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“She Called in Her Soul to Come and See:” Representations of Ageing in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

Author: Serena Volpi

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## Abstract

In my paper I am going to analyze the theme of age and its representations in the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker through the study of their main characters’ individual growth. I will try to analyze the theme of ageing as infinite possibility, resistance, and subsequent journey towards freedom from the constraints imposed by family and society in the characters of Janie and Celie. Underlining differences and similarities among the two works and their main female characters, I am going to take into consideration their representation of ageing as a conquest for women. In this regard, I will propose a definition of both novels as “novels of advanced formation” describing an intermediate stage in Constance Rooke’s distinction between *Bildungsroman* and *Vollendungsroman*. Then, I will explore the possibilities inherent in oral language as both a stylistic choice and an element from the cultural background considered as a source of power leading to the production of strong counter-identities when the relationship with tradition is dynamic and creative. The two characters will be identified as stratified identities in which gender, class, and ethnicity can lead to different forms of social jeopardy and different ways of overcoming them.

## “She Called in Her Soul to Come and See:” Representations of Ageing in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*

Serena Volpi

This essay analyses the representations of the ageing process in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). The primary connection between these two novels of the African-American literary tradition is to be found in the matrilineal relationship between the authors, based on Walker’s appraisal of Hurston as a literary ancestor and, in particular, of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a pivotal text both for her personal life and literary creativity as attested in Walker’s words, “There is no book more important to me than this one.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is particularly appropriate in reference to the relationship between her own novel and Hurston’s whose “concern with finding a voice... becomes the context for the allusive affinities between Celie’s letters [in *The Color Purple*] and the ‘free indirect narrative of division’ that characterizes its acknowledged predecessor [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*]<sup>2</sup> according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s analysis of the relationship between the texts.

By taking the two novels as examples of *Bildungsromane* or “novels of formation” developing into *Vollendungsromane*, I will utilize Constance Rooke’s definition of *Vollendungsroman* as “novel of completion” relating to a later stage of the characters’ lives. The thesis of the present article is considering the *Vollendungsroman* as a particularly useful framework for the analysis of both texts; in particular, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been previously analysed as a novel sharing some characteristics with the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, but here I will underline its connections with the female tradition of *Bildungsromane* and the centrality of the theme of loss within the genre. I do not consider the category of the *Bildungsroman*, though, completely satisfactory in relation to the two novels under

consideration; in fact, if the reader focuses her/his attention exclusively on the two main characters' youth, it is not possible to understand the significance of loss and privation in the actual *Bildung* of their identities. Loss, in fact, constitutes the main link in the passage from *Bildung* to *Vollendung* in both Hurston's and Walker's novels whereas I will consider experience using Teresa de Lauretis's definition of it as "an ongoing process by which subjectivity is constructed semiotically and historically."<sup>3</sup> It is precisely around the theme of loss that the framework provided by the *Vollendungsroman* shows its effectiveness in conveying "the comparative openness of the 'stages', 'phases' or 'periods' into which human life is conventionally divided."<sup>4</sup> The whole process of *Bildung* acquires meaning in its relation to *Vollendung* because they are connected thanks to the transformation of loss into creative possibility for expression surfacing in the passage to a later stage of life; at this empowering turning point stands the genre of the *Künstlerroman* or "novel of artist's formation," because in both works the movement to a later fulfilling phase is marked by the opportunities provided by the artistic expressions of (oral) language and storytelling. In fact, for both Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Celie in *The Color Purple*, the passage between a younger phase of life marked by silence and submission and a later phase characterized by a new degree of awareness and independence finds expression in an outburst of anger in which the characters acquire a voice. The acquisition of a voice is seen as a form of empowerment circumscribed by the awareness that the subject is not divided by language, but "at odds with it."<sup>5</sup> By analysing Janie's and Celie's characters, I would like to propose a reading of their experiences as ways of "growing old" as "growing up" after "having grown up" as a way of "growing down" according to Annis Pratt's analysis of a branch of the female *Bildungsroman* which underlines its distance from a proper "novel of development."<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, by applying the model of the *Vollendungsroman* it is possible to appreciate how the development denied in youth is reached in a later stage of life in which the characters acquire a voice and, through it, new possibilities for action and representation. From this perspective, an approach linked to intersectionality theory and oral history can be helpful in understanding the role of orality, tradition, and intergenerational communication as forms of continuity in the context of a fulfilling later stage of life. In particular, the intersectional approach will be favoured because of its focus on the multiplicity of identity and the possibility for alternative accounts destabilizing the narratives of

marginalization widespread in diversity theory. From this context, intersectionality will be used to reveal the ways in which, at the analytical micro-level of Janie's and Celie's narrative lives, the emergence of forms of resistance articulated through language reveals the interconnectedness of "multiple axes of power relations"<sup>7</sup> (linked to race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation) in which age can be used as a further coordinate of domination or, as in the case of the two novels here analysed, as a resource for liberation from networks of oppression experienced in previous phases of life.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been analysed as a quest narrative in which its main heroine, Janie Crawford, finds the way to affirm her voice after long years of silencing and submission. This quest theme is reprised in Walker's *The Color Purple* in the character of Celie who, after a life marked by abuse and bullying, acquires independence and freedom of agency. In these novels, Hurston and Walker do not link representations of ageing to a progressive loss of abilities, but rather mark them by a progressive awareness that transforms into resistance during the process of emancipation and liberation from the familial and societal constraints. Both novels, in fact, may be defined as 'novels of advanced formation' according to Rooke's definition of *Vollendungsroman* as complementary to the *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, the style in which the authors write the novels is linked to the features of orality and to modalities of storytelling related to the epistolary novel and autobiography, a linkage which underlines the role of language as a source of empowerment leading to the formation of strong counter-identities when the relationship with the tradition is productive and creative. In fact, both characters have the possibility to engage with the cultural tradition they belong to by becoming active representatives within it. In this analysis, the characters emerge as stratified identities in which gender, class, ethnicity, and age can lead not only to different forms of jeopardy, but also to different ways of dealing with and overcoming discrimination.

In the context of the analysis of representations of ageing in contemporary literature, what is striking is that Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has often been analyzed according to the coordinates of racism, classism, and sexism or what Clenora Hudson-Weems defines as the "tripartite form of oppression"<sup>8</sup> against which

African-American women define themselves. However, analysts have typically ignored Hurston's preoccupation with the significant factors of age and ageism. As the sociologists Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth have noticed about images of ageing in British society,<sup>9</sup> both traditional and modern representations tend to describe elderly people as dependent and powerless. By transposing these observations to the US context, it is possible to find a confirmation of the aforementioned representational attitude towards old age as attested by Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker in their discussion of the essay "Aging and the African-American Community: The Case of Ernest J. Gaines" by Charles Heglar and Annye L. Refoe. Deats and Tallent Lenker observe that "mainstream culture tends to stereotype the elderly as sedentary, set in their ways, and physically or emotionally inactive," but at the same time they stress the potential inherent in the African-American literary tradition in its capacity for providing "a wealth of alternative views that demonstrate the emancipatory possibilities of late life."<sup>10</sup> Although things are changing and disciplines like oral history have started to provide elderly people in general with the means and possibilities for representing themselves, still the early contribution of Hurston to an alternative representation of the ageing process must not be underestimated, much less ignored, as it can be considered as a first step in the elaboration of an alternative set of representations for the elderly developed within African-American literature.

The preoccupation with age enters Hurston's text from the very start when Janie comes back to Eatonville after leaving it to follow her younger lover Tea Cake. In this extract, we find the voices of the people of the village gossiping about her return.

[...] What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? – Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went here off wid? – Thought she was going to marry? – Where he left *her*? – What he done wid all her money? – Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs – why she don't stay in her class?<sup>11</sup>

The final remark "Why she don't stay in her class?" is better understood as "Why doesn't she behave according to her age?" (or what is considered appropriate for a

woman of her age) and underlines the presence of “prescriptions for what we nowadays call ‘successful’ (positive) as distinct from ‘unsuccessful’ (negative) ageing.”<sup>12</sup> For the people in Eatonville, the socially accepted image of an ageing woman does not match with Janie’s appearance and behaviour. The problem is that Janie does not behave according to their model of appropriateness related to the stage of life she occupies. More than unsuccessful, her way of ageing is considered ‘dishonorable’<sup>13</sup> according to the vision of age accepted within her community.

Hurston’s depiction of forty-year-old Janie’s actions could be an exemplification of what Featherstone and Hepworth describe as the passage between traditional and modern images of the elderly in British popular literature from the 1920s onwards.<sup>14</sup> That is, a critical reading along these lines could see Janie creating a progressive distance between middle and old age, as the first is described as “an extendible phase of vigorous and self-fulfilling life.” However, that critical reading would fail because what emerges from the reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is that the previous part of Janie’s life has not been active and self-fulfilling at all. From this perspective, it is possible to underline the complementary relationship between *Bildungsroman* and *Vollendungsroman*, since the second part of the character’s life represents that chance of development that has been denied in her previous process of growth. As observed by Bonnie Braendlin, the classical *Bildungsroman* is “[...] a novel of the formation of personality or identity, of an individual (often adolescent) coming to consciousness, shaping and being shaped by social and cultural ideologies as expressed in such discourses as those of education, religion, the law, and the media.”<sup>15</sup>

*Bildung*, in German, refers at the same time to education or formation and culture and, as Braendlin suggests, represents both a “self-development journey” and the goal of that same journey.<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti notices that the role of *Bildung* in modern European and American contexts is “the integration of youth in the society” whose meaning is not necessarily “a mindless adherence” to that society,<sup>17</sup> but it certainly means an understanding of how society works and the character’s attempt to harmonize with it in his/her individual trajectory towards autonomy. Although Maria Karafilis delineates the *Bildungsroman* in its classical form as a genre with specific geographical and historical origins (Germany, 18<sup>th</sup> century) following the journey of a

(usually male) character in his acculturation and successful integration within society, this literary form has nonetheless been productive both in postcolonial and American literature by writers, especially women, belonging to ethnic minorities.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in these contexts, the genre has revealed its potentialities as a “[...] comment on dominant Euro-American society by revising or even rejecting some of its values and certain aspects of its literary traditions.”<sup>19</sup> The condition for success in twentieth-century *Bildungsromane* by women of colour is, according to Françoise Lionnet’s definition of *métissage*, “the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts... the site of undecidability and indeterminacy.”<sup>20</sup> The rewriting of the genre by these writers has underlined a context of constant negotiation between values such as the importance of the community in a person’s development as Karafilis discusses in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.

In both Hurston’s and Walker’s novels, the female character’s development is marked by silence and apparent submission to social demands: actually, in this case, society does not expect from them some kind of integration and success, but just that “mindless adherence” that Moretti identified as not the real goal of the *Bildungsroman*. From this perspective, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* would adhere to the conventions of the female *Bildungsroman*; in fact, as observed by Annis Pratt and Barbara White,

[the protagonist] does not *choose* a life to one side of society after conscious deliberation on the subject; rather, she is ontologically or radically alienated by gender-role norms from *the very outset*. Thus, although the authors attempt to accommodate their heroes’ *bildung* or development to the general pattern of the genre, the disjunctions we have noticed inevitably make of the woman’s initiation less a self-determined progression towards maturity than a regression *from* full participation in adult life.<sup>21</sup>

It is at this point that the integration between the genres of *Bildungsroman* and *Vollendungsroman* seems to be essential for the deployment of the characters’ potentialities. In fact, according to the definition by Constance Rooke

The task of the *Vollendungsroman* is to discover for its protagonist and for the reader some kind of affirmation in the face of loss... Our lives are temporary; all are circumscribed by the reality of death. But this is felt more strongly in fiction concerned with old age, so that a special intensity, resulting from the darkness to darkness, characterizes the *Vollendungsroman*. The writer's imagination is challenged by the prospect of the character's demise and by the need to 'capture' a life before it vanishes.<sup>22</sup>

The capacity of the *Vollendungsroman* of dealing with loss marks its connection to the female *Bildungsroman*; as underlined by Carol Lazzaro-Weis, the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries presents us with heroines dealing with different kinds of losses in relation to their autonomy and creativity.<sup>23</sup> Lazzaro-Weis agrees with Pratt's view that women are confronted with models for "growing down" rather than "growing up" like it was expected from their male counterparts.<sup>24</sup> Both Janie and Celie, in fact, are not expected to actively participate in society and in processes of meaning-making: their personal trajectories in younger years relegate them to subordinate, almost invisible (and mostly silent) roles. The development which has been denied and discouraged has the possibility to occur only when the coordinate of age comes into play not as a further element of oppression, but as a chance of liberation thanks to the possibility of engaging "(...) in the practices, discourses... that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world..."<sup>25</sup> according to Teresa de Lauretis's definition of experience as "the process by which subjectivity is constructed." From this perspective, identity is conceived as "a point of departure," neither an immutable unit nor an incontrovertible destiny when ageing enters the stage\_and confronts the character with conceptions of self and identity "[...] seen as a series of shifting positions within specific and material contexts."<sup>26</sup>

In her study of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Leigh Anne Duck applies Bakhtin's genre theory to Hurston's novel. She sees as one possible reading of Janie's trajectory "... the traditional pattern of the *bildungsroman*, in which protagonists must overturn their early belief-systems as they discover that the communities of their youth were unaware of the changes affecting the larger world."<sup>27</sup> In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a scrutiny of Janie's younger years



reveals that she did not have any kind of decision-making power in her life. At seventeen, she is forced by her grandmother to marry a man she does not love. After her grandmother's death, Janie leaves her husband for another man who eventually encages her within an oppressive relationship where he continually silences and diminishes her. After her husband's death, the forty-year-old Janie is finally able to live by herself, run away with a younger partner, and choose a life according to her wishes. The contrast between the first part of her life and the second is striking. In the first part, she always subordinated herself to her grandmother's desires and her husband's wishes, thereby forgetting herself under the strain of not wanting to deceive her dear ones, which only led to a scission inside her being; whereas in the second part, she mends herself and takes control of her life. The passage below portrays the transition

She wasn't petal-open anymore with him. She was twenty-four and seven years married when she knew. She found that out when he slapped her face in the kitchen. (...) She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them.<sup>28</sup>

The narratives emergent from Featherstone and Hepworth's interviews of the elderly parallels Janie's image of division and disillusionment, although with a difference. When they were confronted by the changes of time on their physical appearance, Featherstone and Hepworth's narrators consistently invoked the recurrent motif of the divided being in their long view of ageing. Janie's experience is different, though, in that she is physically young and beautiful throughout the years, while inside she ages rapidly, leaving all her inner life hidden from her partner, saving a space of interior autonomy from his abusing behaviour in order to survive. Furthermore, the passage also accounts for the acquisition of self-consciousness by the protagonist and a subsequent degree of alienation from external conditions where this newly acquired awareness cannot find a proper expression. This

condition closely brings to mind that of the twentieth-century-artist in the *Künstlerroman*, or novel of artistic formation; in this genre, “[t]he net effect of this corrosive self-consciousness is total alienation from the felt experience of life” where “[t]he self-conscious outsider... runs the risk of non-being, non-identity.”<sup>29</sup> As the position occupied by Janie in the African-American community and in her marriage is already menaced by the risk of annihilation, it is possible to read this representation of division reads like a conscious act of survival and resistance. Moreover, as underlined by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, “[l]iterary manuscripts suggest that middle-age can provide an important creative turning point”<sup>30</sup> and this seems particularly true in relation to the birth of Janie’s artistic creativity if it is taken into account that, according to Hite’s analysis “Janie... produces a story with Pheoby rather than children in any of her three marriages”<sup>31</sup> while becoming “the author of her own story, both source and subject of maternal wisdom, in effect giving birth to herself”<sup>32</sup> and to the artistic possibilities of her narrative.

Celie, the main character and narrative voice in *The Color Purple*, lives a very similar experience as Janie. After being abused by her stepfather and mistreated by a husband she did not choose, she finds freedom and independence in a later stage of her life and will enjoy them throughout old age, as highlighted in her granddaughter’s memories in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Thanks to the relationship with Shug, her husband’s ex-lover, Celie speaks up after years of silenced assertiveness, leaves her uncaring husband and becomes financially and emotionally independent. As suggested by the sociologists John Bond and Peter Coleman, “ageing itself” can become “a creative enterprise.”<sup>33</sup> In the idea of ageing as a process encouraging creation, it is possible to find a further link between *Vollendungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* in relation to Hurston’s and Walker’s works; in fact, it is only in a later stage of life that Janie is able to weave the text of her own story and ultimately provide it with meaning while Celie becomes a tailor, a final embodiment of her progressive acquisition of agency towards her own narrative.

In both Janie’s and Celie’s experiences, the passage between *Bildung* and *Vollendung* is marked by an outburst of anger, which helps them in acquiring a voice. From this perspective, as Kathleen Woodward observes, “the rhetoric of anger” represents “a strategy, calling up the cultural memory of militant women in the 1960s

and evoking anger as a powerful binding force.”<sup>34</sup> The memory of militancy can represent an important part of Walker’s biography interspersed throughout her novels, but Hurston’s importance as a model for her indicates that a certain degree of militancy was already present before the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s.

Unmistakably, in Hurston’s and Walker’s representations of anger, the power of the word acquires the potency to change their main characters’ lives. We do not find that discrepancy between wisdom and anger which, according to Woodward, marks old age in contemporary American society. Rather, Woodward observes that “the cultural prohibition of anger in older people in the United States”<sup>35</sup> would have damaging effects as the “social politics of aging” relies “on a rhetoric of emotion.”<sup>36</sup> While neither Janie nor Celie have not reached old age yet, their female *Bildung* seems marked by loss in various ways, which points to the main reason why the subsequent sections of their lives can be considered so comparable to old age. According to the definition by Hepworth, they are in that particular phase of life in which they are “ageing *into* old age” that is “a constant reminder that... the point of entry into old age is literally... a symbolic construct which is interactively produced as individuals attempt to make sense of the later part of life.”<sup>37</sup> In their early years, both characters have learnt how to cope with different forms of discrimination and this has led to the formation of strong counter-identities rebelling against the possibility of their textual death. As observed by Rooke in relation to the *Vollendungsroman*, the genre focuses on the “deconstruction of ego” and it is precisely this deconstructive process that renders Janie and Celie aware of the interconnections of power relations in their lives and how these work in order to diminish and silence them. Within the novels under examination these attempts work as textual “attempted murders” as exemplified by the premature death of Janie’s husband following a verbal confrontation in which the two characters face one another exactly on the subject of ageing, as we can see in the following passage:

“T’ain’t no use in gettin’ all mad, Janie, ‘cause Ah mention you ain’t no young gal no mo’. Nobody in heah ain’t lookin’ for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is.”

“Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘taint nothin’ to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ about *me* lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.”<sup>38</sup>

This exchange takes place after long years of Janie’s silence and submission. Her ability to find a voice in order to affirm her womanhood throughout the process of ageing constitutes a wise act of rage against the premature annihilation of her presence in the text. The focus of Jodie’s speech seems to constitute an attempt at making Janie age at least at the level of language, but she is more skilled than he is at his own game and, ultimately, she is able to reverse the action against him. From that moment on, Jodie considerably ages, and he dies soon afterwards.

A similar movement is present in *The Color Purple* when Celie finds out that her husband has been hiding her sister’s letters for years. Before leaving him after a life of abuse, Celie finds the courage to speak up for herself and curse him: “[...] The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot... I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook... But I’m here.”<sup>39</sup> This sentence constitutes a reference to different forms of jeopardy affecting Celie’s life: class, race, and social standards of aesthetics have all contributed to her silencing throughout her youth. In an intersectional analysis, this episode can be read according to Ann Cronin’s and Andrew King’s definition of the aims of intersectionality as both “a theoretical approach” and “a form of narrative analysis.”<sup>40</sup> In quoting Yuval-Davis, Cronin and King observe that “...intersectionality theory examines the social divisions, identifications and power relations that structure people’s lives, particularly those people deemed to be marginalized.”<sup>41</sup>

Compared to other approaches like the ones proposed in diversity theories, this form of analysis is particularly productive as it allows the biographical element to be determinant in the setting of later life. Notably, in both Hurston’s and Walker’s works it is present as a substantial reversal of those kinds of narratives Cronin and King define as “tales of marginalization” in which “[...] the equation ageing plus

sexuality equals social isolation.”<sup>42</sup> Considering “a socially situated biographical context,” though, a framework concerned exclusively with diversity per se is not able to represent an effective approach to alternative narratives. Making reference to the works by Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, Clary Krekula observes that, according to an intersectional approach, it is possible “[...] to emphasize how power relations, rather than being based on additive principles, should be understood as dynamic interactions”<sup>43</sup> which accounts for “multiplicity of identities”<sup>44</sup> throughout ageing. What emerges in these interactions is the value of experience as a “process of signification” according to de Lauretis’s research of a definition of female experience that is neither essentialist nor the sign of an absence.<sup>45</sup> This idea of processual experience can find an echo in Janie’s words to her friend Pheoby:

[...] It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh *know* there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves.<sup>46</sup>

It is the consciousness rising both in Janie’s and Celie’s narratives that marks the passage from the *Bildung* stage as adherence to a system silencing their subjectivities to *Vollendung*, a later stage of their lives in which they can weave their memories and, in so doing, acquire a new sense of their being helping them to become active shapers of their later years. The role of language is pivotal for the creative potential of this further phase of life because, as underlined by de Lauretis, the subject is “at odds with language” more than divided by it in Derrida’s sense,<sup>47</sup> so that this conflict inherent in the linguistic medium creates possibilities both for division and expression. In the development of Janie’s and Celie’s characters, as underlined by Cronin and King, differences do not result in disempowerment, but “[...] ageing, sexuality and socio-economic (financial) status”<sup>48</sup> intersect in their lives in empowering ways.

In Hurston’s and Walker’s works, awareness and empowerment are closely related to language in its oral features expressed in both speech and writing. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie tells the story of her life to her best friend Pheoby, while in *The Color Purple* Celie weaves her narrative in a series of letters marked by

orality. In this sense, it is possible to consider their narratives as examples of “oral herstories” connected to the definition of oral history provided by Sally Chandler as an “[...] illustration of the complex relationships among identity, perception and representation which affect the translation of experience into words.”<sup>49</sup> In this kind of narrative, according to Chandler’s analysis, subjectivity as the basis of oral history defines itself as a dynamic entity in its interactions with dominant discourses, local variants in their raced, classed, and gendered variations, and individual experience.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the idea of a possible connection between the elderly and oral history is underlined by Wilbur H. Watson in his analysis of pre-slavery society when he stresses the roles of the elders as “respected... repositories of cultural historical beliefs, legends, and facts;”<sup>51</sup> the further passage which both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* make evident are the possibilities inherent in this role for (elderly) women.

This capacity to articulate a reflection on their lives and personal experience is the basis for the emergence of Janie’s and Celie’s voices and memories as a valuable form of continuity with younger generations, as the following passage taken from *The Color Purple* suggests:

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don’t know much what going on. But I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt.<sup>52</sup>

These final lines focus on the importance of intergenerational exchange when it is not reduced to a cause of constant conflict and the idea that society, personified in the younger generations, decides what old age means and who belongs to it according to stereotypical images of ageing. In fact, as Featherstone and Hepworth emphasize, “(...) images of ageing are stereotypes which we use to locate and identify a wide diversity of individual persons in terms of socially prescribed age categories.”<sup>53</sup> If stereotypes can be overcome, the distance between generations remains, but can take two different forms as observed by Joanna Bornat who refers to it as something “... which can feel painful if it means a feeling of exclusion and the

loss of a sense of value. But it can be a distance to be appreciated if it helps to understand differences in experience and if it makes us search harder for continuities between generations.”<sup>54</sup> As Chandler remarks in relation to oral history across generations, the conflation of *Bildungsroman* and *Vollendungsroman* in Hurston’s and Walker’s novels can be analysed as an “account of the changing patterns through which individuals create meanings at different points in the lifespan and across generations”<sup>55</sup> and as literary representations of how common people can turn into “their own historians and biographers”<sup>56</sup> through the devices of storytelling and epistolarity.

We have an example of this kind of continuity between generations in Celie’s granddaughter’s memories in *The Temple of My Familiar* in which Celie and Shug appear in the roles of grandmothers. As noted by Vita Fortunati (2003), the figure of the grandmother is linked to the ability to transmit long-lasting values to the new generation through her historical memory. Until the very end of Celie’s life, she emphatically is active in building her own meanings, ‘new’ values – when the traditional ones have been revealed as ‘fake’ or oppressive - and that is exactly how Fanny remembers her. The elderly’s recreation of meanings is well exemplified in Shug’s gospel, above all in the following lines

HELPED are those who are enemies of their own racism: they shall live in harmony with the citizens of this world, and not with those of the world of their ancestors, which has passed away, and which they shall never see again.<sup>57</sup>

Celie’s and Shug’s idea of founding a new religion and writing their own gospel focuses on the possibility of producing new meanings. In particular, the characters show awareness of the fact that not everything of the ‘old’ world must be preserved, particularly its racism or sexism. From this perspective, the role of *Vollendungsroman* according to Rooke’s definition of a “winding up novel,” that is a novel where characters find “some kind of affirmation in the face of loss”<sup>58</sup> acquires significance in relation to that “site of undecidability and indeterminacy” present in Lionnet’s idea of *métissage*; in fact, *métissage* can constitute a rewriting of tradition in order to negotiate meanings representing actual possibilities of *Bildung* for younger generations. The dynamic relationship between loss and *métissage* as an

indeterminate position open to multiple possibilities underlines the importance of intersectionality in the analysis of the ageing process as a possibility of empowerment through loss. In fact, the several coordinates constituting the characters' identities are not mere elements leading to exponential degrees of jeopardy during their lifespan, but intersect in various ways generating possibilities for expression and creation. From this perspective, the representation of ageing both in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Walker's *The Color Purple* represents experiences as processes of signification through which identities can be constructed and find expression according to de Lauretis's theoretical definition of experience as a process through which subjectivity can speak, even while being "at odds with language." Experience is neither essentialized nor absent, but has possibilities for political expression especially important in the representation of people who have been traditionally disempowered because of gender, ethnicity, class, and/or age. By reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the *Color Purple* as examples of *Vollendungsromane*, the connections between different stages of life become visible thanks to the interplay between "continuity and change across the life span"<sup>59</sup> while the intersectional approach is useful in analyzing how age is not a mere addition to earlier forms of oppression in an impregnable network of power relations, but rather constitutes an opportunity for challenging the status quo and providing new meanings to one's identity and life experiences. In the process of meaning production the role of the voice is pivotal in the creative recollection of memories in order to make the text alive, vibrant in the very fabric of this passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which Janie summons her soul:

(...) Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.<sup>60</sup>

The acquisition of a voice marks the passage from a youth characterized by silence and subordination to a later stage of life in which the characters shape both actions and memories. Janie's and Celie's voices mark the opening of the stage of *Bildung*



to that of *Vollendung*. Weaving their texts they finally make them live as narrative forms of resistance against silencing and death.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), 86.
- <sup>2</sup> Molly Hite, "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Spring, 1989), 258.
- <sup>3</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 182.
- <sup>4</sup> Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Female 'Bildungsroman': Calling It into Question," *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), 23.
- <sup>6</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 14-15.
- <sup>7</sup> Sirma Bilge and Ann Denis, "Introduction: Women, Intersectionality and Diasporas," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 2010), 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems, "The Tripartite Plight of African-American Women as Reflected in the Novels of Hurston and Walker," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Dec. 1989), 192.
- <sup>9</sup> Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, "Images of Ageing." In J. Bond, P. Coleman, and S. Peace (eds.), *Ageing in Society: An Introduction to Social Gerontology* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 308.
- <sup>10</sup> Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker (eds.), *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990: 1937), 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Featherstone and Hepworth, 322.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.
- <sup>15</sup> Bonnie Braendlin, "Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* as Pastiche," *American Literature*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Mar. 1996), 51.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Maria Karafilis, "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the *Bildungsroman* in Sandra Cisneros's 'The House on Mango Street' and Jamaica Kincaid's 'Annie John,'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter, 1998), 63.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>21</sup> Charlotte Goodman, "The Lost Brother, the Twin: Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double Bildungsroman," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Autumn, 1983), 29.
- <sup>22</sup> Constance Rooke, "Old Age in Contemporary Fiction: A New Paradigm of Hope." In T. R. Cole, D. D. Van Tassel, and R. Kastenbaum (eds.), *Handbook of The Humanities and Aging* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1992), 248.
- <sup>23</sup> Lazzaro-Weis, 17.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>27</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, "Go There Tuh Know There: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk," *American Literary History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 278.
- <sup>28</sup> Hurston, 67-68.
- <sup>29</sup> Carl D. Malmgren, "'From Work to Text': The Modernist and (Post)Modernist Künstlerroman," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn 1987), 8.
- <sup>30</sup> Anne M. Wyatt Brown, "Creativity in Midlife: The Novels of Anita Brookner," *Journal of Aging Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 1989), 176.
- <sup>31</sup> Hite, 271.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.
- <sup>33</sup> John Bond and Peter Coleman, "Ageing into the Twentieth-First Century," 339.

- <sup>34</sup> Kathleen Woodward, "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," *Cultural Critique*, No. 51 (Spring 2002), 187.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 188.
- <sup>37</sup> Hepworth, 2.
- <sup>38</sup> Hurston, 75.
- <sup>39</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983: 1982), 187.
- <sup>40</sup> Ann Cronin and Andrew King, "Power, Inequality and Identification: Exploring Diversity and Intersectionality amongst Older LGB Adults," *Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (Oct. 2010), 887.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 879.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 886.
- <sup>43</sup> Clary Krekula, "The Intersection of Age and Gender: Reworking Gender Theory and Social Gerontology," *Current Sociology*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Mar. 2007), 163.
- <sup>44</sup> Cronin and King, 876.
- <sup>45</sup> Lazzaro-Weis, 23.
- <sup>46</sup> Hurston, 183.
- <sup>47</sup> Lazzaro-Weis, 23.
- <sup>48</sup> Cronin and King, 887.
- <sup>49</sup> Sally Chandler, "Oral History Across Generations: Age, Generational Identity and Oral Testimony," *Oral History*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Autumn 2005), 53.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 49.
- <sup>51</sup> Wilbur H. Watson, *Ageing and Social Behavior: An Introduction to Social Gerontology* (Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1982), 138.
- <sup>52</sup> Walker, *Purple*, 251.
- <sup>53</sup> Feather and Hepworth, 309.
- <sup>54</sup> Joanna Bornat, "Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People," *Oral History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn, 1989), 16.
- <sup>55</sup> Chandler, 55-56.
- <sup>56</sup> Bornat, 18.
- <sup>57</sup> Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (London: Penguin, 1990: 1989), 317.
- <sup>58</sup> Rooke, 248.
- <sup>59</sup> Diana Wallace, "Literary Portrayals of Ageing" in Ian Stuart-Hamilton, *An Introduction to Gerontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 396.
- <sup>60</sup> Hurston, 183-184.