure of a common (female) tongue, of a shared Afro-American woman's authorial voice, serves as an appropriate metaphor not only for Janie and Pheoby's cooperative textual relationship, but also for the Afro-American women novelists' textual system which is explored in this study. The following chapters examine the status of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as initiator of discursive practices in order to demonstrate some of the significant ways in which this novel has influenced contemporary Afro-American women novelists. This study, then, seeks to demonstrate, with reference to a small segment of the Afro-American woman's literary corpus, the accuracy of Barbara Smith's claim that "Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition." *Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Bluest Eye, The Women of Brewster Place,* and *The Color Purple* certainly all represent important texts in any assessment of that tradition. Taken

together, they form, in their complex figurations of self-division, a cooperative system of textual sharing, each portraying, by means of double-voiced strategies of narration, Afro-American female protagonists' efforts to end delibitating psychological disjunction (or double consciousness) and isolation from the larger black community. The four novels upon which I focus here delineate, in other words, a common Afro-American woman's quest for (psychic and narrative) unity and community (or what I refer to as (comm)unity).

What follows in these pages is one black male's contribution to the immensely important project which Mary Helen Washington describes, in one of the epigraphs to this Introduction, as "the knitting together" of the "continuities" of the Afro-American woman's literary tradition. My perceptions of the tradition's continuities are informed not only by an emerging black feminist criticism, but also by advances in contemporary critical theory and in the study of Afro-American expressive culture that have been coterminous with black feminist criticism's development. It is my hope that the convergence of and interplay between such perspectives provide an interpretive tapestry adequate to the explication of the aesthetically complex and ideologically challenging novels of Afro-American women.

1

"The Inaudible Voice Of It All": Silence, Voice, and Action in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

. . . if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country, just as he adapted to suit himself the Sheik hair-cut made famous by Rudolph Valentino.

Zora Neale Hurston
"Characteristics of Negro Expression"

There is enough self-love in that one book [Their Eyes Were Watching God]—*love of community, culture, traditions—to restore a world. Or create a new one.*

Alice Walker
"On Refusing To Be Humbled By Second Place"

DESPITE THE varying ideological persuasions of its authors, recent criticism of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been almost unanimous in its assumption that Janie Crawford achieves a powerful and independent cultural voice as a result of her experiences. Critics also agree that Janie's achievement of voice is, unquestionably, a key factor in her eventual self-possession. Barbara Johnson, for example, argues that "Janie's increasing ability to speak grows out of her ability not to mix inside with outside."[1] In a similar vein, Cheryl Wall suggests that "Janie's self-discovery depends on her learning to manipulate language. Her success is announced in the novel's prologue when, as a friend listens in rapt attention, Janie begins to tell her own story."[2] A third example of the conflation of achieved voice and studied self-possession is offered by Missy Dehn Kubitschek, who believes that Janie "discovers her own soul only through the art of storytelling, thus intimating the artist's responsibility to, and dependence on, the larger community."[3]

Though essays focused on Janie's storytelling as a key to her self-definition are richly suggestive, such essays uniformly fail to acknowledge that despite an undeniable emphasis in the novel on the importance of the protagonist's achievement of voice, she does not seem at all enamored of her oratorical skills when she makes her final return to Eatonville. When Pheoby tells her that the female porch sitters are discussing her return and suggests that she " 'better make haste and tell 'em 'bout you and Tea Cake,' " Janie answers: " 'Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble.' "[4] She, thus, seems uninterested in becoming a public spokesperson sharing the wisdom of hard-won cultural experience with the group. Later, when she has completed a private narration of her story to Pheoby, she clarifies her perspective on the porch sitters who have "got me up in they mouth":

> Let 'em consolate theyselves wid talk. 'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh a hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else. And listenin' tuh dat kind uh talk is jus' lak openin' yo' mouth and lettin' de moon shine down yo' throat. (285)

While Janie's statement expresses impatience at being the topic of town gossip, the very extremity of her view of "talkin' " and "tellin' " suggested by the statement seems inconsistent for the character presented in the novel. Not only does Janie appear to dislike the obvious malevolence of the porch critics, she also seems to issue a general condemnation of verbal performances that are not (and *cannot be*) supported by appropriate action. In other words, she claims to dislike talk for talk's sake.

Earlier in her life, however, Janie very much enjoyed listening to such talk. The narrative tells us:

> When the people sat around on the porch [of the store] and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer [for Janie] to listen to. (81)

Clearly, Janie has not always desired that words be complemented by action. In fact, for the greater part of her life, she wishes no such correspondence, for verbal exaggeration made the store porch expressivity "even nicer to listen to." For example, Janie enjoys Sam and Lige's ongoing argument that "was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason" (99). She also responds enthusiastically to Jim and Dave's "acting out courtship" of Daisy (105). Apparently, then, her views with respect to unauthenticated (i.e., by action) voice are altered radically when, after Tea Cake's death, she returns to Eatonville.

Perhaps the best evidence of her transformed perspective is the narration of Hurston's novel. First introduced by an omniscient narrator, Janie insists that she will serve in the role of storyteller in order to relate to Pheoby the important incidents of her life. These incidents will include, apparently, not only her sojourn with Tea Cake during the preceding year and a half, but also enough information about her entire history to provide Pheoby, a "kissin'-friend" (19) of twenty years, with "de understandin' to go 'long wid" her depiction of her life with Tea Cake. In a text which concentrates so intensely on the question of Janie's establishment of a powerful black cultural voice, one feels that such a concentration should be complemented by action. Janie, indeed, should narrate her own story in the novel. Because she expresses such a strong perspective on action and voice and, yet, fails to emerge as the exclusive—or even the primary—narrator of her story, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* seems flawed (as numerous critics whom I will later cite have claimed) in ways that diminish the overall effectiveness of Hurston's novel.

In the discussion that follows, I shall attempt to show that Hurston's narrative strategies demonstrate not a failure of the novelist's art, but her stunning success in *denigrating* the genre of the novel. To show how the author accomplishes her task, it is necessary first to discuss narrative events in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* In the novel, there exists an observable tension between saying (words) and doing (acting upon those words)—between voice and action. The tension between the two is most clearly represented in the philosophies of life, or "texts," of the three most influential figures in Janie's development: Nanny, Joe Starks, and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods.

II

IN ITS introduction of the young Janie, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* makes the reader acutely aware of the protagonist's spirituality. This spirituality is evident in the edenic scene in which she discovers her sexuality. The language of the scene insists that she literally has been summoned by nature:

> It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren stem to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like

a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? *This singing she heard had nothing to do with her ears . . .*

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the *inaudible voice of it all* came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. *So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation.* Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (23-24, my emphasis)

This scene has been viewed in the criticism of the novel as Janie's sexual awakening.[5] What interests me most about this scene, however, is a physically active nature's role as Janie's instructor, especially the manner in which this instructor communicates its "text" to her. Nature's text is not limited strictly to the sensual. To be sure, the passage cited does describe, beautifully, the reproductive activities of natural entities. But to decode fully the densely figurative language of the scene, it is necessary to concentrate on nature's *mode* of communication. This "inaudible voice"—that which makes a young Janie's experience comprehensible—is the function not of sounds (the text clearly indicates that the intelligible voice she experiences "had nothing to do with her ears"), but, rather, of *actions*. In fact, Hurston's depiction of the natural world suggests what appears to be her view of an organic, precultural, prelinguistic relationship between voice and action. Before man established complex symbolic systems of sounds, the passage suggests, action possessed a generative relationship to interpretable messages or to what the novel's narrative labels an "inaudible voice." The type of relationship between voice and action designated is inconceivable in a spoken-language dominated human community, for such communities rely on sounds (and written representations of these sounds) to encode and convey interpretable meaning. The designated relationship is even more improbable in Afro-American culture which was created during a period when the actions of the vast majority of its inhabitants were controlled and commercially exploited by white slaveowners. During the formation of Afro-American culture, then, action represented for blacks the antipode of their will and their "voice"—a voice encoded and audible in secular songs and spirituals that have survived to express Afro-American resistance to the institution of slavery.

Janie's natural education offers an example of a relation between voice and action that is quite different than what exists in her own culture. Because she observed this precultural phenomenon, Janie is likened to the first human before the creation of his mate. Adam is the original connector of signifieds and signifiers. As Genesis informs us, "whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (2:19). By interpreting the significance of God's creation of Eve from one of his ribs, moreover, Adam defines the parameters of ideal human coupling or marriage. He says of the newly created Eve:

> This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.
>
> Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (2:23-24)

Adam's act is, in a semiotic sense, the first act in the creation of culture. He assigns symbolic designations to animals, to females, and to abstract concepts such as marriage.

While Janie does not herself create names, she is able in her ahistorical backyard to observe what God originally intended marriage to be. After such observation, she searches the yard for a being she can hold in an "ecstatic" "love embrace." As the text suggests, she is "seeking confirmation of the voice and vision" of nature she has experienced. Such confirmation, however, eludes her within the yard's boundaries. She envisions herself as Adam—a signal creation without a mate. While she is "looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience," she observes a being she can passionately embrace:

> Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes. (25)

Clearly, Janie's "pollinated" perception of Johnny Taylor is faulty. She views him in a manner that is inconsistent with her knowledge of his character. In her intense desire for a mate, Johnny becomes for Janie a man without a history. But while the elements of her garden—bees, flowers, trees—may be ahistorical, human beings cannot be.

What Hurston sets in opposition in the garden scene, then, are two images of Janie: (1) prelapsarian, precultural human being, and (2) prophet in a fallen world summoned to behold a "revelation." The language describing the protagonist's sexual awakening intentionally recalls the first chapter of Genesis, but this implicit reference is ultimately undercut. For the text makes it abundantly clear that the