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LOOKING FOR ALICE BY BETSY HALL

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Numerous comparative studies have been conducted on Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, ultimately spawning a collection edited by Lillie P. Howard entitled *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond* published in 1993. Walker herself declares in "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" that when she first began her quest of looking for a model—someone by whom she could be inspired, someone whose work she could emulate—she was researching voo doo for her short story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff." She stumbled across the name Zora Neale Hurston and subsequently declared Hurston her literary model. Although several literary critics have already noted the commonality between these two women, especially between their literary works, I had a unique personal experience when I visited Alice Walker's hometown, Eatonton, Georgia in October 2004 and again in March 2006. My trips to Eatonton were, metaphorically, not unlike the experience Walker describes in "Looking for Zora," an essay in which she chronicles her search for Hurston's unmarked gravesite in Fort Pierce, Florida.

In early October of 2004, I flew to Atlanta, Georgia with a full agenda for a long weekend, my fall break from teaching classes. I was invited to give a talk on Alice Walker to a group at Walden High School in Marietta, an affluent suburb just outside the perimeter. A former colleague had invited me to come to the Atlanta at this particular time because the world premiere of *The Color Purple* the musical was debuting at the Alliance Theatre in downtown Atlanta. I eventually agreed to the presentation under a couple of conditions: that I would be able to attend the premiere and that I would be able to visit Eatonton. My colleague not only agreed to my conditions but she also agreed to be my chauffeur to Eatonton. These conditions required little arm twisting.

On the flight to Atlanta, I read *The Color Purple* for the umpteenth time. When I was writing my Master's thesis several years earlier, I kept several copies of *The Color Purple*, each written in extensively with color-coded notes. Each time I reread the book, I was looking for something new and different. The novel did not let me down. I was elated on the flight, knowing I'd be attending the musical debut that very night.

After a typical tourist encounter with Atlanta—dinner at the Hard Rock Café, drinks at the Wyndam's 360 degree bar, a driving tour of Buckhead—I entered the Alliance Theatre. I felt underdressed. I was amid sparkling outfits, glamorous jewelry, and fine bags. I was wearing khakis and a sweater, a typical small liberal arts college, or SLAC, professor. I felt boring. I felt better upon entering the auditorium, quickly becoming ecstatic about our seats. We were seated on the first level, center stage. Several months after the production, I discovered that Walker herself was also in Atlanta for the premiere, although I'm not sure which performance she attended.

After viewing the musical, my enthusiasm about Walker was rejuvenated. Since the completion of my thesis defense, I haven't taught much literature, much less much Walker. (My composition text includes "Everyday Use," but nothing else of Walker's.) I anticipated visiting her hometown with much verve. When Alice Walker first visited Zora Neale Hurston's hometown, Eatonville, Florida, on August 15, 1973, Walker wrote that she felt anticipation similar to mine. She writes, "Eatonville has lived for such a long time in my imagination that I can hardly believe it will be found existing in its own right" (94). When Walker first sets her eyes on the Eatonville Post Office and City Hall signs, she describes them as

“fascinating” (94); these are usually rather mundane signs, but if you’ve ever gone looking for an author whom you’ve studied in great depth, you can understand this feeling that Walker describes. The next day I was hoping to have a similar experience of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. Trying to get to sleep that night was like being an eight-year-old again anticipating Christmas morning.

The day after the premiere, my chauffeur-for-the-day and I set out early. Eatonton is about one hundred miles southeast of Atlanta. Four lane travel on Interstate 20 East comprises the majority of the trip. At exit 114, state route 441, you head south directly into Eatonton. I recently returned to Eatonton, in March 2006. The landscape vastly differs in fall and spring. When I went in the fall, the landscape seemed dirty and wet, causing me to recall Hurston’s Evergladian “muck,” which is so sharply engrained in the minds of readers of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Spring is a much different, and more pleasant, experience as there are animals grazing and flowers blooming. As a town in Putnam County, a.k.a. the “Dairy Capital of Georgia,” Eatonton is known for its dairy production, and cows as well as horses were in abundance. As I drove along 441, attempting to take notes about these differences and take in the horizon, a line of cars formed behind me on this two-lane road. Right about the time horns began to honk, the road offered a passing lane for faster drivers. I received a few one-fingered salutes from people who presumably absorb what this road has to offer daily. I arrived in town after passing a plethora of signs for Baptist churches, boiled peanuts, and fresh peaches. Eatonton welcomes visitors with the slogan: “Close to Everything ... Next to Perfect.” The town sign also mentions its famous former literary residents, Joel Chandler Harris and Alice Walker. <?xml:namespace prefix = o ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

Upon arriving in Eatonton for the first time in October 2004, my expectations were certainly not met. Somehow the landscape didn’t seem quite right. I expected the proverbial “back woods.” But, Eatonton looked like any other small-town USA town. There were few stoplights, a couple fast food joints, the main drag. My colleague and I were driving around looking for signs of Alice, but were getting nowhere quickly. Part of this problem stems from visiting a place forty years after the author has left. Walker describes similar encumbrances on her trip to Eatonville. She met with a descendant of Joe Clark, who was the basis for the character Jody Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Clark was also the first mayor of Eatonville and he owned a store similar to the fictional one Jody owns in *Their Eyes*. Where his store used to stand, now stands Club Eaton, a nightclub “apparently famous for the good times regularly had by all” (Walker 98).

For our trip to Eatonton, we had packed some chicken salad pitas, and by this time were pretty hungry, so we pulled into a public park to eat lunch. The park we pulled into had a large statue of a cartoonish rabbit dancing around—well as much as a stationary statue can be said to “dance.” As the town sign denoted, Eatonton is also the hometown of folk writer Joel Chandler Harris, author of the Uncle Remus stories. We had stumbled upon the official museum dedicated to the author, which is situated in a town park. As we sat in the car munching on the sandwiches, we contemplated our next move. I guess I thought that the town would be small enough to just sort of drive around and find the house with a big shrine out front. I expected a plaque or something of the like to mark the house. As I finished my foil-wrapped lunch, I knew new measures would need to be taken. Random driving was not going to cut it.

I decided the best place to find information about a literary figure would be from the curator of another literary figure’s museum. Plus, it worked out well that we were parked right outside such said establishment. The Joel Chandler Harris museum is inside a log cabin. We stepped inside and learned that the museum asked for a one dollar donation as admission. This seemed reasonable, though one could argue that you can actually see the entire contents of the museum collection from the doorway. Once inside, we searched the collection a while, before unveiling our real motive. I approached the man behind the counter in the gift shop, which blended in with the rest of the museum, making it confusing what was for sale and what was historical artifact, and asked him about Alice Walker and Eatonton. He informed me he didn’t know a whole lot about her, but he knew that her childhood home was in the country. He thought there were some signs posted along the road that led tourists through the Alice Walker Driving Tour. He drew me a makeshift map, which was sketchy and not exactly exact, and told me that I might want to go to the Chamber of Commerce to get more information. I thanked him for the map, hopeful that the Chamber would have a better map. When Walker was trying to locate Hurston’s grave, Mrs. Sarah Peek Patterson, the proprietor of Lee-Peek Mortuary drew her a slapdash map of the cemetery. She told Walker that Hurston was buried “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” (Walker 102). My suspicion is that Patterson’s map wasn’t much more exact than mine because when Walker actually arrives at the cemetery she notices that “the ‘circle’ is over an acre large and looks more like an abandoned field” (104).

We arrived at the Chamber only to discover that the employees were out to lunch and would be back “later.” We learned this from another person who occupied the same building, a renovated house. As we

waited for the Chamber employees to come back from lunch, we perused the literature and brochures available on “what to do in Eatonton.” I found one brochure on Alice Walker, a yellow piece of paper that was nearly illegible due to the bad print job. Again, I expected to find glossy, professional brochures—she’s a Pulitzer prize winner after all!—and what I found was a sub par scrap of paper. There was a map sketched out on the canary tri-fold, but looking at it, I was beginning to think the hand drawn one I got at Uncle R’s was better. Instead of killing more time at the Chamber, we adventured off to the country to see what we could find. On my return visit in March 2006, these brochures were printed on green paper. I later learned that Valerie Boyd, founder of the Alice Walker Literary Society and author of “In Search of Alice Walker, or, Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,” had traveled to Eatonton in 1997 on a quest similar to mine. She notes that the brochure, the same one I picked up from the way she describes it, was printed on lilac paper during her visit.

Heading southeast on highway 44 takes visitors to the first stop of the Alice Walker Driving Tour. The area hosts Oconee Lake, presumably to which the wealthy escape the city. There were new condominiums on the drive out to Walker’s childhood church as well as expensive automobiles decorating the condo’s parking lots. Again, it just didn’t seem right. This is not what one expects to see in the “backwoods” of the South! Yet also, again, there is a connection to Hurston’s Eatonville. Mathilda Moseley, a schoolmate of Hurston’s, who was still living in Eatonville when Walker visited there in 1973, told Walker that “[white people] took over” (99) a nearby town, building expensive houses on the lakes. Eatonton has also become a spot for vacation homes for those looking for a weekend getaway, with new homes replacing the old in the country.

Once we turned onto Ward’s Chapel Road, my expectations finally became reality. The first stop on the driving tour is the cemetery where Walker’s family members are buried. My colleague was willing to park the car, but she wasn’t going to step a foot out of it. As I got out, I felt another eerie connection to Walker’s essay “Looking for Zora.” As I searched for the family tombstones in the overgrown graveyard, I too felt that “a snake could be lying six inches from my big toe and I wouldn’t see it” (Walker 104). I suddenly felt like I had left Earth and entered Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*: the connections were uncanny. “There were things crackling and hissing in the grass” (104), and for some reason I felt like I was being led to the back of the cemetery, arguably the scariest part, the most overgrown part for sure. There were red ants making mounds and I carefully navigated my footsteps so as not to step on them like Walker did when she first stepped out of her car in search of Zora. I was searching for headstones close together since I knew there was a family burial plot. I started snapping arbitrary pictures of headstones when I noticed that a van had pulled up, right between me and my ride. At this point, I felt rather vulnerable in the back of a cemetery, feeling suddenly like I was in the middle of nowhere. Those Mercedes and BMWs not far down the road now seemed worlds away. It’s an odd feeling to be tromping around a graveyard in a foreign place, not knowing precisely what you’re doing there, what exactly you’re hoping to uncover. Two people in uniforms sat in the van for a while. Occasionally, they’d look at me; occasionally, I’d look at them. I was getting a little anxious, hoping that I wasn’t desecrating the property by pointing my disposable camera aimlessly and shooting. Finally, the couple climbed out of the van, and I saw they both had on United States Navy uniforms. This moment kept getting more and more surreal. They walked around the cemetery for a while and I wondered if they were doing the same thing I was. We never spoke. As quickly as they arrived, they left, clearing the way for me to cross the road and examine Walker’s childhood church.

Along the road on the Walker Driving Tour, there are places to stop your vehicle and read about the author. The sign at the church stop reads:

Wards Chapel

A.M.E. Church

Original structure built in early 1800, current structure was built in [the] 1940’s. The church where Alice Malsenior Walker was baptized and faithfully attended services. It is here where Alice’s strong faith began to grown, giving her a sense of security and a place in the community.

The church is currently very run down, and in fact, condemned. There were “No Trespassing” signs posted over the door, the stairs leading into the church were broken, and a tree had fallen over the entrance. Windows were broken and the crackling and hissing sounds continued to be prevalent around the entrance. I snapped a few more pictures of the church, pondering the pros and cons of entering a condemned building. Pros: I’d get to take more pictures. I might experience another surreal moment and be transported into more of Walker’s works. I would see the childhood church of a prolific author. Con: I might fall through the floor. Pro: I had someone outside the church who could call for help if necessary. Con: Something might fall on me. Pro: I had someone outside the church who could call for help if necessary. Con: There might be some sort of creature in there, just waiting for me. Pro: I noticed a

hospital on the edge of town. As I balanced these ideas in the course of about ninety seconds, I made my decision.

I calmly walked over to my driver, told her I was going in, and if I wasn't out in ten minutes, to check on me. She looked at me like I was crazy, rolled her eyes, and realized she wouldn't be able to stop me. On the short walk from the car back to the church's entrance, my heart started to palpitate in quick succession. I guess entering a condemned building creates this type of involuntary bodily reaction. Again, once inside the church, reality differed from my expectations. While the church was certainly dilapidated, it did show signs of life. The floor was sunken in in places. A screen hung from the ceiling. But there were two new(er) ceiling fans as well as an old pot of fake flowers sitting on the altar. The extremely small room with no permanent seating made it hard for me to visualize the church and its congregation during its glory days—pun intended. I snapped a few photos, noting the vast differences of this structure and my own childhood church. The lack of space provided no room for potlucks, Sunday school, or other forms of church fellowship. It more so resembled a one-room schoolhouse. Thinking about the logistics of space made me realize that the congregation would be forced—due to the physical space restrictions—to bring young children to church services and to hold gatherings either outside near the cemetery or at fellow members' homes. Viewing the inside of the church provided more insight about Walker's early life, insight that might not have been gained without physically entering a condemned building. While the sign outside the church was an admirable attempt at homage to Walker's early life, fully restoring the church would be a much more notable gesture.

The next stop on the driving tour is "Alice Walker's Birth Place." The sign reads:

Alice Walker, the youngest of eight children born to Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, was born on this site on February 9, 1944. The family moved several times before moving up the road where she spent most of her childhood.

Appropriately, stop #4 is entitled "Home Where Alice Walker Grew Up." The sign reads:

On weekdays Alice could go with her parents and siblings to the fields and play among the morning glory vines while they planted, weeded, and picked their crops. Alice's parents firmly believed in education and enrolled their daughter in school at the age of four to keep her out of the fields. Alice's father had been a leading force in getting the county's first black school built.

The house itself sits far back from the road, making any detailed view impossible without trespassing onto private property. Yet another impasse. However, I did get a good look at the grounds the family occupied, which are quite extensive, even for a home in the country. Standing just off the property, I saw horses that reminded me of Walker's poetry collection *Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful*.

The last stop on the driving tour is the Grant Plantation that is currently owned and inhabited by Walker's brother Fred. To get to the plantation, we crossed New Phoenix Road. At this point, Ward's Chapel Road becomes narrower with sharper curves. Trees begin to engulf you; there isn't nearly as much open pasture as on the east side of New Phoenix. Keeping our eyes peeled for the plantation, we noticed random objects in the grass: a three-wheeled stroller, a bag of garbage, a lot of beer bottles. All of the houses are set far back from the road and the farther west we traveled, the more battered the houses and trailers became. Before we knew it, we had come to the Route 16 intersection, completely missing the plantation. Undaunted, we turned around, once again traveling the same road (not river!) twice. This time as we traveled east, we noticed about twenty very well dressed African Americans walking down one of the long, dirt driveways. They were dressed to the nines, with brightly colored hats, scarves, and bags; some carried flowers. Judging by the map, we thought we were at the right place, but there was no sign denoting that as there had been with all the other stops on the tour. We turned around one last time, still not sure where the Grant Plantation was located. Once we hit Route 16 again, we headed back to Eatonton, wondering if perhaps the vastly occupied driveway was the family plantation. On my more recent trip to Eatonton, I saw a new plot at the family cemetery; Walker's brother Curtis had died in September 2004, and his tombstone indicated he was in the United States Navy. This explained a lot.

Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker have made remarkable impacts on Canonical literature, yet for so many years Hurston lay in an unmarked grave and the only apparent updates Eatonton offers Walker is a change in brochure color though she still publishes extensively. Oprah Winfrey has made tremendous contributions to making these women's works popular to all—from starring in Spielberg's film version of *The Color Purple* to endorsing the current Broadway musical. Winfrey was also instrumental in the making of the film version of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Due to this transformation of these literary works into mediums more acceptable to the masses, the authors have gained notoriety in popular culture. Still, the women's hometowns do not offer proper homage. Due to Walker's diligence and

devotion to finding Zora's remains, her grave now has a beautiful headstone that attracts visitors each year. Maybe one day Eatonton will too.

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Betsy Hall teaches expository writing and multicultural literature and edits the undergraduate journal *Origins* at Illinois College, a liberal arts college in Jacksonville, Illinois. She earned her M.A. in English, with an emphasis in African American women's fiction, at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Her thesis, "Resistance is the secret of joy!: Female Suffering and the Irrepressible Spirit in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *The Color Purple*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*," focused entirely on Walker's works. She has delivered several lectures on Walker in Illinois and Georgia. In addition to professing, Hall also travels extensively and teaches self defense courses for women.