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A Notion of Song and Destroying the Single Story

Alice Walker's 1983 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" traces the source of her creative spirit and those of all Black women to their mothers and grandmothers. She focuses on the importance of this creative tradition kept alive in spite of a history of oppression by the institution of slavery and patriarchal structures. In the 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Zora Neale Hurston exudes the spirit of an impassioned and empowered Black woman who seeks to pave her own path in life, taking note from her mother's courage but also deriving strength from within. In the memoir *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), bell hooks explores her experiences growing up poor and in becoming a writer by reflecting on the circumstances and role models in her life. These three writers illuminate the path to creativity for Black women and represent a necessary expansion to the stories told by and about women. Though the history of Black women is one constrained by intersectional discrimination, Walker, Hurston, and hooks build on the tradition of their foremothers and the strength within them to express their creativity through writing that ultimately connects people to each other and allows others to view humans complexly by moving beyond the telling of a single story.

There has been no easy pathway to creative expression for African American women in the face of systems of oppression. Walker's essay asks the central question: "How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year, and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black

person to read or write?” (1297). Despite historical power structures attempting to extinguish imagination and steal the tools of creation away from Black women, they maintained that “spirituality [that] was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious* that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held” (Walker 1296). Through generations, Black women have persevered and preserved the artistry within them through various outlets—singing, writing, telling stories, gardening—and passed it onto their daughters. While the creative spirit manifests itself in many forms, writing can be the most direct outlet of expression for those to whom it is accessible.

Instances of Black self-expression have been suppressed from a lack of ownership of their own bodies to the harmful perceptions imposed by a White patriarchal society; the few able to slip through the cracks when the circumstances aligned were often met with criticism. Specifically, Walker writes of Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), the first Black American female poet, who was enslaved and brought to America at age seven but given the opportunity to read and write. Against all odds, Wheatley was able to tell the story of the silenced. While Wheatley’s poetry is tinged with the ideas internalized in her education in the White household as she imagines her being brought to America as a “mercy” that “brought [her] from [her] pagan land,” Walker addresses Wheatley and declares, “it is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*” (Wheatley 359; Walker 1299). It is this notion that is passed from mother to daughter as well as from the women who were able to break through to produce poetry. Walker goes on to say that she has “absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which [her mother] spoke” (1301). She finds that her inspiration comes from her mother’s urgency to have her story told as well as her mother’s creative spirit that burst forth in the creation of gardens in which she ordered “the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” (Walker 1302). Through resilience

and the modes in which these creative energies have manifested throughout history, the notion of song has been passed on for generations to inspire the telling of stories; Walker highlights these voices that were silenced in a predominantly White male literary tradition.

The binds of creation imposed on all women throughout history combined with the oppression of Black people make the experience of African American women unique and further complicate their place in literature. Walker finds Black women's creative spirit through matrilineage just as Virginia Woolf declares in her 1929 long essay *A Room of One's Own* that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (76). Walker acknowledges Woolf's argument in her own essay, but she offers a revision to Woolf's that is more inclusive of the experience of Black women. Walker variously inserts phrases into sections of Woolf's argument, such as this statement quoting Woolf, "'Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century," insert "black woman," insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village'" (Walker 1298). Though Woolf illuminates the erasure of women from history, her focus is on the story of White women. Walker expands this argument and acknowledges the conditions specific to African American women that have made artistic creation further out of reach. Similarly, in a speech delivered to the National Society for Women's Service in 1931, "Professions for Women," Woolf makes an important distinction about the struggles for women to reach their creative and professional potential in a male-dominated world. She argues that women have had to work with "killing the Angel in the House," the perpetuated idea of the pure, self-sacrificing woman, before they can truly express themselves freely (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 246). It is easy to wonder "Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather

than for a man?" (Woolf, "Professions for Women" 247). Woolf responds to these questions by declaring that "Inwardly [...] the case is very different; [women have] many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome" and for all women there is a "phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against" (247). But it is again necessary to consider the additional prejudices faced by Black women who must not only work to destroy the images of themselves as the "second sex" but as Black and recovering from slavery and segregation in America. These considerations are crucial to the building of a proper literary tradition on which to stand, to connect to each other further, and to broaden the realms of our own worldview and experiences.

In the 1970s, feminist and essayist Adrienne Rich, wrote the essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" for a convention of women writers about the literary canon. In the essay, she highlights the fact that the story of women has been told by men and that even women's writing is greatly influenced by the internalized male gaze, similar to what Woolf expresses in her speech like the concept of "phantoms" to slay in order to free the mind for writing. Rich focuses on intersectional feminism, recognizing the broadening discussion of the literary canon and how "feminist literary criticism itself has overlooked or held back from examining the work of black women and lesbians" (982). Additionally, she writes that "without the sharpening of a black feminist consciousness, black women's writing would have been left in limbo between misogynist black male critics and white feminists still struggling to unearth a white women's tradition" (Rich 982). It is vital to add Black women's voices to the literary tradition because representation in works is essential to how our culture is shaped. This sentiment is most notably expressed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" in which she explains her growing up in Nigeria reading mostly British and American stories about White characters and experiences. She expresses that it is necessary to

consider “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children” and that the result of her growing up with foreign books “was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature” (Adichie 1:45, 2:40). She finds that “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” and that it is the negative stories that “flatten [her] experience” because “the single story creates stereotypes” which are ultimately “incomplete” if not untrue (Adichie 10:00, 12:42). Thus, it is imperative to have an abundance of diverse voices within the literary canon in order to represent reality and human experiences beyond a reductionist, or flattened, view offered by a small group in power. Walker’s essay, significant to this awakening consciousness and a development away from a single story, makes a very important point about the struggle of the creative spirit in Black women throughout history. In her essay, Walker begins to assign this meaning to the other modes of creative expression and derive her own inspiration from her mother and the women before her, bringing to light a much broader and more personal history to consider when thinking about the creative tradition of Black women and their stories left unwritten.

As Walker attributed her writing ability to her “heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength” as well as to her mother’s garden, Hurston derived strength from her own mother who empowered her to “jump at de sun” and her own self-confidence (Walker 1303; G&G 347). Hurston’s essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” written nearly 50 years before Walker’s, has so much spirit in it one could hardly realize the weight of the society pressed against her. Hurston asserts, “But I am not tragically colored. [...] No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife,” reflecting the strength of her own spirit and the willingness to let the flow of her creative energies loose (358). Hurston refuses to let her

history entirely define her existence, but she instead focuses on the making of her life, treating the world as her oyster. In a similar vein, Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" presents her inner strength and ability to rise above the stories told by those in power. When she writes, "You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may tread me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise," Angelou expresses the inner strength that she utilizes to rise above the forces that have tried to reduce her to a single story and express her true self. She additionally calls on the history behind her that has given her the strength to rise above when she declares, "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, / I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (Angelou). Angelou and Hurston both present an honest expression of a self rising above the pain and struggle of a harsh past.

Hurston confidently and passionately asserts herself as an undiminished individual in spite of all that has tried to thwart her. She writes, "Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression in me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. [...] I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep," focusing on the trajectory of her own life rather than the trauma and tragedy of her ancestral past (Hurston 358-359). Similar to how Angelou confidently rises above the past and those who seek to bring her down, Hurston focuses on her own personal experiences as human rather than being categorically different. However, she still acknowledges the moments when she is aware of her Blackness, specifically when describing herself "against a sharp white background" (Hurston 359). In her essay, she illuminates a beautiful example of her experience of feeling jazz music that awakens her and what she describes as "the great blobs of purple and red emotion" that do not "touch" the White man who merely describes it as "good music" (Hurston 359). But she again returns to the sense that there are moments when she belongs "to

no race nor time” when she is “cosmic Zora [...] the eternal feminine with its string of beads” (Hurston 360). Focusing on paving her path as a writer, Hurston is an example of that creative spirit being kept alive in women through generations that Walker describes. She writes with that sense of urgency to tell her story, both for herself and for those who cannot tell theirs, as an addition to that creative tradition for more women to connect with.

Much like Walker and Hurston, in *Bone Black*, hooks looks internally and externally to herself when drawing upon her creative energies and expressing herself. She reflects on her relationship with her maternal grandmother, Saru, who “talks sadly about this need in people to make other people deny parts of themselves. She tells [hooks] that a person cannot feel right in their heart if they have denied parts of their ancestral past, that this not feeling right in the heart is the cause of much pain” (hooks 49). Though this sentiment appears at odds with Hurston’s decision to move beyond the trauma of history, Hurston was not denying anything so much as she was trying to refocus on her own life and make up for a missing past of creative tradition. Likewise, hooks finds it important to both recognize her past and make the most of her present as she examines her rocky, yet loving relationship with members of her family and finds her home in her own writing. The ideas of Walker’s essay are similarly reflected in hooks’ memoir when she writes, “[Saru’s] world is outside. She needs to have her fingers in the soil, to touch dirt. She tells me this part of her mother’s legacy. From her mother she learned to trap small animals ...” (hooks 52). This relationship between her great grandmother and grandmother shows the modeling of tradition from mother to daughter, a need to pass on something no matter the conventionality of its form—whether it be gardening, hunting, or writing. Of her own mother, hooks writes, “she wants to give us a taste of the delicious, a vision of beauty, a bit of ecstasy [...] I want her never to lose what she has given me—a sense that there is something

deeper, something more to this life than the everyday” (141). Again, she reveals this relationship and passion for finding more in her life that has been internalized and passed from mother to daughter.

Along with familial relationships, hooks’ relationship to reading and writing is crucial to her story as they allow her to escape harsh realities and to find her sense of self. Contrasting the vignettes of a harsh family life, hooks dedicates a vignette to her love of books and when she finds characters to whom she connects, such as in *Little Women*, she writes, “I find remnants of myself in Jo, the serious sister, the one who is punished. I am a little less alone in the world” (hooks 77). She connects to Louisa May Alcott’s writing and most significantly it makes her “less alone,” which seems to be a central motivation to the writing of women who wish to express their realities and connect with readers who have long struggled to find themselves represented in literature. With writing, hooks is able to build her own world for herself and others to connect to. When she concludes her memoir with writing, “I belong in this place of words. This is my home. This dark, bone black inner cave where I am making a world for myself,” she reveals what is most central to her identity and her way out of the harsh reality of a society that seeks to suppress and silence her (hooks 183). She finds her place in the works of others and in the expression of her own experiences. In the introduction to *Bone Black*, hooks even writes, “To understand the complexity of black girlhood we need more work that documents that reality in all its variations and diversity [...] There is no one story of black girlhood,” mirroring Adichie’s sentiments about the danger of having a single story of people and the need to understand the complexity of people’s realities (xiii).

These writers reveal that women’s creative tradition is a matter of both acknowledging the reality of the past and source of tradition as well as seizing the opportunities of the present.

Walker unearths the voices of the women who were not famous and broadens the scope through which to view the creative tradition of the silenced. Hurston and Angelou choose to rise above a traumatic history and write as if for those who could not. Hooks seeks out her inner cave and makes a life for herself in her writing. These women, along with Woolf, Rich, and Adichie, highlight the necessity of bringing more voices into the tradition as well as expanding the literary canon to represent the reality for more women. This expansion is vital to the destruction of what Adichie aptly describes as the “single story” in order to better understand and view people more complexly. I think Adichie puts the importance of writing—both fiction and nonfiction—best when she states, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity” (17:14). These women reclaim power in telling their own stories to ultimately reflect the experiences of more people and strengthen the connections to each other. From the passage of a creative spirit through matrilineage to the exploration of personal passions and inner strength, the notion of song is instilled in these women, and through their writing and stories it continues to live and thrive.

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