

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMINISM IN ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

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DEDICATION

To Kishwar and Susan who Nourish and Inspire

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ABSTRACT

Intersectional intellectualism in African American feminism based on subjectivity and analytic is about minoritarian affinities to expose the interweaving of the power structure (Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins). It is open-ended to diversity and inclusion of new categorization in discourse and politics. However, intersectionality is opposite from neoliberal pluralism due to its critique of structural exclusions based on power differentials and constraining normatives. According to Jennifer C. Nash, intersectional intellectualism can be re-imagined in new directions that can unfold Black feminist visionary world-making possibilities. However, scant attention has been paid to the aspect of African American feminist intersectional intellectualism in the environmental humanities. This dissertation focused on African American women life writers reveals that historical intersectionality can be integrated with the conceptual intersectionality in contemporary feminist theories in New Materialism to explore and articulate knowledge practices against racism and anthropocentrism. For Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet*, the posthumanist subjectivity with an emphasis on onto-epistemology and ethics encourages learning to live intersectionally. This research project has focused on African American feminist life writers Zora Neale Hurston, Lucille Clifton, and Alice Walker as critical knowledge producers. The study reveals that these life writings critically engage with the discursive productions of racism and anthropocentrism in modern Eurocentric anthropology, technology, and designs of cultivation. Moreover, these writers also move beyond the dominant discourses to articulate their ecological consciousness and activism against environmental racism based on their “living with and through” flora in their historical contexts. The study contributes to the development of African American feminist praxis in the environmental humanities in which methodology, onto-epistemology, and ethics are interwoven. African American women life writers’ intersectionality as opposed to parallelism contributes to the contemporary feminist transcorporeal entanglement between human actors and nature. This intellectual approach does not reproduce hierarchical dichotomies of self/other, human/nonhuman, culture/nature, material/discursive, and intellectualism/activism.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Deconstruction of individualism, sovereignty, and superiority of the human subject in classical humanism in the Eurocentric modernity has promisingly evolved into contemporary feminist theories in environmental humanities. The feminist paradigm recognizes the persistent dilemma of the modern dichotomies between culture and nature that perpetuates the classical humanist or neoliberal subject. Following the Eurocolonial tradition of thought and praxis, this construction bifurcates, dominates, and incorporates the Universal Man into multiple violent hierarchies based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, and Earth others. The feminist critique of Cartesian dualist oppositions becomes more prospective when it is co-constituted with alternative knowledge practices to (re)conceptualize human identity, subjectivity, and activism based on an entangled belonging with nature.

African American feminist environmental writings offer one such desired alternative epistemologies to complicate the sovereignty, simplicity and universality of human identity and knowledge practices in the Eurocentric modernity with keen attention to racism and anthropocentrism. In *A Theoretical Approach to Modern American History and Literature*, W. Lawrence Hogue studies African American feminism as one of the potential sources to complicate the Eurocentric linearity in modern America. According to Hogue, Zora Neale Hurston's inspiration from the African American folklore in the hybrid of culture and nature in *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) creates a social reality to disrupt racism and anthropocentrism by undermining the "oppositional dualisms" of self/other, white/black, European/Non-European and nature/culture.¹ Hurston's onto-epistemology based on nature and culture relationship articulates

her African American feminist subjectivity outside the confinements of biological determinism and cultural essentialism.

Taking this as a point of entry, the current research study elaborated the subjectivities of African American women writers Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Lucille Clifton in their life writings with the critical lens of African American feminism and New Materialism. The study explored and highlighted the African American feminist praxis in environmental humanities in which their ecological consciousness is inseparable from their epistemologies and activism for environmental justice.

Environmental Humanities is an interdisciplinary field based on different modes of inquiries and theoretical frames to develop the human identity, subjectivity, and knowledge practices in entanglement rather than mastery of nature. The aim of environmental humanities is to radically re-frame environmental issues as human, social, and cultural concerns rather than just scientific and technological matters. According to Deborah Bird et al. Rose in "Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities," environmental humanities unfolds an inquiry about meaning, responsibility, and purpose in humanities to re-imagine human identity as a "thicker notion of humanity" (1). One of the foundational contributions of environmental humanities is its conceptual development in response to anthropocentrism and universalism in science and technology. Donna Haraway's concept of "naturecultures" as ontologies of living with and through nature inspired by Bruno Latour's *We have Never been Modern* played a crucial role in the critique of modern bifurcations of self vs. other, human vs. non-human, nature vs culture, and material vs discursive in knowledge practices. Environmental humanities based on the paradigm of nature and culture relationship develop self-reflection against the epistemological monoculture to recognize the differences of histories and cultures related to environment.² According to Cecilia Asberg, the

contemporary idea of Anthropocene is significant with its critical attention to human-induced biological, geological and anthropogenic transformations of the planet. However, its emphasis on humanity rather than multiplicity of bio, on human extinction rather than human responsibility, and on universalism rather than structural differences render Anthropocene a flawed idea to understand and tackle with the contemporary environmental crisis. New Materialism based on the dynamics of "naturecultures" is supported by feminist genealogies. It introduces new inquiries about human identity, subjectivity, and knowledge practices without dividing the environmentalism from social justice. According to the study by A. Neimanis, C. Åsberg, and J. Hedrén, New Materialism and Posthumanism can be defined as the "ethics of the encounter" to anthropocentrism and universalism in the Western modernity to imagine an "openness toward alterity and unknowability" for the collective justice (84).

Intersectionality is a significant African American feminist intellectual contribution that has been approached in this research study to explain subjectivity with critical attention to human identity based on the analysis of race and nature. Intersectionality as a subjectivity and analytic has been introduced theoretically by the critical race theorist and the African American feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw and other U.S. women of color in the 1980s. Intersectionality is not about identity politics based on gender victimization; rather it is about minoritarian affinities to expose the interweaving of the power structure. It is open-ended to diversity and inclusion of new categorization in discourse and politics. However, it is opposite from neoliberal pluralism due to its critique of structural exclusions based on power differentials and constraining normatives. Jennifer C. Nash in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* highlights that "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977) demonstrated Black feminist's "development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are

interlocking" including race, gender, and class (7). Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins developed the theory of intersectionality based on the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences, identities, and subjectivities as the praxis of analysis and coalition against the interlocking structure. According to Nash, intersectional intellectualism can be re-imagined in new directions that can unfold Black feminist visionary world making possibilities.

Sylvia Wynter's critique of the modern "genre of human" to re-imagine human identity from the liminal space of Black feminism played a vital role in the study of intersectional intellectualism. Wynter offers critical insights to counter totality, racism, and anthropocentrism of the liberal humanist subject in Eurocentric modernity to achieve feminist, human, and environmental liberation. According to Wynter, "all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources...these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle" (260-61). For Wynter, African American studies and minority studies based on the history of racism and colonialism can develop the political and epistemological human struggle against the construction of Universal human subject in Western modernity. Wynter describes that the dominant "genre of human" is based on race in the context of capitalism and colonialism. This discursive construction works crucially in socioeconomic inequalities, racialized exploitation, gendered subordination, colonialism, genocide, and environmental extinction in a sense of divinity beyond any intervention. For Wynter, the African American studies and other minority studies should not confine human identity as an object in comparison and specificity with the dominant discourse. Rather, the potential object of knowledge from the liminal space should be an analysis and disruption of the racialized

assemblage based on capitalism and biological determinism to expose the modern "genre of human" as a relational ontological totality.

Wynter's intersectional feminism encourages to explore epistemically the multiplicity of human identity beyond racism and anthropocentrism. She views the definition of human identity based on capitalism and biological determinism as the limit that should be transgressed. Alexander G. Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* quotes Wynter's theory of human identity based on the liminal space of the Black feminism, "Black studies can and should take up a pivotal position in this process, because analyses of racialization have the potential to disarticulate the human from Man, thus metamorphosing humanity into a relational object of knowledge" (27). Wynter radically transfers the position of "other" in the Eurocentric modernity from margin to center to develop alternative epistemologies for the re-imagination of human identities. According to Weheliye, Wynter's feminism is similar to Hortense Spillers' s feminist subjectivity that is related to the emancipation of humanity, including gender, race, and class than a specific identity, group, and culture. Weheliye' s study of Hortense Spillers is quoted here:

Hortense Spillers makes a similar point when she maintains, "we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject." In this context, "gendered femaleness" denotes gender as a "purely natural" and sovereign modality of difference while the revolt of a "female social subject" articulates gender as an integral component in the abolition of the human as Man. As phrased by one of the defining texts in the recent history of black feminism: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." (23)

In contrast to the racialized assemblage of human identity based on capitalism and biological determinism, Wynter's feminist subjectivity advocates for an alternative assemblage of human identity whose ontology is critically embodied and embedded with culture and nature. According to Cristin Ellis, Wynter suggests a posthumanist, "sociogenic" subjectivity with the power of

culture and storytelling in his/her entanglement with nature for the collective justice. Wynter encourages us to view "sociogenic" subject not as a negative alternative to genetic determinism but to imagine it as a kind of complication and necessity in the contemporary world in which human is not separate from non-human. According to Ellis, Wynter's concept of "sociogenic" human is not transcendental ; rather it ensures an embodied and embedded human identity for whom "flesh, and blood, and brain matter," and who moves "toward a corelated human species, and eco-systematic ethic" (158).

Similarly, New Materialism approaches intersectionality as the feminist subjectivity and analytic, emphasizing gender, race/ethnicity, class, and Earth others. Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet* qualifies "intersectionality" as the basis for the posthumanist identity and subjectivity. She claims that "I have never wanted to be a posthuman or posthumanist more than I wanted to be a postfeminist" (17). Here, Haraway does not mean to reify the troubled categorization of gender; rather she connects gender with other asymmetrical differences intersectionally. For Haraway, the posthumanist subjectivity with its emphasis on ethics, epistemology, and politics of "companion species" encourages learning "to live intersectionally" (18). Haraway cites Carol Adams to explain that "intersectionality" is not about "thinking analogically, of seeing oppression as additive" rather it is an experience and analytic to comprehend "the interlocking systems of domination" for coalition and resistance (309). Nina Lykke in *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* combines the African American feminist and other historical feminist studies of intersectionality with the contemporary post-constructionist feminist studies in New Materialism and Posthumanism to emphasize mutual construction and transformation among intersectional categories or fluid identities. According to her, "intersectional interplays between categorization should be analyzed

as mutual and intertwined process of transformation and not as a mere addition of gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality and so on" (51). Following the feminist physicist, Karen Barad in *New Materialism*, Lykke reinterprets intersectionality as an "intra-action" among the categories of gender, race and nature which do not pre-exist rather they are the result of a "force" among nature (material), culture (discourse), and technology. New Materialism's uniqueness can be measured by its replacement of parallelism with integration between human and non-human, culture and nature, material and discursive. Rosi Braidotti (2016) describes the critical posthuman feminist subject as a development of the "empathetic bonds" with "situated knowledges of the structural others" (382). The distinction of posthumanist feminist subject based on "naturecultures" can be found in the affirmative politics of "zoe" and critical materialism that transgresses the rationality of hierarchical oppositions between self and other, human and non-human, nature and culture, and material and discursive.³

Some influential ecofeminist theorists revised and articulated feminist subjectivity and analysis in terms of intersectionality to complicate and counter gendered identity politics in environmental humanities. Carolyn Merchant in *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in the Western Culture* emphasizes that ecofeminism needs to move beyond gendered identity politics to develop "an environmental ethic based on a partnership between humans and the non-human world" (8). Catriona Sandilands in *The Good-Natured Feminist: Eco-feminism and the Quest for Democracy* reminds us that ecofeminism, with its co-articulation of woman and nature, has an inherent potential to move beyond the discursive closure of woman and nature based on identity politics to acknowledge uncertain, partial, and multiple constructions of woman and nature. According to Sandilands, an openness to alternative and diverse identities and discourses can be a valuable transition from the identity politics based on biological determinism and cultural

essentialism to the radical democracy in ecofeminism. Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is another influential study for the contemporary feminist theories in Environmental Humanities that articulates feminist intersectional politics. Plumwood highlights that rationality in modern Western thought develops the concept of master identity in which woman, other, and nature are inferiorised. The power of Plumwood's argument can be found both in her refusal to women's powerless inclusion in nature and their resistance to cultural exclusions. She insists that Environmental Humanities need critical posthumanist feminist subjectivity with which women can contribute actively and critically for and with nature. The current study of African American women's life writings emphasizing human identity beyond racism and anthropocentrism resonates with the intersectional intellectualism in African American feminism, New Materialism, and contemporary revisions in ecofeminism to build epistemologies based on ecological consciousness and collective justice.

African American women's life writings or autobiographies are known for their self-invention against the commodification of human identity. They resist capitalist reproductions of bodies void of spirit, expressions, and multiplicity in the colonial discourse. Emmanuel S. Nelson writes that the African American autobiography from its inception is about the reclamation of humanity from its commodification (xiv). The autobiography occupies the primary position as a genre in the African American's expressive culture from the mid-eighteenth century till today. African American writers have approached autobiographies in different forms as the "revolutionary act" for freedom, reclamation of self-definition, and collective critique of racism. African American women writers, with their narrative strategies, self-invention, and radical critique of racism add their own revolutionary dimension to the long and established tradition of African American life writings. Regina Blackburn describes that African American women writers

approach life writings for “creative, intellectual and psychological composition” based on their diverse life experiences that have been evaded by racism and sexism before and after the Civil War in America (133). Blackburn also highlights that African American women’s life writings are beyond generalization due to their “complex, multidimensional changing selfhood” (148). Nellie Y. McKay in “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography” describes the politics of the African American feminist life writings in which “stories shape Black female identity in a way that the self, whatever the nature of invention” is always a witness against “the master text and not its absolute victim” (93). It is this political, intellectual, and conceptually innovative power that the current project explored and articulated in the study of African American women’s life writings.

The research project focused on African American feminist subjectivity in belonging with flora highlighted not only the historical intersectional response to racism and anthropocentrism but also the conceptual creativity of women writers in their life writings. In New Materialism, the feminist subject is a knowledge producer known for her ontological, ethico-political, and epistemological relationship with the objects of knowledge (human and nature). Here, the feminist subject is neither completely material (postconstructionist) nor discursive (constructionist); rather she co-constitutes both material and discursive in her figurative subjectivity. Such a feminist subjectivity, in Elizabeth Grosz’ words, combines ontological, ethico-political and epistemological engagement with nature (191). In her essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, Haraway criticizes the construction of woman and nature as resources in Western modernity to emphasize on woman subject and nature as agents in multiple connections. Shirley Ardener in *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* explains that Haraway’s feminist agent is a “player” against biological determinism and cultural

essentialism to “reappropriate and variously disconnect the terms and embed them in new self-aware discourse; and to attempt to ‘activate’ the pacified categories” of gender and nature (201). Similarly, Nina Lykke explains that Karen Barad’s “ethico-onto-epistemology” introduces the feminist knowledge producer for whom ontologies are inseparable from epistemologies and activism for collective justice. Such feminist knowledge producer can reduce the distance between the subject and the object with his/her ontological belonging, partial objectivity, and ethico-political commitment (134). According to Astrida Neimanis, such a conceptual feminist subjectivity only can “cultivate the ability to respond than master” nature (37).

In African American ecoliterary traditions, ontological belonging with flora is both material and discursive. They acknowledge the material agency of flora in the natural environment and the agency of its figuration to resist the racialized discourse of African American identity. Kimberly N. Ruffin in *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Tradition* describes that flora in the African American eco-literature is a figurative tool for analyzing both the burden of history and the beauty of poetic imagination about human and nature. According to Ruffin, African American writers and characters explore and transform the ontological alienations (material and discursive) of the oppressed groups from nature based on their liberative associations with flora. In her book chapter “Messages from the Tress: Recognizing Ecological Burden and Beauty,” Ruffin explains that liberative nature is not just an outside entity (environment); rather it is closely connected with self-consciousness in folk culture and oral literature in African American ecoliterary traditions. She explains the paradigm of African American ecology as, “(i). Humans are indeed ‘natural’, (ii). Humans have developed a strong and distinct culture within nature, (iii). Cultural definitions of ‘Humanity’ influences an individual’s experience among humans, and with

non-human nature” (18). Ruffin replaces “environment” with “ecology” to better articulate African American ecoliterary traditions based on ontological integration with nature.

Whereas Ruffin articulates the figuration of flora for liberative ontology in the African American ecoliterary traditions against material and discursive alienation, bell hooks offers an insight into ontological belonging with flora and earth for social and environmental justice. In her essay “Earthbound: On Solid Ground,” hooks explains that she identifies herself with the spirit of freedom and humility in her relationship with nature, especially with flora due to her folk cultural association in Kentucky. She writes, “To look upon a tree, or a hilly waterfall that has stood the test of time can renew the spirit. To watch plants, rise from the earth with no special tending reawakens our sense of awe and wonder” (70). hooks’ faith in ontological belonging with flora as the “people of earth” would be misinterpreted if it is defined in terms of cultural essentialism and natural organicism. Rather, hooks articulates her ontological affinity with material flora and earth to advocate for social and environmental justice against racism and capitalism. She writes:

More than ever before in our nation’s history, Black folks must collectively renew our relationships to the earth, to our agrarian roots. For when we are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the dark earth, we collude with the domination of the earth’s dark people, both here and globally. Reclaiming our history, our relationship to nature, to farming in America, and proclaiming the humanizing restorative of living in harmony with nature so that the earth can be our witness, is a meaningful resistance. (70)

For Ruffin and hooks, “Blackness” stands candidly for radical critique of racism and anthropocentrism in the Eurocentric modernity and social relations. Their ontological belonging with flora for discursive liberation and environmental justice reverberates what Cynthia Hamilton claims in Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll’s study of the African American environmental history that the “consequences of industrialization ‘have forced an increasing number of African Americans to become environmentalists’” (123). Reflection on hooks’ and Ruffin’s concept of the African American ontology connected with flora in their situated knowledge resonates with

Neimanis' model of feminist subjectivity in New Materialism. In both cases, ecological ontology or ecological consciousness is material, discursive and conceptual to unfold new ethical solidarities.

This research study also focused on the “ethico-political” aspect of African American women’s life writings by elaborating their activism for environmental justice against the racialized labor. Neimanis explains that ethico-political aspect of the feminist subjectivity in New Materialism pays “unflinching attention to the systematic oppressions that still affect some human more than others” (39). Recent African American environmental histories with attention to location, geography, power structure, and agency in daily life experiences offer insights into environmentalist activism against racialized labor. Such ecological activism exposes racially exploited labor, on the one hand, and the degradation of the natural environment, especially flora, on the other hand. Mart A. Stewart’s *“What Nature Suffers to Groe”*: *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680-1920* gives an environmental historical account of the European’s colonialist manipulation of nature and culture with rice industry in the Georgian tidewater in the nineteenth century. According to Stewart, the hard-one irrigation system induced a virulently diseased environment for fields and laborers. Stewart’s historical study highlights that African American laborers developed culturally distinctive and less hierarchical environmental practices of harvesting and planting for an adaptable nature. Nicolas W. Proctor’s *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* gives a detailed historical study to observe how the White elite culture of manhood with mastery of nature and social relations was flourished by hunting practices in forests in the antebellum South. Proctor studies oppressive colonialist structure that was developed in the Southern forests materially and symbolically in which the African American hunt-workers with their labor were invisible. According to Proctor, the culture of hunting

developed the discourse of master by the elite white hunters. Here, African American hunt-workers made their own gendered identities and practices to feed their families. Andrew Hurley's *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana* is another critical African American environmental history that draws attention to the racialized labor and capitalist manipulation of the environment in the Post-war U.S industrialism. Like other environmental historians, Hurley's study highlights how nature has been degraded and manipulated as an instrument and resource to design social inequalities based on the differences of race and class.

Ecofeminist studies from different forums of environmental justice and environmental racism have been more focused on the protection and rights of the land, equal environmental distribution in urban and rural life, self-determination in culture, and government policies and movements on health. However, less attention has been paid to the problematic conjunction of racialized labor and commodified environment in this regard. According to Dorceta E. Taylor, basic principles of environmental justice against the oppressive and destructive operations of multinational corporations and the governmental policies were articulated first time in the United States of America in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit on October 27, 1991 (43). One of these basic principles clearly countered the labor exploitation connected with the environment. As Taylor highlights that it "Affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards" (43). Following African American feminism and New Materialism, the current study explored ethical activism of the African American feminist subjectivities in life writings that opposed commodified labor and nature based on the demarcation of nature and

culture for environmental justice. Robert Allen Sessions highlights that the capitalist system of work/labor is “dysfunctional” based on the hierarchical logic of domination and dichotomies if it is viewed from the perspectives of women, minorities, and lower working-class people. Session significantly draws attention to the dualism between nature and culture as the basis of a dysfunctional capitalist system, “Nature/culture dualism informs our consciousness and is built into our behaviors and institutions. We are alienated from our bodies, from the non-human world, from each other, and from our work” (186). Ecofeminist environmental alternative vision of functional work counters capitalist system, as Session writes:

Work is that work as basic a human need as love. Marx contended that people need to work to ‘create themselves, to be recognized, to leave their marks, and so on. A major complaint about industrial work especially is that it reduces people to a state wherein their worth and work are gauged by the infamous ‘bottom line’. Thus, one change we must make in our work, whether paid or unpaid, is to render it more human, to create work that rewards and generates the flourishing of the finest human possibilities. (186)

Similarly, African American women’s life writings not only expose the commodified labor and nature. They offer insights into alternative possibilities of work in connection with nature in daily life experiences.

Focus on environmental justice in the current research is not an anachronistic frame for the study of African American women’s life writings that were written before the emergence of the movement in the 1990s. W. Lawrence Hogue’s study shows that intersectional politics emerged in African American feminism like American feminism and other women of color movements even in the 1920s and 1930s. He cites Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Only by confronting multiple and intertwined injustices, could the problems of the majority, men as well as women, be solved”.⁴ It is important to notice that African American environmental practices against racism and anthropocentrism have been documented throughout the twentieth century, as Dianne D. Glave writes, in the account of spirituality, folk culture, agriculture, gardening, and nature study long

before the birth of modern environmental movements (10). Moreover, the critique of the racialized labor and environmental exploitation was one of the foundational stances in the African American Civil Rights movement that led to activism for environmental justice in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. In this regard, Glave cites Robert Bullard's study *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* to highlight Martin Luther King Jr.'s role in Memphis, Tennessee, sanitation workers' strike in 1968 that paved the way for the Environmental Justice movement later. The workers went on strike to improve their wages and labor rights with an unhealthy work environment as a subtext. A historical record of the Workers' Strike highlights, as Glave writes, "how race and poverty defined the status and treatment of African Americans in the 1960s. As a poor African American man who had limited choice for employment, his work environment was a hostile place" (131). Similarly, the study of African American women's life writings provided their literary activism against racialized labor and commodified environment in different geographic, socio-cultural, and political contexts.

The current research study explored and articulated that African American women writers' ecological ontologies are connected with their epistemologies. Following Stacy Alaimo, Neimanis contends that "ways of knowing" for the feminist subjectivity are based on "response-ability" to other humans and nature. It is a method of "knowing with and knowing alongside" with nature to counter mastery and sovereignty in the classical humanist subject in Eurocentric modernity. According to Neimanis, feminist epistemology ensures that "we are situated in an ever-changing 'material environment that is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies' in which we nonetheless must make 'political, regulatory, and even personal decisions" (37). Feminist epistemology based on "knowing with and knowing alongside" nature in New Materialism approaches human consciousness to complicate and transgress the dualist oppositions of self/other,

human/nonhuman, culture/nature and material/discursive in the Western modern knowledge practices.

The current project's focus on African American women's feminist epistemology based on flora as the alternative and "response-able" knowledge practice has been developed with the support of critical plant studies. Scholarship on critical plant studies is both assimilated with and separate from New Materialism in science, history, philosophy, and literary studies. According to Hannah Stark, critical plant studies explore plant materiality and plant-wisdom to destabilize human thought and hierarchical human/nature relationship based on the "metaphysics of the one" in liberal humanism (183). Stark points out that "if plant life is a blind spot in the Western metaphysics, taking plants seriously invites us to re-evaluate the categories and hierarchies that compose our system of thought" (181). Michael Marder in his groundbreaking study of plants' alterity in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* relates the intellectual exclusions of plants, the earthliest with the subordination of soul the most ethereal, in the age of positivist science and technology in late modernity. According to Marder, we can get rid of the existentialist approach to the world by reviving plants' materiality and plant-thinking as the generative force of life.

The concept of feminist epistemology based on flora is inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "Rhizome" in *A Thousand Plateaus* as the vegetal figure of post-anthropocentric thinking. Such an epistemology driven by intersectional relationship between culture and nature resists the hierarchy and sovereignty of the dominant modern subject. According to Stark's study of Marder, plant-thinking articulates the basic principle of "rhizome" which is an "essentialism-free way of thinking that is fluid, receptive, dispersed, non-oppositional, non-representational, immanent, and material-practical" (185). Stark in her study of Marder describes

that the “ways of knowing” based on plant-thinking leads to “becoming-plant” that challenges knowledge practices structured on self/other, human/nonhuman, and nature/culture. Here, “becoming-plant” is not a matter of imitation; rather “becoming requires the assemblage of disparate entities into a collective” (186). In other words, “becoming-plant” or “becoming with” plant is an intersectional epistemology and coalition based on the critique of anthropocentrism and capitalism. In Stark’s words, the emphasis in plant epistemology is “placed on the new functions that the assemblage gives rise to rather than the identity of the actors involved” (190). Elaine P. Miller’s *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in Feminine* highlights that “rhizome” or “plant-wisdom” is based on transplantation, adaptability, and growth. Miller critically connects Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic thought with the feminist subjectivity of reading that moves beyond the dialectical oppositions of identity politics to embrace creativity and collectivity. She contends that “A rhizomatic reading emphasizes nonlinearity and a genealogical refusal of unique unified sources or meanings” (183). According to Jeffery T. Nealon’s *Plant Theory: Biopolitics and Vegetable Life* Nealon, the concept of “rhizome” in critical plant studies develops “a new image of thought and concept of life, outside the organism-centered, human-animal understandings of life that continue to dominate our biopolitical present” (84). Plant-thinking focuses not on a universalist abstraction, instead on “transversal” connections among humans and between human/non-human in the ways of knowing. Nealon writes in the contemporary context of climate change, “It might be time to start diagnosing the world not as a static or dynamic backdrop for the myriad (im)possibilities of individual lives but as the ecological territory that cuts across all strata of life as we have known it, life as primarily defined rhizomatic territories which is to say by the practices of emergence and transformation” (107). In this frame of thought, “rhizome” is an epistemology or in Nealon’s words, an operative system to build a

territory of living based on transversal connections of life. Similarly, African American women's life writings are focused on the critique of individualist human consciousness in modernity, and on the articulation of life in transversal connection. In other words, "plant-thinking" co-determinant with "becoming-plant" is an epistemology for the coalition against racism and anthropocentrism in the metaphysics of one.

Feminist studies in life writings with their critique of the liberal humanist subject have the inherent potential and rationale in the current study of African American feminist praxis in environmental humanities. George Gusdorf, the dean of autobiographical studies, founded his theory of autobiography on the classical individualist selfhood, domineering rationality, colonialism, and racism. He claimed that autobiography "expresses a concern peculiar to the Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures" (29). Mary G. Mason's foundational essay "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" differentiates the feminist subjectivity developed in the Western women's autobiographies from the unified and sovereign self as projected in the prototype male autobiographies of Augustine and Rousseau. For Mason, "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (210). According to Mason, the recognition of "other(s)" transfers the focus from "how hath this lady writ her own life?" to "why hath this lady writ her own life?" (235). Susan Stanford Friedman moves a step forward in the conceptualization of women writers' subjectivity by expanding it to multiculturalism. Friedman argues that the dominant concept of individualist self developed in the Post-Renaissance Western epistemologies could not recognize social consciousness and collectivity in women, minorities, and the non-Western cultures. Moreover, Friedman's

replacement of gender identities with geopolitical identities as the emergent feminist politics emphasizes knowing other on the basis of gender, race, class, geography, and other differences. Nancy K. Miller describes women's recognition and conversation with "other" as an essential characteristic of life writings. To Miller, "our relation to the other—to others" has to be considered as the foundational rule of life narratives. Miller's concept of feminist subjectivity unfolds critical inquiries and possibilities about the relationship between human and nature in contemporary debates in environmental humanities, "autobiography's story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose" (544). Recently, Cynthia Huff and Joel Haefner's foundational essay explores life narratives in the context of New Materialism to highlight the urgency of the shift from liberal humanist identity to the "entangled self" in the twenty-first century. They articulate the necessity of a "deep analysis of relationality" between humans and non-humans rather than adopting an onto-epistemology of the "Master's voice" (261). Gillian Whitlock describes that autobiography in New Materialism is "beyond the figure of the human organism, beyond the linear time of the biography, and beyond the boundaries of individual personhood" (viii). According to Whitlock, critical posthumanist concern with the limits of "human" and the knowledge practices in modernity converge life writings with social justice (xi).

The significance of the current study can be explained in terms of advocacy for environmental justice from the liminal space of African American feminism. The force of advocacy in feminist environmental studies is about the critique of anthropocentrism and racism. It is also about supporting activism for change. These life writings generate African American feminist environmental activism that can be interpreted in terms of Carolyn Merchant's acclaim of *Ecotopia* as both realist and imaginary where capitalism does not dominate social relations and environment. Similarly, Kimberly N. Ruffin, in her introductory chapter "Message of the Trees:

Recognizing Ecological Burden and Beauty,” explains that African American ecoliterary traditions develop ecological foundations to conceptualize inseparability between nature and culture for environmental justice. Kimberly cites Julie Sze in her approach to describe environmental justice in the African American ecoliterary tradition, “literature offers a new way of looking at environmental justice, through visual images and metaphors, not solely through the prisms of statistics. This new way of looking references the ‘real’ problems of communities struggling against environmental racism and is simultaneously liberated from providing a strictly documentary account of the contemporary world” (17). In a way, African American women writers’ advocacy for environmental justice is not different from feminist intersectional environmentalism like Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Vandana Shiva’s Chipko Movement in India, and Dave Foreman and her companions’ Earth First! in Northern California. Rob Nixon’s study in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* shows that feminist environmental movements especially Maathai’s Green Belt Movement was influenced by the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America (141). African American feminist resistance and coalition against racism and anthropocentrism can be associated with the feminist activism against environmental degradation in a larger scale of colonialism in the Western capitalist system.

African American women’s subjectivities based on their materialist and imaginative accounts of lives create alternative visions about human identities, subjectivities, and epistemologies in environmental humanities. Their onto-epistemological subjectivities in connection with flora counter commodification of human identity, nature, and knowledge practices. The current research study highlighted that the aim of African American women writers is to complicate and disrupt the dominant “genre of human.” Their knowledge practices do not

reify identities and culture by confining them to discursive categories of gender and race. The current study analyzed that human identity has been instrumentalized in fixing racial and gendered stereotypes in the service of Eurocentric modernity and expansion. The ecological visions in the African American women's life writings based on their situated knowledge acknowledge humanity in its freedom from egotism and fictional sovereignty of classical humanism.

The current research study approached African American women's subjectivities on historical, conceptual, and textual basis in their life writings. Each chapter engaged with feminist subjectivity, human identity, epistemology, and ethical activism against racialized labor in critical conversation with Eurocentric modernity, driven by the "naturecultures" relationship with flora in different sociocultural and historical contexts. Following Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll's method of the African American environmental history, this study engaged with narratives of "naturecultures" relationship in fields, forests, and industrialist urban space to articulate African American women's knowledge practices based on ecological consciousness and activism as the African American feminist praxis in environmental humanities.

The second chapter studied Zora Neale Hurston's autoethnography *The Dust Tracks on a Road* as an alternative to modern anthropological simplification of nature and the African American indigenous identity. Hurston's indigenous feminist subjectivity is focused on environmental sustainability with her resistance to anthropocentrism and racialized labor. Hurston's subjectivity as an indigenous feminist scholar can be articulated as a "minoritarian" that is not about margin; rather it revolutionizes anthropological discourse by resignifying the African American lumber identity and environmental sustainability. She reconceptualizes the Black indigenous lumbers by articulating their historical and cultural relationality with the forests owned by forest industries in Polk County, Florida.

The third chapter conceptualized Lucille Clifton's life writing *Generations: A Memoir* as a heteroglossia interweaving her family oral narratives and Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* to complicate the modern photographic simplification of the African American migrant identity and nature in the Northern industrialist America. I have focused on Clifton's politics of conceptual photography and environmental activism as the feminist visual objectivity to "see" human identity and nature as "active and meaning-generating agents" to critique transcendentalism and control in modern visual technologies.

The fourth chapter studied Alice Walker's assemblage of autobiographical essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* to explain her critical conversation on gardens, material and literary, as an ontological, ethico-political, and epistemological collaboration between humans and plants to intervene in the liberal humanist designs of cultivation and domination. The traces of connection between cultivation and "racial statecraft" have been documented in the European colonial histories of America where the schemes to "cultivate or design" were accompanied by the desire to dominate nature and people psychologically, culturally, and ecologically. Walker's autobiographical essays in *Mothers' Gardens* are not about "rest and respite"; rather she articulates her writing subjectivity against the commodified African American identity, degraded nature, and racialized labor. It is a revolutionary politics of life writing that critiques the racialized and capitalist roots of cultivation in modernity.

In the final chapter, the study concluded that African American women's life writings are a valuable source to critique racism and anthropocentrism in modern knowledge practices. Built on the historical and conceptual intersectionality of nature and culture as the desired coalition, African American women writers offer alternative knowledge practices based on ecological self-consciousness and activism in their situated contexts.

Besides a method of inquiry, the research project elaborated African American women's life writings in terms of genre. The study based on intersectionality of race and nature explored and articulated more diverse imaginative forms of life writing in African American feminism. The research elaborated that African American feminist life writing focused on *who she is* than *how she is defined* is both communicative and poetic. Walker's collective autobiographical essays have been studied as her "assemblage" of nature and culture that formulates a dynamic coalition for the resignification of the African American identity and nature against the modern knowledge practice of cultivation. In the study of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the African American feminist theory of autoethnography has been connected with contemporary theories of indigenous feminism in New Materialism. The study stretched African American feminist notion of autoethnography as a revisionist contact zone between center and margin to Hurston's indigenous feminist critique of racialized labor and commodified forests in Florida based on nature/culture disparity. The study of *Generations* projected that Clifton's heteroglossic life writing can be articulated in historical terms in her critically charged conversation with the racialized representation of the migrated African Americans in urban American. In conceptual terms, Clifton's life writing is a dialogue with the discourse of objectivity and subjectivity to complicate modern photography.

NOTES

1. Hogue, W L. A. *Theoretical Approach to Modern American History and Literature: An Issue of Reconfiguration and Re-Representation.*, 2020. Internet resource.
2. Neimanis, A., C. Åsberg, and J. Hedrén. 2015. "Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene."

See also Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman in Feminist Theory* (2015), "Four Thesis on Posthuman Feminism" (2017).

3. Rosi Braidotti (2018) highlights the significant contribution of critical posthumanities in the humanities with a movement from the critical and political rationality of "dialectical oppositions" to the ethical relationality in the recognition of "others" to resist the humanist subject in capitalism and colonialism (38). Braidotti's neomaterialism "re-defines" the human subjectivity in postanthropocentric terms: As an expanded self, whose relational capacity is not confined within human species, but includes non-anthropomorphic elements. Zoe, the non-human, vital force of life, is the transversal entity that allows us to think across previously segregated species, categories, and domains. Neo-materialist immanence expands this collective ability to the sustainability of our modes of knowledge production (42).
4. Hogue, W L. A. *Theoretical Approach to Modern American History and Literature: An Issue of Reconfiguration and Re-Representation.*, 2020. Internet resource.

CHAPTER 2

Indigenous Feminism on Environmental Sustainability

Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on A Road* (1942)

In her autoethnography *The Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston deconstructs modern anthropological construction of the African American indigenous lumber identity and culture in the historical relationality with the forests owned by forest industries in Polk County, Florida. According to Valerie Boyd's in *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, Hurston was "deeply indigenous" who considered the Black indigenous culture as a "natural phenomena" with an "enormous literary potential" that "should be studied as closely as any text" (86,115,116). Following the posthumanist feminist theory, Hurston's indigenous feminist subjectivity can be conceptualized as a "minoritarian" that is not about "margin"; rather it is about "revitalization of discourses" and social relations.¹ Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthumanist feminist indigenous scholar in *Posthuman Knowledge* fits well with Hurston's autoethnographical deconstruction of racism and anthropocentrism in modern Western anthropology:

These theoretically sophisticated transversal discourses combine attention to the earth with enduring care for the people who live closest to the earth – indigenous populations – thus raising the ethical and political stakes. The critique of western imperialism and racism provides an added critical distance – an extra layer of dis-identification – that positions these posthuman critical thinkers closer to the dispossessed and the disempowered, adding that many of those are neither human nor necessarily anthropomorphic. Many claim non-western indigenous humanism as their platform. (50)

Hurston's autoethnographical writing complicates and revises the anthropocentric construction of human identity and culture in modern anthropology. Hurston's situated,

oppositional and revisionist writing of modern anthropology has been analyzed mainly in the context of her politics of gender and race.² The current study has stretched Hurston's autoethnography as her individual and collective revisionist writing to her engagement with forests as the critique of racism and anthropocentrism in the modern discourse. Hurston's environmental approach to culture parallels with her contemporary anthropologist Julian Steward's "cultural ecology" that he elaborated in his book *Theory of Cultural Change*. John Claborn highlights that Hurston's writing based on "cultural ecology" emphasized interaction between human culture and nonhuman environment (118). Lloyd Willis studies Hurston's liberational nature writing with its contrast from the White or Emersonian environmental tradition. According to Lloyd Willis, "Instead of focusing on the issues of purity, availability, and durability, [Hurston] offers a vision of enmeshment within an immanently physical natural world that is imbued with racial and cultural significance" (104). Hurston's nature writings is also different from the environmental thinking of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, and Jean Toomer for whom nature was an "oppressive white regime" (116). In posthumanist feminist terms, Hurston's study of culture can be articulated as an open culture instead of the whole culture. According to Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond Human*, the collaboration between humans and nonhumans in the study of culture redefines human in different ways beyond the discursive constructions of race, gender, and class etc. Thinking with forests is not about the binary between the commercial closure and generative desires; rather, it is the politics and ethics in the study of human identity and culture connected with histories and the earth.

Posthumanist sustainability as thinking with forests is a critique of the neoliberal and anthropocentric sustainability that is conceptually influenced by modern Western discourse about forests. Forests as a material space and chronotope have been proclaimed as an empty and

unclaimed territory to justify the conquest in the European colonial discourse. Paulo Tavares in “In the Forest Ruins” describes that the term forest whose etymology in Romance Languages, *Silva*, at the root of the word *Savage*, symbolizes “the outside, the negation, or the enemy of the space of the civic” as it is “*terra nullius*, a lawless and unruly territory populated by barbarians and all sorts of outcasts and outlaws” (295). The fundamental dialectical opposition between forests and human civilization based on the classical humanist design of “mastery” over nature has caused material and discursive violence to both forests (deforestation, *terra nullius*) and the indigenous population (genocide, labor, displacement, *tabula rasa*). Braidotti’s concept of posthumanist sustainability combines onto-epistemology and political activism, “re-grounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments s/he inhabits.”³ Following the critique of racism and capitalism in New Materialism, Oglia Ceilemecka and Christine Deigle describe that posthumanist or “radical sustainability” based on indigenous knowledge encourages an interdependence and collaboration of culture and nature whereas “reformist sustainability” based on capitalism is the anthropocentric design of mastery that evades social structural inequalities. According to Ceilemecka and Deigle, the most-oft quoted definition of sustainability that is also adopted by UN World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) is based on the humanist-centric paradigm in modern Western epistemology that does not underscore structural inequalities in which many populations (human and nonhuman) become “undesirable and/or disposable” based on race and capitalism (71). It is an “individualistic, human-centric understanding of sustainability modeled in the economy of debt and inheritance” (82). In the indigenous feminist tradition of posthumanist sustainability, Hurston’s autoethnographical writing urges the “restoration” of Polk County’s forests in connection with the “re-story-ation” of the Black indigenous lumber identity and culture.⁴

Understanding Hurston's account of her life and family in the background of the African American indigenous culture and natural environment in Eatonville, Florida as narrated in *Dust Tracks* will explain her autoethnographical subjectivity as a feminist indigenous writer who stood for posthumanist sustainability. Hurston's attachment with nature is not merely an interspecies ontological relationship but also a source of knowledge for her politics and subjectivity. In her first chapter, "My Birthplace", Hurston describes candidly that her life writing is based on the connection between her memory time and the nature time in the situated context: "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So, you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life" (1). Hurston was born in Alabama in 1891, and she grew up in Eatonville, Florida. She portrays Eatonville as a place where the "sensuous world whirled on in the arms of ether for a generation" and "curious spectacle in the swampy forests so dense that they are dark at high noon" to develop Hurston's approach to life (3,4). Hurston narrates the first night when her father John Hurston was joined by his wife, Lucy Ann Hurston, and children at Eatonville, and he went to the woods and filled the bags with Spanish moss, "Two burlap bags were stuffed with Spanish moss for the two older children to sleep on" (10). Boyd writes about Hurston's especially Lucy's first night at Eatonville, "They didn't have much in their small cabin that night, but the family was together, and Lucy was happy. 'Lucy sniffed sweet air laden with night-blooming jasmine and wished that she had been born in this climate'" (23). Hurston calls herself "mama's child" who was a schoolteacher and loved nature, freedom of expression, and self-realization. Hurston tells about her mother, "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun'. We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground" (13). Hurston writes in her life narrative

How Lucy's eyes appeared to appeal to her on her death bed, "to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice" (65). Consequently, Lucy's death did not close; instead, it opened Hurston's journey of multiple becomings based on the collaboration between culture and nature. Hurston writes about her mother's death, "the hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit" (67).

The close contact between the Southern frontier's African American indigenous culture and forests in Eatonville, Florida expanded Hurston's literary horizon to develop and appreciate the individual and cultural powers beyond the discursive inscriptions.⁵ Hurston writes about her early aspirations in affinity with nature, "I wanted to be away from drabness and stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle. I was only happy in the woods, and when the estatic Florida springtime came strolling from the sea, trance-glorifying the world with its aura" (41). Moreover, it was the indigenous culture of tales and talks based on ordinary "natural elements" at Joe Clark Store as "the heart and spring of the town" that impacted Hurston's subjectivity and imagination in connection with nature. It influenced Hurston to tell stories and converse with nature as a living agent. Forest and trees stood the important position in this list of living actants. Hurston writes about her friendship with "the loving pine tree" in her childhood, "I used to take a seat at the foot of that tree and play for hours without any other toys. We talked about everything in my world. Sometimes we just took it out in singing songs. That tree has a mighty fine base voice when it really took a notion to let it out" (52). Hurston's approach to pine trees is inspired by the African American indigenous culture in which human is entangles with nature in the pragmatic relationship of interdependence and mutual influence. Hurston does not romanticize trees as metaphysical objects. Instead, she views them with the perspective of material nature in connection with indigenous daily life experiences. Hurston recalls another pine tree from her childhood who would

threaten her after the sundown, “I used to wish it would go off somewhere and get lost. But every evening I would have to look to see, and every time, it would be right there, sort of shaking and shivering and bowing its head at me” (52). Hurston acknowledges how the indigenous culture’s expansion to the nonhuman world influenced her writing, “Life took on a bigger perimeter by expanding on these things. I picked up glints and gleams out of what I heard and stored it away to turn it to my own uses” (52).

Hurston’s narration of individual and cultural enmeshment with the natural environment in Eatonville functions as a scaffold to understand her situated perspective in her autoethnography to develop posthumanist sustainability. Hurston’s situated politics of nature writing aligns with the indigenous studies in New Materialism, as Ceilemecka and Daigle describe, “An inclusive posthuman approach to sustainability decenters the human, re-position it in its ecosystem and, while remaining attentive to difference, fosters the thriving of all instances of life” (72). Such an approach based on nature and culture relationships as driven by zoe-egalitarianism rejects the use of “resource” to refer to nonhuman others and the Earth system as a whole. Hurston’s concept of posthumanist sustainability is driven by “thinking through and with” Eatonville’s forests in which human ontological and cultural relationship with nature is a critique of the human sovereignty, mastery, and the linear vision of human-centric futurity in modern Western knowledge production of culture and nature.

Hurston’s chapter on “Research” in her autoethnography reconceptualizes Black indigenous identity based on nature and culture relationship by exposing racial superiority and colonial complicities in the modern anthropology. Near the completion of her graduation in anthropology at Barnard College, Hurston came to the lumber and turpentine camps in the Southern frontier, the forests of Polk County, Florida, in 1927 for a year to study the Black

indigenous laborers and their culture.⁶ The chapter opens with Hurston's autoethnographic voice to complicate the linear anthropological discourse of "objectivity" and "primitivism" in the study of Black indigenous identity and culture. Hurston acknowledges Franz Boas for his "genius for pure objectivity" and anti-racism. However, she recognizes that the method of objectivity has its limitations. She faces a failure in her research during the first six months of her observations, making her think that she "did not have the right approach" (143). According to Hurston, "The glamor of Barnard College was still upon me. I dwelt in marble halls. I knew where the material was all right. But I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, 'Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?' The men and women who had whole treasuries of material just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads" (144). Hurston recognizes that the academic method of objectivity in the study of "exotic culture" could hinder her Black feminist situated politics for cultural survival and continuity. Her indigenous cultural background influences her narrative method that opposes the modern anthropology in Eatonville. As she describes her innovative anthropological theory:

Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle. So, every man's spice-box seasons his own food. Naturally, I picked up the reflections of life around me with my own instruments and absorbed what I gathered according to my inside juices. (45)

According to Suzanne Clark, Hurston's method of "narrative fitness" for culture and nature opposed the discourse of the "survival of the fittest" in the evolutionary anthropology modeled on natural sciences. This dominant anthropological epistemology advanced White racial superiority by reifying nature and indigenous culture. Clark describes that Hurston's "alternate method she promoted came out of her folk and was called by her not only the collection of 'Negro folklore' but also a turn to 'Nature'" (67). Hurston is subtly critical of her guide, Mrs. R. Osgood Mason's

notion of “primitivism” as the fixed and static cultural identities based on racism. Hurston highlights how Mason is eager to know about the life on a “saw-mill job” from her, “I must tell the tales, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down. She is altogether in sympathy with them because she says truthfully, they are utterly sincere in living” (145). Hurston’s portrayal of Black indigenous identities in their historical and cultural entanglement with the industrialized forests exposes the gaps in modern anthropological notion of “primitivism” based on the dialectical hierarchies of self vs. other, European vs. Non-European, culture vs. nature and civilization vs. wilderness. These dialectical oppositions evade historical, material realities and colonial complicities in studying human identity and culture under the gauze of “sincere living” of primitivism.

Like the feminist indigenous scholars, Hurston highlights that forests are not “terra nullius” for conquest; rather, they draw attention to the environmental crisis in which the indigenous population and natural environment are at compromise. Hurston’s autoethnography gives a different account of the “re-story-ation” of forests in indigenous and feminist studies which are marked by the critique of the indigenous displacement and genocide. Hurston’s analysis is about the exploitation of labor and deforestation in the modern economy. Hurston introduces that the forests in Polk County that are void of “law” to run the “wheels of industry” in which “criminal” is a new “primitive”:

And since the law is lax on these big saw-mills, turpentine and railroad “jobs”, there is a good chance that they never will be jailed for it. All of these places have plenty of men and women who are fugitives from justice. The management asks no questions. They need help and they can’t be bothered looking for a bug under every chip. In some places, the “law” is forbidden to come on the premises to hunt for malefactors who did their malefacting elsewhere. The wheels of industry must move, and if these men don’t work, who is there to do it? (146)

Hurston subtly reverses the lens of “primitivism” from the Black indigenous workers to the forests' capitalist forces that exploited both the forests and Black indigenous population. Hurston notes that naturally exploitative and socially hierarchical structure based on anthropocentrism and racism has been developed in the forests owned by forest industries: “Polk County. Black men from tree to tree among the lordly pines, a swift, slanting stroke to bleed the trees for gum, paint, explosives, marine stores, flavors, perfumes, tone for a violin bow, and many other things which the Black men who bleed the trees never heard about”(148). Kurt Eisen describes that Hurston’s ethnographical approach to culture is not essentialist; rather, it is performative based on textuality that “mimics” the modernist production of “primitive” indigenous culture. Moreover, Hurston’s autoethnographic analysis of the Black human identity and culture in connection with nature skillfully draws the attention to her perspective of posthumanist sustainability that exposes “technological primitiveness” in the forests based on the modern social evolutionism and racism. According to Paulo Tavaréz (2016), “This image of the forest as a pre-civilizational space inspired modern theory of the social contract from Hobbes to Rousseau, and by the nineteenth century became entangled with orientalist geographies of colonialism and its attendant doctrines of social evolutionism and racial inferiority” (269). Hurston’s autoethnography offers an important critique to counter modern Western epistemology in which forests were instrumentalized by the White explorers, colonial administrators, naturalists, and ethnographers to produce a racialized and anthropocentric society.

Historical studies reveal that Hurston’s autoethnography is a political resistance against deforestation and the exploitation of the Black labor in the Jim Crow South. Cassandra Y. Johnson’s and Josh McDaniel’s study of “Turpentine Negro”, *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and the Environmental History* provides a critical understanding of the

environmental exploitation and racial abuse of labor in Polk County's forests. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Pine forests in North America were used to produce resources such as turpentine, tar, pitch, gum, and rosin by the naval stores in shipbuilding and repair. In the 1930s, 80 percent of turpentine workers in Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi were African Americans. At least 70 percent were the African Americans in the South Carolina and Alabama that led to the establishment of lumber turpentine camps throughout the South in the twentieth century (54). After the second world war, the industry's decline started due to the poor work conditions and migration to the North. According to Johnson and McDaniel, until 1930, turpentine was "purely the extractive operation" in which trees were used like minerals than renewable resources for three to six years before they were logged for timber. The forest industry in the South was operated by the simultaneous exploitation of the Black laborers and the forests:

In later years, chippers also applied acid to the trees to stimulate flow. Following the chippers were the dippers who emptied the cups and boxed and filled barrels for transportation to the stills. Most turpentine operations divided labor between chippers, dippers, drivers, supervisors (or wood riders), and distillery workers. At the beginning and end of the work cycle, workers hung cups and gutters and raked around the trees to prevent destructive fires from killing the trees through their exposed faces. (54)

Similarly, David G. Nicholls describes that Hurston's study of the indigenous culture in Polk County's forests is the political resistance or the "hidden transcript" against lumber and turpentine camps in Imperial Polk in the 1930s and 1940s where modern infrastructure, social segregation, and notorious labor exploitation of the Black migrant laborers from all over the South was marked with the acceleration of deforestation (467).

Hurston portrays the Black indigenous workers and the forests in her autoethnography in the universal, mythological, and aesthetic image that highlights their abstraction in the "technological primitiveness" in the forest industries. Hurston's posthumanist ethical and artistic account of the Black indigenous workers and the forests developed by her narrative methods

moves beyond the situated and historical account of Polk County's forests. Her approach intensifies the complexity:

These poets of the swinging blade! The brief, but infinitely graceful, dance of body and axe-head as it lifts over the head in a fluid arc, dances in air and rushes down to bite into the tree, all in beauty. Where the logs march into the mill with its smokestacks with the elements, its boiler room reddening the sky, and its great circular saw screaming arrogantly as it attacks the tree like a lion making its kill. (147)

Hurston connects the anthropogenic “rumble, thunder and grumble” of trees in the “imperial Polk” with the Black labor “sweating black bodies, muscled like gods, working to feed the hunger of the great tooth. Polk County!” (147). Hurston’s Black feminist situated perspective is converged with her posthumanist sustainability to reflect on Black lumbers’ entanglement with the forests as the human crisis in the capitalist system. Susan Scott Parrish in “Zora Neale Hurston and the Environmental Ethic of Risk” studies Hurston’s analysis of the Black indigenous culture in Polk County as a “folk cosmology” which reveals not only the Southern phenomenon but also the human contingency in connection with biological, physical and anthropogenic disturbance in nature (22). It would be appropriate to emphasize that Hurston’s artistic interpretation of Black indigenous laborers introduces the “folk labor cosmology” in which the intersectional focus on the racialized labor and exploitation of nature reveals the limitations in the capitalist discourse of environmental sustainability and social evolution.

Due to her ethical activism in her autoethnography, Hurston revises the notion of criminality in the discursive and material context of the Black indigenous workers on lumber camps in Polk County. Hurston faces one of the most unpredictable moments of her fieldwork when a woman attacks her with a knife. Lucy’s ex-boyfriend, Slim is Hurston’s main source for the collection of indigenous songs. Hurston reveals that it is the structural violence besides the rival jealousy that makes Lucy attack her, “That is the primeval flavor of the place, and as I said

before, out of this primitive approach to things, I all but lost my life. It was in a saw-mill jook in Polk County that I almost got cut to death” (152). Hurston knows that Lucy mistakes her for an official or administrative representative, “I had store-bought clothes, a lighter skin, and a shiny car, so she saw wherein she could use me for an alibi” (152). According to the historical records, over the postbellum era and early twentieth century, multiple generations of workers were born and grew on the lumbers’ camps in the South with poverty, bad working and living conditions, instability of employment, and without education and law. Illicit activities were perpetuated on the camps by the labor system. According to a historian of the rural South, Wayne Flynt, as Johnson and McDaniel cite him, laborers were arrested and kept like criminal prisoners in lumber camps and plantations due to their failure to repay their debts (55). Hurston highlights the socioeconomic structure of the lumber camp in which an indigenous Black lumber defines himself as a prisoner in his relationship to his owner: “Me, I don’t aim to run a step. I ain’t going to run unless they run me---I’m going to live anyhow until I die. Play me some music so I can dance! Aw, spank dat box, man!! Them white folks don’t care nothing bout no nigger getting cut and kilt, nohow” (151). In Hurston’s autoethnographic account, capitalism and criminality go hand-in-hand in the forests industries in Polk County. John Claborn in his study of the natural environment and Black labor highlights that the forest industry in 1920-1930 throughout the Southern States was “thrived on the exploitation of (mostly Black) prison labor and the seemingly infinite supply of Cypress trees” (120). Hurston describes that it was herself as an anthropologist who had to run from the lumber camp to save her life, “I really ran, too. I ran out of the place, ran to my room, threw my things in the car and left the place” (156).

Hurston represents the Black indigenous identity and culture connected with nature as the historical and material complexity than a racially inherent construct as projected in the modern

anthropology. Zoe Todd cites Dwayne Donald to conceptualize such an understanding of human identity and culture in terms of “ethical relationality” in the feminist indigenous epistemology. It is “an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other” (18). Hurston writes about the laughing, singing, and fighting lumber community members whose emotions waver between love and violence based on the “ecological paradox of burden and beauty” in the dense forests owned by industries. The lumbermen and women “are quick to sunshine and quick to anger. Some little word look, or gesture can move them either to love or to sticking a knife between your ribs (146). Hurston befriends Big Sweet who helps her in the collection of folk material. When Hurston wants to keep a knife for her security, especially due to Lucy, Big Sweet reminds Hurston of her difference as an outsider in the lumber community, “You don’t know how to handle no knife. You ain’t got dat kind of sense...And then again, when you sure ‘nough fighting, it ain’t enough to just stick ‘em wid your knife. ...But don’t you bother ‘bout no fighting. You ain’t like me” (155). Big Sweet promises with Hurston for her protection during her stay on the camp, “you just keep on writing down them lies. I’ll take care of all de fighting.” (155). Material and historical experiences on the lumber camp in the “lawless” forests differentiate Big Sweet from Hurston. On the discursive level, Big Sweet’s simplification of Hurston’s folk collection in the complex historical context of the industrial forests speaks back to Mrs. R. Osgood Mason’s anthropological simplification of Black indigenous identity and culture based on dialectical oppositions. Hurston studies the lumber community’s spirit of mirth and violence centered on their pay night on jooks as their segregated space. As she writes:

And the night, the pay night rocks on with music and gambling and laughter and dancing and fights. The big pile of cross-ties burning out in front simmers down to low ashes before sun-up, so then it is time to throw up all the likker you can’t keep down and go somewhere and sleep the rest off, whether your knife has blood on it or not. That is, unless some

strange, low member of your own race has gone and pumped to the white folks about something getting hurt. Very few of those kinds are to be find. (152)

Hurston reflects on the Black lumber community in their entanglement with the Southern wilderness as the historical and colonialist construction of the racialized identities. According to Johnson and McDaniel, Black lumbers, and turpentine workers lived the Southern frontiers like the European pioneers in the early twentieth century. However, both groups developed contradictory wilderness ideals in most cases based on their socioeconomic and racial experiences in the “civilized” world. Whereas the European “forests ethics” were based on individualism and expansionism, Black laborers, though with some individualist resistance, were forced to conform the hierarchical structure and mostly “subjugated to the worst kind of despotism” (56).

Hurston’s revisionist account of human identity and culture centered on the Black indigenous workers in Polk County’s forests aligns with the posthumanist critique of the anthropocentric discourse based on the modern concept of universalist and individualist human subject. Cristin Ellis’s theorization of critical posthumanism based on anti-racism is important to understand Hurston’s autoethnographic subjectivity that neither evades cultural identity politics nor develops a cultural essentialism to imagine an inclusive environmental notion of sustainability. Ellis develops a critical lens to the posthumanist material feminism (Rosi Braidotti) and posthumanist social justice (Sylvia Wynter) in her study of environmental discourse and racism in the American literary studies. Ellis acknowledges the contribution of the posthumanist materialism to draw the attention to epistemological, ethical, and cultural “myopias” and “modesty” in dealing with the complexity of human relationality with natural environment (169). However, she is critical of the skepticism in posthumanist materialist ontology toward identity politics with an over-emphasis on “primordially relational”, “flesh”, “matter-before identities” and ontological entanglement “prior to subjects, objects or causes and effects” that she thinks may engender the

replacement of posthumanist social justice by neo-liberalist pluralism in which everyone is “included” (153).

On the other hand, Ellis acknowledges Wynter’s critical lens of racism in the modern transcendentalist discourse of anthropocenic crisis, but she does not celebrate her human exceptionalism that may blur the boundaries with biocentrism in modern study of human culture. Ellis emphasizes that the notion “we are all in this together” in contemporary environmental studies is based on modern liberalist discourse that transcends contextual differences and racial inequalities. Ellis’ theoretical study of critical posthuman thought is useful to reflect on Hurston’s indigenous politics of posthumanist sustainability in which the intersectionality of Black indigenous labor and nature moves forward to counter neoliberal environmentalism that makes specific populations and objects “undesirable” and disposable.

In the Black feminist autoethnographic tradition, Hurston represents Big Sweet as a powerful woman with individual and cultural characteristics. With her assertive physical and expressive authority, she can stand up against any Black male worker and the White boss whenever it is required. Hurston’s landlady tells her about Big Sweet:

Humb! Tain’t a man, woman nor child on this job going to tackle Big Sweet. If God sends her a pistol, she’ll send him a man. She can handle a knife with anybody. She’ll join hands and cut a duel. Dat Cracker Quarters Boss wears two pistols round his waist and goes for bad, but he won’t break a breath with Big Sweet lessen he got his pistol in his hand. Cause if he start anything with her, he won’t never get a chance to draw it. She done kilt two mens on this job and they said she kilt some before she ever come here. She ain’t mean. She don’t bother nobody. She just don’t stand for no foolishness, dat’s all. (154)

Knowing about Big Sweet, Hurston decides right away that she is going to befriend her. Pearlle Mae Fisher Peters in *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston’s Fiction, Folklore, and Drama* studies Big Sweet as an “assertive” woman of authority and law with her words and actions in Hurston’s account of Polk County. Peters writes, “It is through the ultimately positive thrust of her

words and desire for order that Polk County thrives; it is not the result of capricious authority represented by the White Quarters Boss” (79). It is significant to notice that Hurston’s focus on Big Sweet in her autoethnography indicates her disruption of another binary opposition in modern Western epistemology that exists between male vs. female and masculine vs. feminine. Big Sweet as a Black indigenous lumber with both emotional care and the power of order exposes the discursive limitations of human identity based on gender.

Big Sweet emerges as a Black indigenous laborer worker with a cultural speech demeanor in the industrialized forests. Hurston highlights Big Sweet’s indigenous methods of expression known as the “specifying” or “reading” or “putting your foot up”. Hurston gets interested in the indigenous talk rituals in the forests in which speech is the sign of resistance, multiplicity of meaning, self-expression, and courage. Hurston writes about Big Sweet’s playful and exceptionally assertive speech in which she “specifies” a man on the lumber camp, “She was really giving the particulars. She was giving her opponent lurid data and bringing him up to date on his ancestry, his looks, smell, gait, clothes, and his route where nearly everybody else of the four or five hundred people on the ‘job’ were to listen to the reading” (153). Hurston comes to know that the indigenous ritual of “specifying” is the matter of personal courage, “But if you have no faith in your personal courage and confidence in your arsenal, don’t try it. It is a risky pleasure. So, then I had a measure of this Big Sweet” (154). According to Peters, Big Sweet’s method of direct expressions or “specifying” opposes “signifying” that is an indirect method of humiliating or shaming another person in speech and storytelling (43).

Hurston’s interest in Big Sweet’s articulate expressions is similar to her interest in her own indigenous speech and storytelling in Eatonville in connection with the natural environment that she describes earlier in her chapter “Figure and Fancy”, “There were no discreet nuances of life

on Joe Clark's porch. There was open kindness, anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks, but all emotions were naked, and nakedly arrived at. It was a case of 'make it and take it'. You got what your strengths would bring you" (46). Hurston's focus on the Black indigenous speech and individual courage embodied in Big Sweet in relation with the natural environment reflects her posthumanist and autoethnographic critique of the modern anthropology based on biological determinism and cultural essentialism.

Hurston's analysis of Black lumbers' blues is another characteristic of her posthumanist indigenous feminist subjectivity to articulate human identity and culture with their ecological relationality beyond the discursive inscriptions' confinements. According to Luc Sante's "The Invention of the Blues" in *A New Literary History of America*, the early blues musicians were often illiterate and mobile, including the indigenous population on sawmills and turpentine camps throughout in the Deep South's forests in the early twentieth century. The art of blues "was a deliberate decision arrived at by a particular artist through a process of experimentation, using materials at hand from a variety of sources. It was taken up by others and expanded to encompass anguish as well as defiance, humor, lust, cruelty, heartbreak, awe, sarcasm, fury, regret, bemusement, mischief, delirium, and even triumph" (482).⁷ Hurston's study of Black lumbers' blues in historical connection with nature in Polk County articulates that the indigenous population in the forests is not "*terra nullius*" and "*tabula rasa*" for conquest and evasion. Adam Gussow in "The Blues in African American Culture" acknowledges that Hurston's most important contribution to the African American blues culture comes "as a result of several extended visits she made to the jooks, the backwoods blues clubs, of a lumber camp in Polk County, Florida—a subculture that no other anthropologist, Black or White, had ever investigated" (303). In her autoethnography, Hurston describes that Black workers' daytime is spent in work on the lumber

camps while their nighttime brings the creation of blues, “Polk County. After dark, the jooks. Songs are born out of feelings with an old beat-up piano” (149). Hurston introduces different forms and themes of blues songs, some of them are old-time social songs like “Uncle Bud” that were widely known for their amusement and incremental growth in the Southeastern U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s. Other blues are deeply connected with the Black labor on lumber camps in which indigenous song mediates between human identity and nature. One such example is a section from the “parting song”:

Quarters Boss! High Sheriff?
Lemme git gone from here!
Cold, rainy day, some cold, rainy day.
I’ll be back, some old cold, rainy day.
Oh, de rocks may be my pillow, Lawd!
De sand may be my bed
I’ll be back some old cold, rainy day. (151)

Valerie Levy highlights in “That Florida Flavor” that Hurston considered Florida in her nature writing “the most tempting, the most highly flavored” platter of the Black indigenous culture in America in which human identity and nature are in “fluid relationship” with each other. According to Levy, Hurston’s nature writing represents how Black indigenous culture emerges from the Black indigenous’ labor in connection with nature and land (86). In Hurston’s writing, the natural environment and the Black indigenous culture are represented in the mutual relationship of interdependence and influence. Hurston’s nature writing marked with the Black blues in Polk County’s forests can be explicated in Lawrence Buell’s words, as Levy cites, as an “environmental text” in which “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (86). Hurston’s introduction of Polk County’s forests aligns with the Black indigenous lumber’s poetic expression

of the human identity who is not separate from the “ecological burden and beauty” based on commodified labor and cultural aesthetics. Hurston writes, “Polk County! Ah! Where the water tastes like cherry wine. Where they fell great trees with axe and muscle” (147).

Another significant example of the blues in the current study is how a Black lumber on the camp expresses his determination to travel to find his love despite the restrictions and difficulties in his materialist context. By the contrast between the blues singer’s emotions and the problem of traveling, Hurston’s selection draws the attention to the Black indigenous resistance against the modern discourse and civilization in which laborer is a commodified and displaced object:

Got on de train didn’t have no fare
But I rode some
Yes I rode some
Got on de train didn’t have no fare
Conductor ast me what I’m doing there
But I rode some
Yes I rode some.
Well, he grabbed me by de collar, and he led me to de door
But I rode some
Yes I rode some.
Well, he grabbed me by de collar, and he led me to de door
He rapped me over de head with a forty-four
But I rode some
Yes I rode some. (150)

Hurston’s exploration of blues ethos in Florida’s forests explicates the triumph of the Black indigenous aesthetics at the face of the capitalist exploitations. As Levy cites Cheryl Wall from “Zora Neale Hurston’s Traveling Blues” that “a central premise of Hurston’s work: material poverty is not tantamount to the spiritual poverty or experiential deprivation” (89). Hurston’s

interest in Black indigenous blues also shows that she was inclined to the Niggerati's artistic expressions with the indigenous culture's political significance and subjects. Like Arthur Fauset and Langston Hughes, Hurston found herself closer to the negro folks for art expression. As Boyd describes Niggerati's anti-racist and anti-elitist aims of art, "Rather than mimicking white American standards and aesthetics, they envisioned creating art that reflected and spoke to the common element among Negroes- the folk" (118). Hurston joins the Niggerati with its emphasis on real life experiences, ecological relationality, and self-recognition in the indigenous as her resistance and complication of Western modernity.

Hurston's focus on Black indigenous labor identities in daily experiences, speech and blues with ecopolitical consciousness can be interpreted as her reconceptualization of human ontology based on the "sociogenic" posthumanist thought. Following Sylvia Wynter, Ellis describes that a "sociogenic" human subject moves beyond "Man/Anthropos" to relate with others, and substitutes biological determinism with the power of language, culture, and storytelling. According to Greeta Gaard, indigenous feminist epistemology with ecopolitical and ecoeconomic consciousness defines "transcorporeal" human identity that can develop the discourse of "adaptation" between nature and culture to address climate change in the contemporary world (9). Similarly, Hurston's study of Black indigenous' ecorelativity in the "consumption, domination and control" of the forests articulates her posthumanist feminist indigenous subjectivity for environmental consciousness.

Hurston's autoethnographic account of Black indigenous identity and culture based on the ecological relationality resonates with the contemporary indigenous studies of adaptability and resistance against the modern discourse and economy. One of the main concerns for Hurston is to represent the Black indigenous culture in its "fluxional" and "operative" forms like the natural

environmental spirit in Eatonville, Florida. Hurston in “Characteristics of Negro Expressions” (1934) describes that the African American folklore is a dynamic cultural phenomenon; it is “not a thing of the past. It is still in making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use” (56). Hurston does not study indigenous as an isolated, rural, and separate phenomenon; rather she describes it as the integrated and interventionist knowledge in contemporary society. In her autoethnography, she writes that her account of the Black indigenous labor and cultural aesthetics offers the critical insight, “another offering to the soul of civilization whose other name is travel” (148). Politically, as Nicholls highlights, Hurston’s study of the lumber camps in Polk County is the resistance against the racialized migrant labor exploitation in the 1930s on the Southern lumber camps. In her autoethnographic revision, Hurston’s focus on the Black indigenous lumber community in Polk County resists any essentialist and fixed identity in the indigenous culture. As Martyn Bone clarifies that Hurston’s study of culture is not “a nostalgic site of the rooted rural community”; rather, she depicts “an unstable, liminal locus, increasingly defined by intraregional and transnational flows of capital and labor” (758). Leigh Anne Duck in ““Go There Tuh Know There’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk” also highlights that Hurston’s indigenous study is not about a past and closed category; rather, it is part and parcel of our contemporary society. In the posthumanist indigenous feminist paradigm, Hurston also articulates human identity and culture in deep connection with their natural environment. No matter traveling or stayed, black indigenous blues singers communicate their historical and cultural enmeshment with the forests. Hurston’s study of the indigenous subject is an alternative modernity that counters, in the light of Mary Louise Pratt’s analysis of geopolitics, dialectical oppositions between traveler/stayed, ethnographer/native, enlightened/backward and culture/nature based on the racialized superiority

of knowledge and economy in the imperial system. Influenced by indigenous activists and scholars, Pratt redefines human identity in a contingent and collaborative relationship with nature no matter traveling or stayed.⁸

Hurston develops posthumanist sustainability through her writing that is her indigenous feminist consciousness against racism and anthropocentrism based on modern knowledge and economy. She candidly describes her identity as a posthumanist subject to move beyond the discursive constructions of gender and race, “The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so, what need of denomination and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? The wide belt of the universe has no need for finger-rings. I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance” (226). Hurston situates her posthumanist counter-ethics in the forests of Polk County in her autoethnography to complicate and disrupt the modern commodification of forests and Black indigenous lumbers who are not less than “complete, complex and undiminished human beings” (293). It all began with Hurston’s early imaginations and inquiries in her affinity with the forest in Eatonville, “But no matter whether my probings made me happier or sadder, I kept on probing to know. For instance, I had a stifled longing. I used to climb to the top of one of the huge China-berry trees which guarded our front gate and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon” (27). Hurston’s life writing proves that her indigenous feminist subjectivity with “thinking through-and with” forests revises the linear discourse of “Man/Anthropos” in Western modernity and insists on the collaboration between nature and human culture.

NOTES

1. Anthropology was scientific and biocentric based on natural sciences when Hurston entered the field in 1920s. Her autoethnographic revisionist writing in connection with culture and nature can be interpreted as a “minoritarian” posthumanist subjectivity against the dominant discourse.

Braidotti’s theory of the posthumanist “minoritarian” subject has political and epistemological significance that is equally valuable and also driven from the indigenous feminist theory. According to Braidotti (2019) “minor subjects of knowledge” or “minoritarian” in the critical posthumanities are “knowing subjects” with the potential voices of the historically unrealized and unactualized “missing people” to resist and create alternatives to the classical humanities and modernist “royal sciences” (46). Braidotti claims that critical posthumanities as “monistic affirmation” (ecosophical), “immanent inter-connections” (zoe-centered), and “generative differences” (geo-centered) can be drawn from the non-Western epistemologies (52).

Feminist posthumanist theorists view subjectivity of writers and critics as “minor” or “becoming minoritarian” with their critique and alternatives to the anthropocentric construction of human identity in the classical humanism based on gender and race. Cindi Katz’s “Towards Minor Theory” (1996) describes the contributions of Deleuze and Guattari to human consciousness with the concept of “becoming minor” and its feminist revisions in relation to women’s subjectivity and knowledge production. “Becoming minor” is not about politics of margin or an outsider rather it is an “imbricated or interstitial politics” of “negotiation and reworking a space of betweenness” to create something new (496). Pelagia Goulimari in her essay “A Minoritarian Feminism? Things to do with Deleuze and Guattari” (1999) acknowledges that Braidotti’s “new nomadism” in *Patterns*

of Dissonance is compatible to Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming minoritarian". However, she also emphasizes that "becoming minoritarian" can be used by other minoritarian movements within or without feminism (115). According to Braidotti (2014), "when you remember in the intensive or minority-mode, however, you defeat linearity, to open up spaces of movement and of de-territorialization that actualize the virtual possibilities which have been frozen in the image of the past" (173). Elizabeth Grosz in her essay "The Forces of Sexual Difference" based on the study of Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) defines feminine "minoritarian" subjectivity as the "knowing subject" with virtual force of "becoming" and "revitalization of discourses" (179). According to Grosz, the future-bound feminist thought as a "latent condition of all knowledge" has to embrace the ontology of "inhuman (or imperceptible) becomings" to move beyond the femininity as it is idealized and represented in patriarchy (177). Grosz views feminist subjectivity as "knowing subject" against dominant humanist and anthropocentric discourses with focus on "how to think, write, or read not as a woman but more complexly and less clearly, how to think, write, and read otherwise, whether one is a man or woman, how to accommodate issues, qualities, concepts that have not had their time before" to bring diversity and postanthropocentrism in the episteme (175).

2. Mary Louise Pratt in her foundational essay "The Arts of Contact Zone" (1991) defines autoethnography as a literary creation of "contact zone" with its inventive and "revisionist account" of "stable and centered knowledge", the hegemonic representations of identity and culture. Hurston's autoethnography as a liberational amalgamation of individual (autobiography) and collective (ethnography) has been analyzed in the context of gender and race. According to Francis Lionnet's "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on A Road*" Hurston's individualism is not "anchored" in any gendered and racial identity. It opposes the modern

ethnography in which culture is viewed nostalgically and identity is fixed (99). Similarly, Alice A. Deck studies Hurston's autoethnography as her polyphonic and multiple account of "biocultural identity" that allowed her to "pinpoint the cultural contrasts and equivalences" between her ethnic community and the white community to demonstrate the basic humanity (239). Lyla D. Brown-Vincent highlights that Hurston's autoethnographical analysis with focus on the suppressed stories and histories is the Black feminist tradition that participates in the active struggle against racism, sexism and all other systems of injustice. Brown-Vincent cites I. McClaurin to conceptualize Hurston's autoethnography as "'an innovative strategy of knowledge production' through which 'Black feminist anthropologist may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses to levels recognized by both margins and centers of the discipline'"(112).

3. From Rosi Braidotti, "Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity," *Rhizomes* 11(12), 2005/2006. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html>.

4. Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* highlights that the "restoration" of environment especially in relation with forests and plants needs "re-story-ation" of the indigenous culture and epistemology as the resistance to the individualist subject in classical humanism based on racial and anthropocentric hierarchy.

See also Greeta Gaard (2014), Winona LaDuke (1999), Seghezze, Lucas (2009), Mendovi, Leerom (2010), Maezumi, S. Yoshi, Alves, Daiana, Robinson, Mark, de Souza, Jonas Gregorio, Levis, Carolina, Barnett, Robert L., de Oliveira, Edemar Almeida, Urrego, Dunia, Schaan, Denise and Iriarte, Jose´ (2018), Whyte, Kyle, Caldwell, Chris and Schaefer, Marie (2018).

5. Hurston in her account of Eatonville also indicates that Nature/Culture interdependence in Eatonville paved the way to self-realization and personal responsibility in the African American indigenous culture. Eatonville was a place “sprouted with life” where the “self-government” in “a raw, bustling frontier” was actualized (6). Boyd studies that Hurston’s selfhood was influenced by the materialist background of Eatonville as “one of the first incorporated all-black municipalities in the country” in which the relationship between culture and nature was marked by individual responsibility (22). Booker T. Washington, an eminent advocate of Black enterprise, education and racial uplift acknowledged the significance of the places like Eatonville for the formation of subjectivities. Boyd cites Washington that “in such a town, individuals who have executive ability and initiative have an opportunity to discover themselves and find out what they can do” (22).

6. Besides *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston’s study and interpretations of Polk County become the central part also in her ethnography *Mules and Men* (1935) and play *Polk County* (1944). Her short story “Spunk” (1925) has similarities with the themes in these works. D.A. Boxwell’s “‘Sis Cat’ as Ethnographer: Self-Presentation and Self-Inscription in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*” (1992) is an important source to understand the debate on *Mules and Men* as Hurston’s ethnography and/or autoethnography.

7. Hurston has included various forms of songs in her account of the Black indigenous blues in Polk County’s forests. According to Luc Sante, “although the term ‘blues’ came to be applied to any minor-key lament-in the 1920s and 30s, to almost any kind of song- the true blues songs are those that hew to the twelve bar structure” (479).

8. From “The Rough Guide to Geopolitics with Mary Louise Pratt”, at:

<https://www.chicagohumanities.org/media/rough-guide-geopolitics-mary-louise-pratt/>

CHAPTER 3

Feminist Objectivity in Visual Technology

Lucille Clifton's *Generations: A Memoir* (1976)

Lucille Clifton's life writing resignifies her family photographs with the support of multiple voices from family members and Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*. This chapter reads Clifton's heteroglossic life writing as an embodied technology on historical and conceptual grounds that articulate her contribution to African American feminist conceptual photography and New Materialism for feminist objectivity against the racialized and anthropocentric representations in the modern Western visual technologies. Donna Haraway in "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" based on ecofeminist and feminist technoscience studies, introduces the feminist vision of objectivity to "see" the objects (human and nature) as active and meaning-generating agents to critique totality, transcendentalism, and objectification in modern Western visual and semiotic technologies that she calls "god's trick" based on sexism, racism, and anthropocentrism. In Haraway's words, posthuman feminist vision reconceptualizes the subjectivity in knowledge practices:

Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is, partial connection. There is no way to be "simultaneously" in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (i.e., subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class. And that is the short list of critical positions. (586)

Clifton's heteroglossic life writing as the power-charged conversation develops the posthuman feminist vision in which objectivity is achieved by merging the human identity with multiple others in culture, nature, and technology from the African American feminist standpoint. Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* terms the non-hierarchical collaboration among culture, nature, and technology as the "new kind of ecosophical unity" for "an ethics of mutual interdependence" (62).

In the feminist literary studies and criticism, heteroglossia has been approached to replace the totalitarian and unitary "monoglossia" also known as the "masculinist speech" in language and thought on the macro-level by the struggle in the form of interaction among different sociopolitical, historical and cultural discourses on micro level for the formation of new discourses, identities and subjectivities. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith (1998, 2016) highlight that heteroglossia in women's life writing recognizes that no voice is unified and no text is monologic; rather, there are always different voices of others embedded in one's language and consciousness in historical, political and cultural contexts. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" describes that multivoiced texts and subjectivities in Black women's writings emphasize their dialogical, diverse, and revisionary approach to the dominant discourses of gender and race (348). In *New Materialism*, the postmodern feminist concept of heteroglossia functions both discursively and ontologically to define human identity, subjectivity, and knowledge practice connected with culture, nature, and technology. It is developed by the postmodern studies in feminist technoscience and ecofeminism to develop "oppositional consciousness" against the dominant appropriation of human identity, technology and nature based on dualist binaries in modern Western technologies and discourse. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s", Haraway

defines “powerful infidel heteroglossia” as the feminist revisionary practice in modern visual and semiotic technologies to resignify human identity connected with multiple others. Haraway describes that “infidel heteroglossia” in its opposition to the “god’s trick” in modern Western epistemology and neoliberalism is “an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the super-savers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories” (39). Similarly, Clifton’s heteroglossic life writing counters racialized representations from the Black feminist standpoint and revises human identity connected in a non-hierarchical relationship with culture, nature, and technology.

Clifton’s life writing can be situated in the 1960s-1970s academic and cultural background when conceptual photography in journalism, literature, and fine arts resisted and transformed the formalist photography, autonomous photographer, and depoliticized documentary in modern photography. This movement was the modernist critique of optical racism, biological determinism, and historical evasions. According to Jeff Wall, photoconceptualism was the critique of the modern Western photography that appeared around the 1920s with its mastery of “immediacy, instantaneity, and the evanescent moment of the emergence of pictorial value out of the practice of reportage” (33). The “Western picture” or the “Western concept of the picture” marked with institutionalization and utilitarianism of the photographic technology in journalism, museums and other visual arenas was based on Western modern art of painting:

It is known as a product of divine gift, high skill, deep emotion, and crafty planning. It plays with the notion of the spontaneous, the unanticipated. The master picture-maker prepares everything in advance yet trusts that all the planning in the world will lead only to something fresh, mobile, light, and fascinating. The soft body of the brush, the way it constantly changes shape as it is used, was the primary means by which the genius of the composition was placed at risk at each moment, and recovered, transcendent in the shimmering surfaces of magical feats of figuration. (33)

One distinctive feature of conceptual photography in its critique of formalist, transcendentalist, and dispassionate photography was the critical collaboration between photographer and writer. Many young artists shaped their critical writing and narratives of sociopolitical significance as the work of art-photography for self-definition and “self-portraiture” in photoconceptualism (37).

The art of conceptual photography is one of the prominent arts in the last decades of the twentieth century in which African American women artists, writers and activists articulated their enthusiasm to radically engage with modern photography to deconstruct it for sociopolitical and cultural activism. According to Lisa E. Farrington, the African American women artists inspired by Black liberation, the Black Arts movement, and Black feminism created some of the most creative and diverse works of art in photoconceptualism in the 1960s-1970s with more critical and situated representations of the African American identity and culture against racism. Adrian Piper as the “god mother” of the African American feminist conceptual photography was a minimalist and universalist who emerged in New York at that time against xenophobia and racism. According to John Parish Bowles, Piper viewed the conceptualist aesthetic as the ““opportunity for self-reflection and individual liberation—her own and her viewers’—in her artwork” that was “motivated by an ideal: the end of racism and sexism, achieved by rational means” (2). Piper in her conceptualist aestheticism gave preference to “concept” over the sensuous object to develop an “antioptical” approach that was a shift from the object to spectator (reader) with self-reflection and deconstruction of biases (4). Situated in her historical and cultural context, Clifton’s embodied photography in her life writing can be interpreted as one of the most radical examples of the conceptual art of photography in which she replaces traditional modes of photography based on sexism and racism with her posthumanist feminist vision of objectivity from the Black feminist standpoint .¹

The first chapter “Caroline and Son” in *Generations* begins with the picture of Clifton’s great-great grandmother Caroline and her son. Clifton begins this chapter with the critical interaction between the universal and situated truths as the foundation of the posthumanist feminist vision to critique transcendentalism in the modern visual technologies. Mammy Caroline with her son appears in the picture with the universal human feelings of loss and survival against the oppressive domination that in Cheryl A. Wall’s analysis is the major theme in Clifton’s writing (60). In the African American feminist tradition of conceptual photography, Clifton’s embodied technology is marked by universal and situated truths in her critique of racism in representations. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Clifton describes her writing politics as both universal and situated: “A person can, I hope, enjoy the poetry without knowing that I am Black or female. But it adds to their understanding if they do know it—that is, that I am black and female. To me, that I am what I am is all of it; all of what I am is relevant” (58).

Clifton demonstrates that Mammy Caroline’s truth can be grasped by understanding the situated and specific history of her life. Clifton’s first narrative enacts her power-charged dialogue with an unidentified lady on the phone based on the question of truth in the representation of her family. Clifton’s conversational account highlights that the racial tension between the two women is based on the difference of their discursive practices rather than the inherent qualities. The unknown woman calls Clifton in response to the notice Clifton placed in the newspaper in Virginia to inquire about the name of her father, Samuel Sayles, and the colonized history of her family. The lady has been engaged with the study of the Sale/Sayles family. However, she could not recall the name of Clifton’s father and other details about the family.

Moreover, her account of Mammy Caroline is limited by the discourse of colonialism. She knows about Mammy Caroline in terms of her labor only, “She remembers the name Caroline, she

says, her parents were delivered by the midwife, Mammy Caroline. The midwife Mammy Caroline” (6). Clifton exposes the fragility of the transcendentalist vision in the representation.

Is the Nicholas house still there? I ask.

Still with the family in it, she says. I hear the trouble in her voice.

And I rush to assure her. Why? Is it in my blood to reassure this thin-voiced white lady? I am Clifton now, I say. I only wanted to find out about these things. I am only curious, I say. It’s a long time after, and I just wanted to know.

I can help you, she sighs. I can help you.

But I never hear her voice again. (6)

Clifton tells that the lady sends the compiled historical record to her in which the names of Sayles family “are thick in her family like an omen” (7). It is by the end of the first chapter that Clifton discloses the position of the unknown woman researcher who is the only descendant of the White master of the Sale/Sayles family, “I see that she is the last of her line. Old and not married, left with a house and a name” (7). Clifton introduces her identity in affinity with Mammy Caroline based on her oppositional consciousness against the transcendentalist representations, “I feel the Dahomey women gathering in my bones” (7). At the outset, Clifton’s enactment of the tensed dialogue with the White lady in her representation of Mammy Caroline significantly emphasizes that representations are always relational, and any political affinity across racial differences could be made possible only with attention to situated and specific truths in technologies. Clifton’s representation of Mammy Caroline resonates with the feminist vision of objectivity in visual technologies in New Materialism. According to Haraway’s study in “Situated Knowledges”, “the moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” and “feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how we see” (583).

Clifton divides the chapter into multiple narratives in her father, Samuel's voice, and her voice to further complicate and multiply the significance of Mammy Caroline's representation in the historical and cultural contexts. Samuel's narrative is focused on Mammy Caroline's family background, the captivated journey from West Africa to Virginia, and her resistant subjectivity:

“Walking from New Orleans to Virginia”, Daddy would say, “you go through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Caroline and North Caroline. And that's the walk Mammy Ca'line took when she was eight years old. She was born among the Dahomey people in 1822, Lue. Among the Dahomey people, and she used to always say ‘Get what you want, you from Dahomey women’. (14)

Samuel is enthusiastic about telling Clifton about who Mammy Caroline was in her daily experiences to oppose the discursive construction, “Oh she was tall and skinny and walked straight as a soldier, Lue. Straight like somebody marching wherever she went. And she talked with an Oxford accent! I ain't kidding. Don't let nobody tell you them old people was dumb” (11). Samuel's narratives as the interpretation of Mammy Caroline's picture also resonates with the “pictorial genealogy” in African American cultural activism against the domestic colonialization, subjugation, and segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. According to bell hooks' “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life”, family picture galleries were the means for the African American collective participation in “a noninstitutionalized curatorial process” and making of “pictorial genealogies” where “we learned who our ancestors were by listening to endless narratives as we stood in front of these pictures” (62).

While Samuel's narrative shows his enthusiasm about the portrayal of Mammy Caroline as an adamant woman in her daily life, Clifton's situated narrative of Mammy Caroline unfolds multiplicity of voice against racism in representations and social relations. Clifton narrates her journey in contemporary America in comparison and contrast with Mammy Caroline's silent and captivated journey. Clifton's journey from Baltimore to Buffalo and her husband and brother to

attend her father's funeral is marked by the agency of "seeing" and "laughing" that reflects not only the generational differences but also the persistent racial gaps in contemporary Northern urban America. Clifton writes,

We drove North, seeing everything and laughing the whole way. Miss Mattie came and got the kids and I stopped by Sears and bought a black hat and Fred and Sammy got a map and we headed North, Fred driving.

Mammy Ca'line walked North from New Orleans to Virginia in 1830. She was eight years old. (10)

On their way, a White boy increased his car's speed when he sees them and drives away from them.

Clifton writes, "(he) sped the hell in front of us and across the mountains scared and driving like hell. Like away from hell. Fred started to speed, and we started trying to catch up with him and laugh at him some more, but we looked across every mountain, and he was gone" (16). Clifton's portrayal of the "speediness of cars" and the "mountains" across which they look for the White boy highlights the racial gaps based on the monumental static identities that according to Smith and Watson have been developed by the nationalist narratives. Clifton's laughter at this encounter indicates the fictionality and discursive construction of the racial binaries. In Haraway's theory of the posthuman feminist vision in visuals and semiotic technologies (1988), "humour" is the feminist quality of knowing the world and its contradictions "by giving up mastery and keep searching for fidelity" (594). Clifton narrates that, "We kept on, saying we were looking for our cowboy and followed the day" before reaching the "grey and hard and cracking", New York State, "The promised land" (16). Clifton relates the captivated journeys in the colonialist history with the political apartheid and hate discourse against minorities based on racism in the USA in the new millennium. Clifton's "laughing" journey to Buffalo moves along her father's account of Mammy Ca'line captivated journey in America, "And I would ask her how did she get captured, Mammy, and she would say that she was a child and I would ask her when did it happen, Mammy, and she would say 'In 1830 I walked from New Orleans to Virginia and I was eight years old.' And I would

ask her what it like on the boat and she would just shake her head” (14). Mammy Caroline’s silence becomes a driving force in Clifton’s life writing. Her silence speaks to the institutional silence about the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants during slavery. Clifton is vocal about these silences in her poetry, especially “Blessing the boats” and her collection of poems *Blessing the Boats* that critically represent the captivated journeys and their relationship with the racial hierarchy and hate crimes in contemporary America. In “Blessing the boats” Clifton transforms the historical experience of African captives on boats into fearlessness, love, and future vision based on her inspiration from nature.

In her representation of Mammy Caroline, Clifton moves beyond the dialectics of subjectivity and objectivity in modern visual technologies. Her life writing, structured in the corresponding sections of photos and multiple subjective narratives with historical information, follows the art of conceptual photography in which subjectivity and objectivity were tied together. Jeff Wall highlights that it was hard to decide which side of the mirror one was standing in the art of conceptual photography. Subjective experiences and perspectives were joined by formal language of photojournalism. Moreover, in the African American feminist tradition of the conceptual art-photography, Clifton’s life writing critiques the institutionally objective representations of the African Americans that serve the political propagation of conformity by evading the individual differences, experiences, and achievements. Farrington in her study of conceptual photography highlights African American feminist critique of the modern photography to reveal how the political agenda of representations is concealed under the guise of objectivism. Following Barthes’ debate in *Camera Lucida*, “the gaze of the audience is less germane to the photograph than the author’s vision”, African American feminist and situated critique of the racialized representations demonstrated the relational use of technology to determine “particular”

truth (73). However, Clifton's heteroglossic narratives develop a conceptual dialogue more than antagonism between the objective and subjective approaches in photographic technology. Her life writing as an embodied technology develops a non-hierarchical relationship between human culture and technology. She implements technology in her life writing to articulate her personal and cultural experiences against the historical and epistemic exclusions. According to Haraway in "A Manifesto for Cyborg", modern technologies with gendered and racialized representations reproduce the "informatics of domination" in knowledge practices in which the human civilization is based on the old, universalizing Western stories (12). Clifton's feminist vision in her embodied technology does not fall back on the "demonology of technology", technological determinism or the "anti-science metaphysics"; rather, this onto-epistemology focuses on the "historical system depending upon structured relations among people" (25). Haraway emphasizes human responsibility in her intervention in technology for social justice. According to Haraway, "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are *they*" (38).

Clifton's life writing recuperates not only human bodies as meaning generating agents in their situated context, but it also retrieves the agency of nature in her critique of classical humanism. Clifton skillfully integrates Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* with each family member's picture. Whitman's poetics of "small nature" based on the wisdom of grass adds on the diversity of vision with the inclusion of nature and ecological belonging. Clifton combines her historical representation of Mammy Caroline with Whitman's posthumanist identity in "Song of Myself", *Leaves of Grass* that moves beyond the Cartesian dualisms of self/other and nature/culture. It reads, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, and what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (4). Christine Gerhardt acknowledges

that Whitman's humility in his association with the neglected nature minutiae ponders his decomposition of the arrogant construction of human identity based on class, gender and race in discourse and social relations. Gerhardt cites one of Whitman's early notebook entries on the agency of grass that aligns with contemporary posthuman and critical plant studies, "Bring all the art and science of the world, and baffle and humble it with one spear of grass" (84). Clifton associates Mammy Caroline with multitudes in human culture and nature to intervene in the construction of liberal humanism and identity politics. Mammy Caroline wins multiple layers of significance in different voices of Samuel and Clifton in family narratives, and in Whitman's nature poetry. Haraway in her theory of the posthuman feminist vision in visual and semiotic technologies, approaches the object of knowledge (human, nature, technology) as a "poem" to resist the reduction of the world to a "resource":

This unwieldy term (material-semiotic actor) is intended to portray the object of knowledge as an active meaning-generating part of apparatus of bodily production, without ever implying the immediate presence of such objects or, what is the same thing, their unique and final determination of what can count as objective knowledge at a particular historical juncture. Like poems which are sites of literary production where language too is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. (595)

Clifton incorporates Whitman's poetics of "small nature" to render her objects of study emerge as "poems" that can generate meanings with multiple connections in culture, nature, and technology in the situated context to counter their objectification in the modern technologies. Mammy Caroline's representation is multiplied by the historically situated and the posthumanist voices. Like her own literary identity, Clifton wants readers/spectators to know Mammy Caroline in her geo-political, historical, and universal context. Adam C. Syvertsen in his study of Whitman's "Song of Myself" explains Whitman's concept of human identity, "all the material manifestations of human and more than human world were 'only the different disposition of [the] eternal and

changing atoms” (21). Whitman’s poetry developed the nineteenth century materialism influenced by the Epicurean philosophy and organic chemistry. Like Clifton, Whitman set human material embodiment in entanglement with the nonhuman world to break the binaries of the discursive inscriptions based on gender, class, and race differences.

Clifton’s inclusion of Whitman’s posthumanism from “Song of Myself” in her life writing is not a liberalist tokenism to propagate plurality of identity and culture; rather, it reflects her radical politics of nature writing. Clifton’s incorporation of her family’s racially excluded history with Whitman’s politics of “small nature” reveals the collaborative agency of minorities. Hillary Holladay in his essay “Song of Herself” in *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton* explains that the “poet-memoirist equanimity” (Whitman-Clifton) is based on their “expansive selfhood” that transgresses the dualist oppositions of Black/White, Female/Male and Nature/Culture (179). However, Clifton’s incorporation of the poetics of “small nature” in her life writing is more aligned with her resistance to the racially hierarchical construction of human identity in the modern epistemology and social relations. As Wall remarks about Clifton’s critique of anthropocentrism and the racialized commodification, “if Clifton acknowledges her debt to her foremost white literary ancestor, her volume tells the story that Whitman could not tell” (60). Clifton’s poetry for social justice is motivated by her thinking through nature. For instance, in “After Kent State”, Clifton radically connects environmental degradation in liberal humanism with racism in contemporary America:

Only to keep his little fear
He kills his cities
And his trees
Even his children oh
People

White ways are
the way of death
Come into the
black
And live
Being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
That's why i can talk
About environment.
What wants to be a tree,
Ought to be he can be it.
Same things for other things.
Same thing for men.²

Clifton's "After Kent State" is her critical response to racism in the massacre of peaceful anti-war protesters (Vietnam War) by the National Guardsmen in 1960. Clifton's writing develops a postanthropocentric and anti-racist human subject with the lower-case "i" that resonates and supplements Whitman's poetics of "small nature" against the totality and sovereignty of human identity in classical humanism.

The second chapter is focused on Lucy's picture that reflects Clifton's "diffractive reading" of her object of study (human) to achieve objectivity in modern visual technologies. In the theoretical frame of New Materialism, "diffractive reading" also known as "matter of concern" than "matter of fact" replaces the simplification of the object produced by the "god's eye view" with the complexity and materiality generated by multiple versions of the same object in the context of social interactions, histories, and technological knowledge practices. Lucy was Mammy Caroline's daughter and Samuel's grandmother. Lucy's photo is the most formal portrait in Clifton's narrative that in Wall's words reflects both African American political resistance and

social progress in the late nineteenth century (71). Clifton's father, Samuel's narrative about Lucy "diffracts" her image from the objectification of the African American female body in the modern visual technology. In Samuel's narrative, Lucy is an undomesticated and subversive woman unlike other women in her family:

They say she was a tall skinny and dark-skinned girl, look just like her mother. Mammy Ca'line. They say they couldn't get her to work as hard as the rest and she was quiet and thought she was better than the rest. Mammy Ca'line taught her that, they say, and I wouldn't be surprised if she did. They tell me she was mean. Lucy was mean always, I heard Aunt Margaret Brown say to Mammy Ca'line one time. And Mammy just said no she wasn't mean, she was strong. 'strong women and weak men'. (29)

Samuel tells that Lucy worked with her Mammy as a midwife during the war, after the emancipation when the White folks from the North came to the South to make money "off the South's trouble" (30). Lucy got married to a White man, Harvey Nichols, carpetbagger, and born a son. Samuel would proudly tell Clifton about Lucy who killed her husband and was hanged, "'First Black woman legally hanged in the state of Virginia'. He said Black like that, back then. And he would be looking proud" (28). On the other hand, Clifton's narrative about Lucy shows her "diffraction" from Samuel's narrative. Like Lucy, Clifton expresses her distance from the patriarchal values "three women who had loved Daddy. Three daughters who had loved Daddy. I shook my head and walked up the stairs to my old room" (28). However, Clifton is more engaged with Samuel when he narrates Lucy's life in the context of colonialism, "It ain't something in a book, Lue. Even the good parts was awful" (22). Clifton's life writing can be interpreted as her interaction with her father. Clifton develops a collaborative interaction with Samuel on anti-racism, whereas the conversation gets disengaged due to his patriarchal values.

Clifton's narrative account of Lucy is about her epistemological struggle to demonstrate multiple versions of Lucy's marginalization in the modern visual technologies. Clifton mobilizes

a critical conversation about the dialectics of objective and subjective versions of Lucy as the object of study:

Later I would ask my father for proof. Where are the records, Daddy? I would ask. The time may not be right, and it may just be a family legend or something. Somebody somewhere knows, he would say. And I would be dissatisfied and fuss with Fred about fact and proof and history until he told me one day not to worry, that even the lies are true. In history, even lies are true. (35)

Clifton's critical conversation between the objective record "proof" and subjective record "lies" about Lucy in her life writing aligns with Haraway's concept of "conversation" to critique the master narrative in modern Western visual technologies, "Accounts of a 'real' world do not, then, depend on a logic of 'discovery' but a power-charged social relation of 'conversation'. The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder" (593). Clifton relies on multiple versions and multiple voices to know Lucy. Unlike her father's version, Clifton does not draw a racial or nationalist pride from Lucy's hanging, rather she approaches it "diffractively" as a source of multiple truths based on social relations, history, and technology to critique totality in the methods of visualization.

And Lucy was hanged. Was hanged, the lady whose name they gave me like a gift had her neck pulled up by a rope until the neck broke and I can see Mammy Ca'line standing straight as a soldier in green Virginia apart from the crowd of silent Black folk and white folk watching them and not the wooden frame swinging her child. And their shame making distance between them and her a real thing. And I know she made no sound, but her mind closed round the picture like a frame and I know that her child made no sound and I turn in my chair and arch my back and make this sound for my two mothers and for all Dahomey women. (35)

Clifton skillfully connects Mammy Caroline's oppositional consciousness to people's silence at Lucy's hanging with the visual fixation based on the structural oppression. Clifton's complication of Lucy's image in photography, social interactions, history, and knowledge practice candidly proves her "diffractive" reading to counter the "god's trick" in modern technologies. Moreover,

she indicates that oppressive representations are the human crisis beyond the binary of White and Black.

Integration of Whitman's poetry in the description of Lucy's difference further enhances the multiplicity of vision to critique the dominant discursive representations. Clifton cites from Whitman's "Song of Myself" to introduce Lucy, "I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood/I see that the elementary laws never apologize" (20). Clifton represents Lucy with the spirit of liberation both from the cultural and racial discourse. In "Main Drifts in Whitman's Poetry" Floyd Stovall's study describes that the dominant principle in Whitman's "Song of Myself" is his love for liberation that finds its authoritative expression in nature. He considers his embodied subjectivity connected with nature as the "spokesman" for those "whom laws, theories, conventions can never master" (3). Whitman writes in the same section (20) of "Song of Myself",

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less/And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them/I know I am solid and sound/ To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow/ All are written to me and I must get what the writing means/I know I am deathless.

Whitman's poetics of "small nature" for self and collective liberation was a discursive struggle. According to Paul Outka, "grass" symbolizes text/nature/identity in Whitman's "Song of Myself" to imagine multiple connections and possibilities for human identity and nature without giving ultimate or essentialized authority neither to the text nor to the matter in the world (44). Similarly, Clifton represents Lucy with multiple layers of meanings for her liberative relationship with materiality and discourse. Like the photograph and cultural interaction between Samuel and Clifton, nature narrative leads to resignify Lucy beyond the discursive inscriptions based on sexism and racism. Clifton's acknowledgment of Lucy in *Generations* or of "Lucille" in *An Ordinary*

Woman as the symbol of bright light is similar to Whitman's poetics of "small nature" in recognition of multitudes of minorities.

Like the African American feminist conceptual photography, Clifton's embodied photography supplemented by multiple narratives speaks to the spirit of liberation against commodified representations in the dispassionate photojournalism. Lisa E. Farrington highlights that objectivity in the African American women's art of conceptual photography has been achieved by personal experiences and collective spirit. Pat Ward Williams' "Accused: Blowtorch, Padlock" (1987), with the combination of photography and personal narrative, is an essential source in the current context in which Williams strives to transform photography and audience's speculation by inquiring the dispassionate reportage of the racialized violence. Williams explains that her conceptual photography's spirit is both specific and universal, personal, and collective (71). Clifton's embodied technology in the African American feminist art of conceptual photographic tradition has been achieved by the anti-capitalist inquiry and speculation in the modernist art, that in Jeff Wall's words, "could not be integrated into the 'regime', the commercial-bureaucratic-discursive order" (35). Clifton's portrayal of Lucy with historical complexity and material details develops the collective spirit against racialized representations in its spectators/readers.

Clifton dedicates her third chapter in her life writing to Gene's picture that recognizes the importance of narratives as the human subjectivity to intervene in human bodies' representations in modern visual technologies. Gene was Lucy's son, Samuel's father, and Clifton's grandfather. The picture shows that Gene was a young and handsome man. However, it does not expose the deformity of his arm by birth. The blind spot in Gene's picture resonates with Clifton's introspection over her father's hidden imputed leg in his funeral ceremony. She writes, "Nothing was hidden. They were missing nothing. I thought I was going to laugh. They were hiding where

there was nothing to hide” (24). The coffin hides “nothing” (imputed leg). Clifton describes through her narrative that Samuel lost his leg because of the emphysema that he contracted due to his job in the steel mill over thirty years (51). Like the African American feminist tradition of conceptual photography, Clifton in her embodied photography, emphasizes the collaboration between human bodies (object of knowledge) and narratives with material details. Gene’s photograph is like Samuel’s dead body without the inclusion of the impact of historical realities on his material being. Wall comments on Gene’s picture as the “grown child of tragedy” (74). Following Susan Sontag, Wall draws our attention to the visual technology limitation, “the camera rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses” (78). However, the focus on African American feminist art of photoconceptualism like the posthuman feminist visual technologies avoids technological determinism. Instead, it emphasizes relationality and positionality in technological epistemology to approach objectivity with critical and situated lens. According to Lisa Farrington’s African American feminist photoconceptualism frame, Gene’s picture is a “visual punning” that shows him in the Western dress and appearance while also connotes colonialism outside of the photo (69). Clifton’s revisionary art of photoconceptualism can be read as the posthumanist politics of “nomadism” that critiques modern Western reification of the objects of knowledge also insists on the human embodied agency for critical intervention in modern technological epistemology. It deconstructs the dualist opposition between the human identity and technology. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s “bodies without organs”, Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* describes that “nomadism” situates “the human as coextensive and intimately connected to the technological, but also stressing the way in which the human occupies the threshold between technology and narration” (75). Clifton’s life writing with embodied technology provides consciousness for “posthuman collectivity” based on

her narratives connected with photography in the industrialist urban America. This situated and ethically conscious approach counters objectivity in the “god’s trick” in Western modern technologies. N. Katherine Hayles highlights how literature with its narratives and embodied subjectivity develops the cultural self-understanding of human identity in the milieu of disembodied and abstracted technology. According to Hayles, the new model of human identity may begin “to envision herself or himself as a posthuman collectivity, an ‘I’ transformed into ‘we’ of autonomous agents operating together to make a self” (6).

Like other family members, Gene is also represented by multiple and connected narratives in Samuel’s and Clifton’s voices to signify generational and gendered differences in the culture that resist any unified representations. Samuel’s narrative of Gene uplifts patriarchal and masculinist values as he tells that “the women was crazy about him. He was crazy about them” (43). According to Samuel, Gene adored his son (Samuel), and named him “rock”. Gene would brag about his son, “he’d walk round the bar hollering to all the other men that I could whip their boys and he’d take bets on it” (47). On the other side, Clifton distantly views Samuel’s same values that he appreciated proudly in Gene. Clifton writes that Samuel’s life goals were “to plant a tree, own a house, and have a son” (39). Clifton tells about Samuel who “thought that he was some kind of a God’s man” in his relationship to women in his family (45). Clifton writes, “Once I asked him why he was so sure that he was going to heaven. God knows me, he said. God understands a man like me. Mama didn’t really understand such a man” (45). Mae Gwendolyn Henderson in “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition” describes that multivoiced texts and subjectivities in the African American women’s writings emphasize their dialogical and revisionary approach to the discourse of gender and race. Clifton does not objectify Gene and Samuel as the “spoiled” sons and “furious” husbands” in her

heteroglossic life writing. Rather, she represents them complex and undiminished human beings by providing specific historical details about their lives. Samuel was a thoughtful guardian who worked like a machine in the steel mill in the North (51). Clifton writes about him, “I was going away to college that fall and Punkin was off and married and we were scattering but he had bought us this house to be together in. Because we were his family and he loved us and wanted us to be together. He was a strong man, a strong family man, my Daddy” (75). Similarly, Gene was not merely a “crazy man” rather he was “somebody whose Mamma and Daddy was dead” and he died before “he didn’t hardly get to be a man” (44).

Clifton’s multivoiced and interwoven narratives articulate not only multiple visions to know Gene but also the different positions of those who speak for him. Gene, Clifton, and Samuel indicate their difference of position, gender and generation in their relationship with Mammy Caroline. According to Samuel’s narrative, Mammy Caroline was a matriarchal figure of authority and care to Gene, “‘He can go where he please’, she would say, ‘he from Dahomey women.’” (43). Similarly, Mammy Caroline asks Samuel not to obey his stepfather, “Mammy Ca’line would tell us that we was Sayle people and we didn’t have to obey nobody. You a Sayle, she would say. You from Dahomey women” (48). Whereas Mammy Caroline influences Gene and Samuel in their independent position in the family and community, she has a deeper impact on Clifton on political and epistemological grounds. Clifton was the first child in her family who went to Howard University. According to Mary J. Lupton’s *Lucille Clifton: Her Life and Letters* (2006), Clifton was at Howard from 1953 to 1954 and it was only after 1960 when the University changed its white conservative image (19). Clifton had to face institutional racism (20). She left Howard and entered Fredonia State College to pursue her interest in creative poetry for social and environmental justice (21). In her life writing, Clifton tries to convince her father by her association

with Mammy Caroline and her conviction in the Dahomey women as her self-empowerment when he gets disappointed at her decision to leave Howard after two years. Clifton writes, “I don’t need that stuff, I am going to write poems. I can do what I want to do! I’m from Dahomey women!” (41). One of the epigraphs in Clifton’s life writing is Mammy Caroline’s sayings: “Get what you want, you from Dahomey women”. Following Mammy Caroline, Clifton associates herself with Dahomey women in terms of their resistance and oppositional consciousness, “they was the best soldiers in the world” (14). Clifton incorporates Mammy Caroline’s words with her subjectivity to resist the reproduction of the unified African American representations. According to Mark Poster, modern technologies in communication instrumentally reproduced unified and rational subjects, whereas the postmodern practices with images and texts decentralize the unified ethnic identity by generating multiple and diffuse subjects. Clifton’s multi-voiced life writing indicates that African American identity is multiple and diffused into the difference of position, gender, and generation. It is both individual and connected with the community. Clifton’s life writing as an embodied technology aligns with Haraway’s feminist objectivity in visual technologies in which differences are not meant for an infinite catalogue and exchange; rather, for the development of an objective understanding of others. Haraway remarks, “All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view” (583). Clifton’s incorporation of multiple and interwoven family narratives with Gene’s photograph recognizes his difference in connection with history and culture.

Clifton’s representation of Gene indicates her posthuman feminist resistance to the individualist and sovereign human identity in modern Western epistemology. She associates Gene’s photographic representation with Whitman’s lines from “Song of Myself”, *Leaves of*

Grass, “What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?” (38). On the one hand, her poetic question exposes the paradox of Gene’s photograph in which he appears in Western modern dress without any implication of colonialism in his life. On the other hand, Clifton’s question suggests that Gene connected with multiple others, cannot be represented as an individualist and autonomous human identity. Clifton answers to the poetic question “what is a man anyhow?” by recognizing Gene connected with multiple others. Clifton’s embodied photography resonates with Haraway’s posthuman feminist vision, “Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (590). Similarly, Clifton’s study of Gene is her voice for communities in culture and nature against their appropriation in modern technologies. According to Abdel Mohsen Ibrahim Hashim, Clifton’s ecofeminist tradition in her writing is a community building born out of love rather than of oppression (182). Clifton calls on all voices of the community in culture and nature to be recognized and heard. Clifton’s frame of human identity is similar to Whitman’s poetics of grass. According to Paul Outka’s study, Whitman’s articulation of grass as a “uniform hieroglyphic” conceptualizes his ecological thought on the border between text and the material world. In this “linguistic ecosystem” each definition of human identity and nature is “accurate, incomplete, and interconnected” (45). Clifton in her representation of Gene as a collective and diffused human identity resists both racism and anthropocentrism in modern Western epistemology.

Clifton dedicates the fourth section in her life writing to her father Samuel, demonstrating her heteroglossic “double vision” to complicate the homogeneity of human identity based on patriarchal totality in culture and technological epistemology. In Clifton’s choice of picture, Samuel appears with military erectness and causal calmed facial expression in the background of spring plants and blossoms. Wall studies Clifton’s double vision in Samuel’s photograph, “Suavely

dressed, replete with vest, suspenders, tie, and sharply creased trousers, he looks like his father's son. The layout of the photo marks him as his daughter's father. Snapped outdoors in early spring, to judge from the budding trees, the photograph poses him equidistant between two houses" (78). Clifton resists any totality in Samuel's representation who is both masculinist/feminist, unified/split, and patriarch/storyteller. Clifton's critique of gendered identities in culture is inseparable from her resistance to anthropocentrism. It is due to this complexity that makes Clifton embrace both Samuel's death and resurrection at the same time. Clifton begins the chapter on "Samuel" with Whitman's verses to indicate that Samuel's death is not a closure; "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses/And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier" (54). In his poetics of "small nature", Whitman relates the decomposition of human corpses in the earth with the composition of the natural environment. According to Paul Outka in "(De)Composing Whitman", Whitman's postanthropocentrism is motivated by his critique of the discursive construction of human identities based on class, gender, and race (56). Samuel's art of storytelling and recognition of multiplicity with change in his name from "Sayle" to Sayles" continues as the foundations for Clifton's politics of writing for minorities and nature against domination. However, Clifton ends the chapter by embracing Samuel's death, "My father bumped against the earth. Like a rock" (59). Clifton's blunt acceptance of Samuel's death reflects her politics against the patriarchal domination in culture. Clifton aspires to her father for his storytelling and oral narrative. She distances from him in his patriarchal and nationalist values. Clifton's incorporation of Whitman's thoughts from *Leaves of Grass* in her chapter on Samuel indicates that she critiques patriarchy both in her community and in modern Western culture in the form of anthropocentrism. According to Rosi Braidotti in "Posthuman Feminist Theory", posthuman feminist subjectivity uplifts an "ontological desire" for "self-expression" connected with multiple others for "inner most

freedom” that has been diminished in the classical humanism (384). According to Braidotti, the posthumanist feminist onto-epistemology as the cartographic and generative force stands at the border between the ceasing Eurocentric universal “Man” and the process of becomings. From this perspective, Clifton’s heteroglossic account of Samuel stands between the death of patriarchy and the emergence of the posthuman being in her knowledge practice. In the Black ecoliterary tradition, Clifton strives for political and epistemological liberation from sexism and anthropocentrism by incorporating nature poetry in her life writing. Camille T. Dungy in *Black Nature* explains that politics of cosmic embodiment in the African American nature writing is different from the dominant tradition of nature writing because “the literary attempt to deflect attention away from human beings....might not be appealing for writers who already feel politically, economically, and socially marginalized” (xxv).

Clifton views Samuel’s death and his funeral as the moment for reflection on the survival and solidarity of women in her family. Her narrative indicates that the loss of her father is intensified by her realization of the domestication of her mother(s) in the family. She writes, “My father was laid in the ground between his wives. The stones seemed strange to me. Edna Sayles and Thelma Sayles...Punkin’s mother waited, cooking at the house, and I thought of her and wondered where she would lie” (59). The clouds of loss from Clifton’s consciousness disappear with the emergence of her aunt Lucille, Samuel’s sister, at his funeral. Clifton’s aunt replicates the image of Lucy with her undomesticated difference and distance from the masses, “my Aunt Lucille who had come from New Jersey in the night. She was standing as she always stood, stiff and military in the rain, surrounded by people who didn’t like her” (55). Clifton does not write about her aunt’s life as she writes about other family members in her life narrative. However, it is Aunt Lucille’s voice of survival and solidarity with Mammy Caroline that supplements Clifton’s

multivoiced-text in her recognition of “others” at the end. The text tells, “Mammy, Mammy she was whispering in her tears, Mammy it’s 1969, and we’re still here. I held her tightly. Lucille and Lucille” (59). According to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson in *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*, the politics of heteroglossia (inner and outer dialogue) in Black women’s writing reflects on their self-making: “It is the complexity of these simultaneously homogeneous and heterogenous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves...that enables black women writers authoritatively to speak and to engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non) hegemonic discourse” (62). Clifton represents women’s intersectional solidarity against sexism and racism. She engages and speaks for Lucy whose name was given to her by her father out of his nationalist pride at the face of racism. However, Lucy does not have a voice in Clifton’s life writing. On the other hand, Clifton develops an explicit affinity with her Aunt Lucille and gives her voice. Aunt Lucille is the person who never called to Clifton’s father. Clifton writes about the siblings’ relationship, “she don’t even think about him and he crazy about her” (55). Clifton’s inner and outer dialogue indicates her critical conversation with “hegemonic” racism and “ambiguously (non)hegemonic” discourse of nationalism and sexism in her heteroglossic life writing.

In the final chapter, Clifton employs her mother Thelma’s photographs to articulate their active social category than the technical category to represent African American migrants’ predicament and survival in the racially and economically marginalizing North America. Clifton chooses two photographs to represent Thelma; one is a happy and young Thelma while the other one is a passive and exhausted Thelma. Clifton’s selection of the photographs with their surface deformities and defects ponder on the political significance of photoconceptualism in the formalist reportage in the 1960s-1970s to democratize photographic technology. According to Jeff Wall, the

amateur photography in photoconceptualism with its critique of formalism and positivism in modern Western photography reduced institutionally developed distance between the specialized art and common people, especially the oppressed and neglected ones. This radical transformation in photography was based on the slogan “every man is an artist” to reduce the elitist and institutional antipathy to social concerns in the use of technology (42). Clifton’s selection of two opposite and amateur pictures of Thelma with narratives reflects African American lives in the Northern urban cities during the Great migration period. According to Lillian Serece Williams’ *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: Creation of an African American Community in Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940*, it was not only the period of limited economic, political powers and ghettos formation for the migrated African Americans but also an opportunity for their community building, pride, social uplift, and self-reliance.³ Clifton writes about the living conditions of the migrated African American families from the South in New York and Buffalo, “Depew is where I was born. Depew New York, in 1936. Roosevelt time. It was a small town, mostly Polish, all its life turned like a machine around the steel mill” (64). She writes about her Mama’s family house to reveal the miserable conditions of living, “in that house were my Mama’s family, the Moores, and a lot of other people, lines of people, old and young” (64).

Clifton narrows down the crisis of the African American migrant life in Northern urban America to the representation of Thelma in her life writing. Exhausted and disoriented Thelma was the image of financial insecurities, domestic abuse, and diseases “Tuberculosis. Consumption” contracted in the steel mills area. Thelma always wanted Clifton to leave the place, “She used to tell me ‘Get away, get away. I have not had a normal life. I want you to have a natural life. I want you to get away’. A lot of people were always telling me to get away” (74). Vivacious and young Thelma represented her creative and resistant self for the survival of her own life and her family.

Clifton's narrative shows Thelma's celebration of life to survive the racial and economic trap. They would go to walks and to movies together. Clifton writes, "on New Year's Eve we would wait up until midnight and I would play Auld Lang Syne on the Piano while me and my Mama sang and then we would go to bed" (75). Despite the financial stress, Thelma tries to buy wedding rings from the pawnshop but returns them when she could not make the payment on time. Clifton is certain that Thelma's life can't be circumscribed in the metanarratives of race and gender, "And I could tell you about things we been through, some awful ones, some wonderful, but I know that the things that make us are more than that, our lives are more than the days in them, our lives are our lines and we go on" (79). Thelma "was not wise in the world but she had magic wisdom" (73). In an interview, "I'd like Not to be a Stranger in the World: A conversation with Clifton", Clifton explains how her mother's desire for poetry in the restricted and oppressed life motivated her to be a prolific writer for social and environmental justice. In Clifton's words, Samuel's suppression of her mother's creativity was a driving force behind her creative career, "I had heard (him), 'Ain't no wife of mine going to be no poetry writer'. And I think that it did impact on me. I think it had something to do with the reason I never stopped writing, and I have been writing since I was a little girl. I think maybe that's where that came from, as I think back" (314). Due to her heteroglossic life writing, Clifton develops a reconciliation between her father's and mother's voice against racial oppression. Thelma's voice dominates at the end who could tell Clifton that "slavery was a temporary thing, mostly we was [*sic*] free, and she was right. And she smiled when she said it and Daddy smiled too" (78). According to Clifton, creativity and resistance were the leading resources for her mother and her family to move on.

Representation of Thelma as a splitting subject with multiplicity indicates Clifton's posthuman feminist vision of objectivity based on the standpoint of "subjugated" in visual

technologies. Thelma does not develop an identity politics but functions, in Haraway's words, as a "visual clue" or subjectivity based on Clifton's critical and situated position to investigate and complicate the transcendentalism of "god's trick" that renders the objectification of the African American identity of her family (586). Diverse and situated representations of Thelma also resonates with the Black cultural tradition of photography in the 1950s-1960s. Clifton's choice of photographs represents Thelma multidimensionally in her situated context of oppression and resistance. Thelma is not a unified, static, and symbolic victim. According to Hooks, diversity and multidimensionality of subject were the crucial features in the African American culture of "pictorial genealogy" in homes to bring "true-to-life" images which would disrupt the racist representations by the "colonizing eye". In hooks' words, "in opposition to colonizing socialization, internalized racism, these walls announced our visual complexity. We saw ourselves represented in these images not as caricatures, cartoon like figures; we were there in full diversity of body, being, and expression, multidimensional" (61). Clifton's approach to Thelma's photographs with their diversity and "true-to-life" representations in the context of African American migration shows her faith in the social significance of photographic technology.

Thelma with her creative resistance and "magic wisdom" never dies for Clifton; instead, she becomes a source of inspiration for renewal and growth in her politics of writing for minorities in culture and nature. Clifton incorporates her representation of Thelma with Whitman's verses from "Song of Myself" based on the wisdom of grass:

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not
Wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd. (62)

If liberal humanism in modern visual and semiotic technologies can be defined as the capitalist reproduction of bodies based on the conservatism of biological determinism, cultural relativism, and nature/culture dichotomy. It is clear that Clifton's life writing in *Generations* opposes such technological reproduction by disrupting sexism, racism, and anthropocentrism. According to Haraway in *The Haraway Reader*, the reproduction of human bodies and nature based on the binaries of self/other, male/female, human/nonhuman, and culture/nature in modern Western knowledge practices is about the plots of individuation, separation, and militarism. The alternative is the "regeneration" to reconstitute ourselves with imagination for a technological world without the binaries (39). Clifton's construction of African American identity in her life writings in partial, multiple, and diverse connections with culture, technology and nature in her situated context critiques the reproductive politics of liberal humanism and anthropocentrism.

Clifton's family documentation in her life writing contributes to cultural reclamation, nature writing, and African American feminist transformation of photographic technology against the racialized and commodified representation of bodies in modern Western visual and semiotic technologies in the 1960s-1970s. Clifton writes at the end, "things don't fall apart. Things hold. Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept" (78). Clifton's life writing as an embodied technology highlights that the struggle over rationality/objectivity is the struggle over "how to see" in the histories of technologies. Vision is always the question of power. Clifton's life writing based on African American feminism offers a window to develop an objective vision in the world against sexism and racism. It is also a posthumanist vision, as nature, technology and culture are not detached and dualist backgrounds; rather, human identity is "generated through and entangled" with them in her sociopolitical context.⁴

NOTES

1. Clifton's experimental life writing has been studied in the political context of her resistance to gendered and racialized representations. See Audrey T. Mc Cluskey (1984), Cheryl A. Wall (1999), Edward Whitley (2001), Hillary Holladay (2002), Margaret Rose Rathbun (2016).

Bettina Judd's essay "Glossolalia: Lucille Clifton's Creative Technologies of Becoming" (2019) is the only source so far that views Clifton's creative life writing for her technological mediation or "embodied technology" in the posthumanist terms. Judd views Clifton's connectivity of self (mind, body and spirit) as the transhuman and "glossolaliac self" (spiritual) that she achieves through an "embodied technology" in her writing. Judd relates Clifton's technical proficiency and economy of language in her use of "the ones" as the "unknown others" to demonstrate Clifton's transhumanist (spiritual) self-knowledge and self-making. Following Sylvia Wynter (1984), Judd views Clifton's "embodied technology" in her writing as the Black women's politics to reconceptualize the established meaning of human bodies based on biological racism, "These practices involved a recovery of the Black body and thus the foundation of what it means to be human. Automatic writing is a technology that produces effects that re-embody and inspirit, whereas humanism's technologies may otherwise enflesh" (138).

For posthumanist material technoscience studies with emphasis on embodied subjectivity, black body, technology and anti-racism in the African American literary and cultural

studies see Gregory Jerome Hampton's *Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture: Reinventing Yesterday's Slave with Tomorrow's Robot* (2015), Louis Chude-Sokei in *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (2016), Melvin G Hill's *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture* (2019). Kristen Lillvis in "Posthuman Multiple Consciousness in Octavia E. Butler's Science Fiction" (2017) concludes that "'the future is a much better guide to the present than the past' then perhaps the alien is a much better guide to the human than we are ourselves" (97).

2. From Lucille Clifton. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. pp-77-78.
3. See Lillian Serece Williams' *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: Creation of an African American Community in Buffalo, New York, 1900-1940* (2000). Also, James R. Grossman (1989), Joe W. Trotter (1985).
4. In *New Materialism*, Stacy Alaimo (2018) describes that "human" in the feminist technoscience studies is posthumanist because it is not "founded on detachment, dualism, hierarchies and exceptionalism" with background nature and technology rather "human" is being re-imagined as a subject who is "generated through and entangled" with biological, technological, and sociopolitical aspects (436). Similarly, Karen Barad (2007) remarks that the human ethics in technology is not about the "right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part" (159). According to Nina Lykke (2010) the feminist objectivity originates its critique in the bodiless and faceless researcher/writer/subject in the classical technoscience studies to enhance the "responsible and entangled" relation of subject with objects of study for ethical and political purpose. Cecilia Asberg and Nina Lykke (2010)

describe the significance of feminist technoscience studies to re-conceptualize female materialist subjectivity that is not stuck in the sociocultural inscription of biological determinism with the binaries of self/other, male/female, masculinity/femininity, culture/nature and technical/organic based on the phallogocentrism.

CHAPTER 4

Assemblage in Mothers' Gardens

Alice Walker: *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983)

The study of Walker's collection of autobiographical essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* explores her garden writing, material and discursive, as an "assemblage" based on nature and culture relationships in historical, onto-epistemological, and political contexts to counter the modern Western discourse of cultivation /domination. According to Stéphane P. R Robolin, the traces of connection between cultivation and "racial statecraft" can be found in the European colonial histories of America, where the schemes to "cultivate or design" were accompanied by the desire to dominate nature and people materially, psychologically, culturally and ecologically.¹ Walker in *Mothers' Gardens* does not "rest and respite" by "the convenient walls" rather she articulates her life writing that contains, in Joy James' words , "distinct political intent to revolutionize rather than reform existing power structures, hoping to go to the root, to nurture and grow structural change that alleviates and diminishes oppressive conditions" for the African American identity, feminist subjectivity, and nature (6).

There is a significant scholarship in anthropological, African American, and feminist studies that disarticulates human identity and nature from the discursive formations of race and anthropocentrism in modern agriculture and its discourse of cultivation.² Kay Anderson's critical posthumanist study in *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (2007) is a significant source to illustrate that race is not an innate feature. Instead, it is a discursive construct. According to Anderson, the discursive alignment of humans (indigenous, others) with nature or "closer to nature" in the settler

colonies of North America led to the construction of race in the European imperial interests of oppression and dispossession (14). The discourse of human subject as supreme, sovereign and separate from nature was developed in specific Western farming practices and plantations that replicated classical humanism and was intensified in European Enlightenment and technologies of modernity (9).

The current study describes that Walker's coalition between humans and plants/flowers inspired by the history and culture in rural Georgia can be interpreted as an "assemblage" to liberate human ontology, African American feminist subjectivity and nature from biological determinism and essentialist identity politics. Jane Bennett in "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout" defines "assemblage" as a collectivity of many types of actants in nature, culture and technology including humans, nonhumans, animals, vegetables, and minerals. Following Gilles Deleuze, Bennett explains that an assemblage is "not governed by a central power: no one member has sufficient competence to fully determine the consequences of the activities of the assemblage" (445). Louis Van den Hengel interprets the art of autobiography as an "assemblage" with a generative force of material and discursive connections between humans and non-humans to counter the individualist and sovereign humanist subject in Western modernity. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze, Hengel explains that an "assemblage" is "about finding 'the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation' in which human and nonhuman enter into a mutual process of becoming-other" (9). Hengel cites Rosi Braidotti to demonstrate the resignification of human identity from the perspective of "assemblage", "It marks the point of evanescence of the self and its replacement by a living nexus of multiple interconnections that empower not the self, but the collective, not identity, but affirmative subjectivity, not consciousness, but affirmative interconnections" (14). Similarly, Gillian Whitlock expands Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's

"interface" in women's life writings to the concept of "assemblage" in which writer's collaboration with the "vibrant materialities" of nature and culture moves "beyond the figure of human organism, beyond the linear time of the biography and beyond the boundaries of individual personhood" (viii). *In search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is an "assembled" autobiography in its form also with the collection of different essays written between 1966-1982 in which Walker collaborated with diverse others in nature and culture to resignify human identity, African American feminist subjectivity, and plants. Cheryl A. Wall approached the various complexity of history, different literary authors, and multiple personal experiences in Walker's collective autobiography as not about something "deployed as proofs or as undisputed authority presented to confirm a single thesis but are assembled as conflicting cases and contradictory evidence" (80). Walker develops the diversity of being and thought through her design of assemblage in her mother(s)' gardens.

Walker's articulation of the African American onto-epistemology and ethical activism in her life writing can be grasped by understanding the history of racial and economic exploitation of the African American labor and nature in the rural South in which she grew up. Walker was born in 1944 in a sharecroppers' family in Wards Chapel near Eatonton, Putnam County, Georgia. According to Deborah G. Plant's epistemological and philosophical biography of Walker in *Alice Walker: A Woman for Our Times*, Walker often called herself the daughter of the rural peasantry in the South. Walker's early life and her parents' significant part of the life was spent under the dispossession and exploitation marked by the Jim Crow South, Great Depressions, and the sharecropping system in the early twentieth century. Farmers and peasants were the "mere labor unit" in the sharecropping system that "not only exploited the labor of the African Americans but also routinely resulted in their being indebted to white farmers, promising a future of perpetual servitude" (6). According to Plant, African American farmers and peasants in the South were

officially "environmental others" both in the social environment of segregation, and in the natural landscape of dispossession and dismemberment. Plant explains the natural and human exploitation in the sharecropping system in the South: "As landowners exhausted the land by planting the same cash crops year after year, the sharecropping and tenant farming system exhausted those who toiled in the fields. Their labor and need discounted, no amount of tilling the land could raise them above subsistence level. The work was relentless, dispiriting, and unrewarded" (8). The sharecropping system in the South replicated the modern Western tradition of cultivation based on the separation between human and nature, and the domination of others (sharecroppers, peasants) based on their being "closer to nature".

Walker radically introduces her subjectivity as a Black writer in *Mothers' Gardens* based on her ecological belonging as the "creature of the earth" to counter the ideologies of human identity. In her essay on "The Black Writer and the Southern Experience", Walker describes the significance of ecological ontological belonging in the historical context as the primary inspiration for a Black writer's politics of writing:

They (Northern brothers) have never experienced the magnificent quiet of a summer day when the heat is intense and one is so very thirsty, as one moves across the dusty cotton fields, that one learns forever that water is the essence of all life. In the cities it cannot be so clear to one that he is a creature of the earth, feeling the soil between the toes, smelling the dust thrown up by the rain, loving the earth so much that one longs to taste it and sometimes does. (21)

The unique ecological belonging and environmental perspective is comprised of "great deal of positive material" for Walker to draw from her "'unprivileged' background" as "an antidote against bitterness" (20). Kimberley N. Ruffin in *Black on Earth: African American Ecocritical Traditions* emphasizes that Black ecocritical traditions are marked by the "ecological paradox of burden and beauty" in which African American artists and writers forged the ways for environmental agency, ecological belonging and perspective under the historical "burden" of dispossession and otherness.

Similarly, Plant's biographical study of Walker indicates that Walker's "ecological agency" negotiates "both the human and nonhuman social systems that determine survival" extracted from the experiences of her own life in the sharecropping family (11).

Epistemologically, Walker's life writing is inspired by her mother, Minnie Walker, basically due to her gardening aesthetics and spirit in 1930s-1940s as a resistant vision to the economically, politically, and environmentally exploited sharecropping system. Due to the ecological belonging, Walker recognizes that her mother's story is not about "pitiful example of Southern womanhood" but about herself (17). Walker writes that "my mother is the walking history of our community" who gave Walker the clarity of vision to refuse to diminish her identity to racism (19). Walker is proud to have "the advantageous heritage" of "a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice" as a black writer (21). Walker is cautious of cultural essentialism, but she recognizes the worth of her ways of knowing driven from the cultural politics of ecological belonging. Following Camus, she writes that Black writer and artist are placed "halfway between misery and the sun", and "though all is not well under the sun, history is not everything" (21).

Walker develops her unique subjectivity of "assemblage" in her life writing by collaborating between humans and non-humans based on the art of her mother's garden and gardening. Walker describes such unique collaborations in art and life in her essay "Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" that "Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world" (5).

For Walker, personal is the collective agency that expands from her mother's garden, to community, and the whole earth. Walker's ecological belonging based on the cultural politics of gardens' cultural politics as the resistant practice of farming in the South reminds us of what bell hooks considers the "humanizing restorative of living" on the earth for collective justice. In "Earthbound: On Solid Grounds" in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (1990) explains the foundation and scope of ecological belonging in the African American writing and activism against racism and anthropocentrism:

More than ever before in our nation's history, black folks must collectively renew our relationship to the earth, to our agrarian roots. For when we are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the black earth, we collude with the domination of the earth's dark people, both here and globally. Reclaiming our history, our relationship to nature, to farming in America, and proclaiming the humanizing restorative of living in harmony with nature so that the earth can be our witness is a meaningful resistance. (70)

Walker approaches the material art of gardens and the spirit of gardening, inspired by her mother, both as a means for self-expression beyond the racialized discourse, and as a generative force for the earth. Walker's coalition of humans and non-humans in rural Georgia functions against the humanist agrarian system in the South. It becomes a posthumanist force for Walker to imagine justice beyond racism, anthropocentrism, and regionalism by viewing the "varied world" with the "common thread".

Aesthetics and spirituality associated with nature in African American gardening formulate the liberative basis for Walker's onto-epistemology against racism and anthropocentrism in her socioeconomic system. She traces the origins of black women's art of gardening in the African civilization. She cites from "New Anthropological Finds: The Swords Started Out as Ploughshares" in *Ms. Gazette* (1979) that "*first implements were not designed by men to hunt animals, as has long been assumed but by women to gather plants*" for their needs (334). Walker acknowledges the art of her mother's gardening, "whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned

into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art" (241). According to Richard Westmacott's study in "Pattern and Practice in Traditional African American Gardens in Rural Georgia" gardening in the rural Georgia was mostly contributed by women as a vernacular art that functioned as a means of self-expression and community-building in connection with nature. He describes the aesthetics of African American gardens during the nineteenth, twentieth and the contemporary periods, "Black Southern society has 'developed its unique orientation, assimilating every appropriate spiritual and aesthetic resource in the environment'" (87). Likewise, Walker approaches her mother's garden for aesthetic value and oppositional consciousness, "Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms-sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...and on and on" (241). To Walker, Minnie Walker's "invisible" and creative unification with the plants and flowers in her garden motivates Walker's consciousness and imagination as a writer.

Walker in her account of the ecological belonging and consciousness in the practice of gardening based on the collaborative survival between nature and culture, articulates her agency of resistance to discursive identities based on racism in the historical context. Stacy Alaimo's notion of "transcorporeality" in New Materialism is about radical rethinking of ontologies and epistemologies based on the master subject of Western humanist individualism to develop political interconnection between humans and non-humans (437). Unlike the classical humanist subject of cultivation, human in the transversal relationship is not a desiring and controlling subject; rather

she emerges with her fragility and historical contingency connected with nature. The posthumanist solidarity opens up multiple possibilities for human identity and thought. Walker writes about her mother in her garden, “Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She handed down respect for possibilities—and the will to grasp them” (242). In her garden, Minnie Walker cultivates a substantial fearlessness of artistic possibilities of human identity and thought to imagine beyond the discursive limits.

The aesthetic garden as a vibrant source functions not only for Walker’s empowered onto-epistemology in her literary imagination but also for the cultural resistance against the socioeconomic exploitations in the sharecropping system. According to Mellisa Walker and James C. Cobb, sharecropping produced one of the most exploitative antebellum plantation systems. In their words,

In the best situation, the family labored without close supervision from the landowner, but in the worst, the landlord or his hired foreman interfered in every aspect of the sharecropping family’s work and lives, even prohibiting them from growing a garden or keeping a livestock—both activities that would provide a landless family with some independence from landlord control. (15)

Walker’s portrayal of the aesthetic gardens with creative self-expression, independence, and transcorporeal relationship with nature demonstrates her critical response to the repressive structures.

Walker’s onto-epistemology based on gardener and gardening leads her to conceptualize the subjectivities of Black women writers and artists radically trespassing the domination of Western modernity. In her essay “In search of our Mothers’ Gardens,” Walker describes the difference of the political subjectivity between Black women writers/artists and the dominant women writers/artists in terms of gardeners and wanderers. She contends that “our mothers and

grandmothers, ourselves-have not perished in the wilderness” (235). Walker attributes black women artists and writers as gardeners whose “tenacity of the artistic spirit” with the “evidence of ‘contrary instinct’ emerges like “whirlwinds from the hard clay” against domination and dispossession (316). The aestheticism in Black women writers and artists is inseparable from their radical critique of historical domination and dispossession. The conversational engagement with art and ideology in Black women writers and artists indicate their historical contingency and collectivity in their generative entanglement with the sociopolitical contexts. Walker’s essay on Philip Wheatley, Black woman poet, is an example that reiterates the onto-epistemological difference between a gardener’s contingent relationship with nature and a wanderer’s unspecific connection with the wilderness. According to Walker, Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” based on gender politics is not sufficient for Wheatley who “owned not even herself” in modern Western representations and social relations based on racism (235). According to Walker, mothers’ gardens as excluded in Western modernity are the material and cultural sources for Black feminist subjectivity, “the truest answer to a question that really matters” (238). Walker articulates Black women’s literary agency inspired by mothers’ ecological belonging, “ so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (240). In this context, Walker’s mother appears both as a gardener and a story-teller, “through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories--like her life---must be recorded” (240). Walker’s anecdotal writing style and ecological belonging reverberate her onto-epistemology based on her mother’s garden as

a critical alternative to modern Western domination in knowledge practices and socio-economic relations.

In *Mothers' Gardens*, plants and flowers are active, living, and expressive agents to demonstrate Walker's critique of modern dichotomies between human/non-human, nature/culture and material/discursive. Besides the cultural affiliation with gardens, Walker relates her ecological perspective with the Native American Indigenous spirituality supported by the scientific plant studies. In "From an Interview" in her collected essays, Walker describes:

If there is one thing African Americans and Native American have retained of their African and Ancient American heritage, it is probably the belief that everything is inhabited by spirit. This belief encourages knowledge perceived intuitively. It does not surprise me, personally, that scientists now are discovering that trees, plants, flowers, have feelings... emotions, that they shrink when yelled at; that they faint when an evil person is about who might hurt them. (252)

Walker's notion of human and nonhuman relationships complicates the capitalist domination that destroyed nonhuman and human life equally. In her essay "Everything is a human being," Walker articulates the posthumanist thought: "We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here: trees, people, snakes, alike" (667). Jennifer Wren Atkinson in "Just Gardens: Uprooting and Recovery in the Postcolonial Garden" highlights that Walker's feminist and ecocritical lens in her account of gardens recognizes plants' agency and disrupts the totality of classical humanist subject. According to Atkinson, "Humans may be important agents in a given garden, but they are hardly the source of the life principle underlying it" (198). Human identity in Walker's figurative gardens is neither a superior manager nor a passive presence. Instead, she is a member of that community of plants with the recognition of her own dependency.

Walker recognizes plants' alterity in her search for and affinity with African American women writers and artists beyond racism and anthropocentrism. In her tribute to the "unsung"

African American women artists and writers, she approaches the figuration of “motherroot” that resignifies both plants and the collective agency of the women. She quotes Marilou Awiakta’s poem “Motherroot” to reflect her affinity with Black women writers and artists. Like Walker, Awiakta, the poet and cultural essayist, gets inspiration from nature to traverse her voice through contemporary social, environmental, and feminist issues in the capitalist system. The poem reads, “Creation often/needs two hearts/one to root/and one to flower/One to sustain/in time of drouth/and hold fast/against winds of pain/the fragile bloom/that in the glory/of its hour/affirms a heart/unsung, unseen” (230). In contemporary critical plant studies based on posthumanism and scientific studies, plants’ material alterity is being recognized for ecological and environmental consciousness beyond the anthropocentric gaze. Monika Bakke describes that contemporary science studies about the “root brain” in plants with a decentralized and rhizomatic communication network introduced the concept of being and thought in its opposition from the sovereignty of a modern individualist in the humanist discourse.

Walker develops plant-thinking that recognizes the agency of material ontology both in the African American feminist identity and the plants beyond the discursive constraints. She resignifies herself in terms of a plant who stands with the glory of “unsung, unseen” black women writers and artists as the “motherroot” to counter the modern epistemology. In her essay “The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or The Black Writer who Simply Works and Writes” based on her experiences at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, Walker critiques the “blind spots” in the dominant modern canon to African American identity, culture and history. According to Walker, this epistemological flaw “contributed to a blind spot in my education that needed desperately to be cleared if I expected to be a whole woman, a full human being, a black woman full of self-awareness and pride” (131). Walker explains her identity in terms

of her creativity and critique as a black poet, writer, and teacher, “I have not labeled myself yet. I would like to call myself revolutionary, for I am always changing, and growing” (133). Her plant-thinking with revolutionary possibilities does not confine in the identity politics based on gender and race. In one of her interviews, she describes, “I don’t consider myself a Southern writer. I think I am dealing with regions inside people.”³ Walker’s revolutionary, growing and changing ontology can also be traced in the cultural traditions of a gardener in the rural South who embraced diversity and community for the adaptation and improvisation of her plants.⁴ Just like the unrecognized materiality of “motherroot” in plants, Walker’s articulation of “unsung and unseen” collective labor of African American women draws attention to the absence of their recognition in Western modernity. She makes a blatant statement, “*The real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff*” (135). Like the gardeners in the sharecropping South, Black literary artists developed their subjectivity in affinity with ordinary objects, nonhumans, common people, and daily experiences.

Walker re-interprets the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s with her revolutionary attention to aestheticism, nature, and ordinary people in the African American culture. “Civil rights” is an unsatisfactory and incomplete concept for Walker when it speaks only about the “physical possibilities” of the American Law and ignores the spirit of Black culture based on “whimsicality, playfulness and cosmic” ideals (336). To Walker, sociopolitical and economic changes are not possible without the epistemological change. In her essay on “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good was It?”, she explains her point, “Man only truly lives by knowing; otherwise he simply performs, copying the daily habits of others, but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man, and accepting someone else’s superiority and his own misery” (122). Like Awiakta’s “motherroot”, Walker’s believes that resignification of the African American

identity “needs two hearts”, one in flower and the other in root. The “glory” of the changing and growing flower is inseparable from the “unsung, unseen” roots especially in “time of drouth” and “against winds of pain” (230).

In her plant-thinking, Walker’s onto-epistemological association with “motherroot” instead of “mother earth” demonstrates her posthumanist feminist critique of the classical humanist subject based on sexism and racism. Ellain P. Miller in her critical study of *The Gardens of Adonis* pinpoints the gendered and racialized binaries in the modern plant studies in which “superficial, light-weight plants” were associated with woman and the East while the “serious, solemn, rooted” plants were associated with man and the West (186). Walker’s figurative choice of “motherroot” to reconceptualize African American women artists and writers recognizes the alterity of plants and deconstructs the modern human identity based on sexism and racism. Walker in her assemblage of writers, artists, and politicians restricts the dualist binaries. Her critical appraisal and appreciation of Flannery O’Connor (White, Southern, Female), Buchi Emecheta (Nigerian, English, Female), Jean Toomer and Richard Wright (Black and Male) in *Mothers’ Gardens* demonstrate her decentralized and de-hierarchized subjectivity based on the vegetative feminist figuration. Stephane Robolin in “Cultivating Correspondences; or, Other Gestures of Belonging” describes that Walker’s garden writing was an example of alternative cultural politics by Black women writers for the development of “sub-national” or “extra-national” thought based on “affective communities” in the era of 1970-1980 that was marked by the nationalist racism of cold war and the oppositional Black nationalism (136).

Walker acknowledges Zora Neale Hurston, a gardener, and a literary goddess as “a genius of the south” because of her emphasis on aesthetic and culturally creative possibilities beyond the conservatism of biological determinism and cultural essentialism. Walker discovers that Hurston

as “one of the most significant unread authors in America” was laid in an unmarked grave in the deserted graveyard, Garden of the Heavenly Rest, in St. Lucie County, Florida. She acclaims Hurston as her literary maternal aunt. She discovers her material and literary garden as the foundation for her intellectual agency. For Walker, Hurston “was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself” (89). In her literary labor, Hurston developed Black racial health to disrupt the modern subject in the elite circles of anthropology and Harlem renaissance. Walker’s acknowledgment of Hurston’s agency aligns with her posthumanist critique of the fixed identity in modernity, “this was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora’s work: racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (85). Mia Manzulli approaches Walker’s recognition of African American female literary artists in her garden writing as the feminist alternative to the blind spots in the “father’s library” to the agency of women writers. It was Walker’s collaborative communion with nature and earth that took her to the literary garden outside the “father’s library” marked with exclusions.

In her search of an account of Hurston’s last days, Walker reaches her residence at 1734 School Court Street in Florida, where Hurston lived before, she was taken to the county welfare home. Walker writes how eagerly she wanted to know from one of the resident neighbors if Hurston was a gardener, “there is only one thing I want to know: ‘tell me something,’ I begin, looking down at Zora’s house, ‘Did Zora like flowers?’. He looks at me queerly, ‘As a matter of fact,’ he says, looking regretfully at the bare, rough yard that surrounds her former house, ‘she was crazy about them. And she was a great gardener’” (114). Like a gardener, Hurston was inclined to explore creative links in nature to counter modern Western subjectification. As Walker quotes Hurston from her essay, “How it Feels to be Colored Me” (1928), “I do not belong to the sobbing

school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it...No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (115). Walker’s acknowledgment and remembrance of Hurston as the gardener in her assemblage of *Mothers’ Gardens* can be interpreted in terms of the African American culture of gardening in rural Georgia, where each plant was “treated individually” and affiliated with a particular person. According to Westmacott’s study of gardening in rural Georgia, “many gardeners associated each plant in their yard with the person who gave it to them or remembered the circumstances in which it was acquired” (102).

Walker’s assemblage of nature and culture relationships in her garden writing connects her cultural politics against the commodified labor in the sharecropping system with the critique of the evasion of plants in modern discourse. In one of her essays in *Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker introduces the range of her poetic expressions, including culture and nature, “all of my ‘love poems’ apply to old, young, man, woman, child, and growing things...” (251). She describes her grandfather, eighty-five old, who have never been out of rural Georgia, “The pressure on his life have been unspeakable” (251). Walker compares her grandfather’s historical burden, complexity, and endurance with flowers, “Yours eyes are widely open flowers. /Only their centers are darkly clenched/ To conceal Mysteries/ That lure me to a keener blooming/ Than I know. / And promise a secret/ I must have” (251). Walker persistently re-interprets the African American labor identity in rural Georgia regarding the historical burden and aesthetic beauty of spirit. Walker’s assemblage of nature and culture in the historical resonates with “wisdom of plant” or “becoming- plant”. Hannah Stark in “Deleuze and Critical Plant Studies” in *Deleuze and the Non/Human* explains that “becoming-plant” in the “Rhizome thinking” is not about the imitation of plants. Instead, such thought develops an assemblage of the new and diverse significance of human identity, nature,

ideas, and events based on the “alliance” than “filiation” between humans and non-humans in the critique of anthropocentrism in Western modernity (186,188). Similarly, Walker develops the transversal relationship of mutual transformation and resignification between African American identity and plants/flowers in the historical context of rural Georgia.

Walker describes the “blooming” agency of petunia in her poem “Revolutionary Petunias” to articulate her faith in the aesthetic possibilities and futuristic imagination inspired by nature in her resistance to the historical burden and racism. She explains:

Another reason I named the poem “Revolutionary Petunias” is that I like petunias and like to raise them because you just put them in any kind of soil, and they bloom their heads off—exactly, it seemed to me, like black people tend to do (Look at the blues and Jazz musicians, the blind singers from places like Turnip, Mississippi, the poets and writers and all around blooming people you know, who---from all visible evidence---achieved their blooming by eating the air for bread and drinking muddy water for hope. (268)

Walker inherits the perspective of petunia’s agency from her mother’s affinity with plants in her garden. She writes, “it never wilted, just bloomed and bloomed. Every time the family moved (say twelve time) she took her petunia---and thirty-seven years later she brought me a piece of that same petunia bush. It had never died. Each winter it lay dormant and dead-looking, but each spring it came back, livelier than before” (268). Walker’s narrative of her mother’s affective relationship with petunias for self-realization and endurance against the socioeconomic and political exploitation in the sharecropping system explains her resistance to modern cultivation of domination. Walker skillfully emphasizes that the creative and liberative possibilities of ecological perspectives can be explored only by the critique of the commodified identities in the modern society, “modern petunias do not live forever. They die each winter and the next spring you have to buy new ones” (268). Walker explains the politics of her life writing, “In a way, the whole book is a celebration of people who will not cram themselves into any ideological or racial mold. They are all shouting Stop! I want to go get that petunia!” (268).

Walker's African American onto-epistemology based on plant-thinking aligns with the contemporary plants' narratives in critical plant studies. Michael Marder in *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) highlights that plants are the outsiders and marginalized in the modern epistemology. Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari observe that, "Marder's willingness to cultivate our sympathy for plants, so that they seem to reflect back to us the ethical and political selves we wish to become, is an example of one tendency within plant studies to assume that plant life exist in tension with and thus might provide a resolution to the problems of modernity, since plants remain excluded from it in their guise as its victim" (14). However, Jeffery T. Nelson in *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (2016) develops a different argument from Marder and views plants as critical agents. According to Meeker and Szabari's study of Nelson, plants with their rhizomatic, "uncontrolled growth" and "dense interconnectedness" disrupt liberal humanist identity that is based on animal model of appetite, expansion, desire, domination, and consumption (15). Critical mediation of plants in art, culture and politics evokes their vital active role, as Meeker and Szabari's study highlights, "at a moment when we have lost the possibility of living in our natural environment" (12). Walker's plant wisdom in connection with culture in *Mothers' Gardens* provides an intellectual and imaginative opportunity to measure plants' critical agency for the development of environmental consciousness.

The study of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* based on critical plant studies offers critical mediation in the sharecropping system as the prototype of modern cultivation based on the dichotomy of nature/culture, and its impact on the socioeconomic life in contemporary America. Walker recognizes the historical complexity in the absence of political resistance in the new Black middle class, the "scars of greed" affecting the Southern landscape, and the discouragement of Black movements in the North (169). She approaches the contemporary dispossession and

marginalization of Black people as the replication of the Southern agricultural system that developed a separation between self/other, nature/culture, human/non-human, and White/Black. In her essay “Lulls”, Walker gives an account of the conversation with a relative on poverty, unemployment, and crimes in the Black community in the North: “‘It’s the drugs,’ says Lorene. ‘Those little nasty spaces they have to live in,’ says Thomas. ‘All those from the South,’ says Lorene, ‘probably miss their gardens.’ ‘Miss going fishing.’ ‘Miss trees.’ ‘Miss having people smile at them out of true affection.’ This is the most quaintly put reason, and perhaps it is the truest of all.” (195). Walker describes the deserted and dilapidated houses in Black community in her essays on two entirely different but connected occasions, once in the rural South abandoned by the agricultural system, and then in the North by unemployment and mortgages. She writes about the street in Dorchester, Massachusetts where her brothers once lived. The street was effected gradually by the socioeconomic system, “Driving up once familiar Blue Hill Avenue to visit them I discovered I no longer knew where I was. Whole blocks are boarded up, trash clots the street corners, once-lovely homes have the look of having been assaulted: paints peels, doors fall off hinges, windows are stuffed with rags. The people on the street looked *conquered*” (197). Walker articulates that the socioeconomic structure in the contemporary America reproduces the sharecropping system. One strategy in the bottom-top approach is to redefine the “genre of human” by countering racism and anthropocentrism.

Walker imagines plants’ materiality and wisdom as her resistance to modern agriculture in her essay “Recording the Season” with the resignification of the African American feminist subjectivity. Walker writes about her depression developed in the final years of her stay in Mississippi in the 1970s out of her nonviolent and pacifist philosophy of art that could bring no change in the consumerist society with “violent, nonpacifist” values. However, her speculation

about her “coming of age” in Mississippi makes her realize that “it was the privilege of my life to observe and ‘save’ for the future some extraordinary lives” (227). Walker views that Black generations in the past were “revolutionary” due to their communion and interdependence with nature that can still be approached as the “strength” against racism and anthropocentrism. She embodies the African American artistic subjectivity (and herself) as a tree:

Here we have watched
A thousand seasons
Come and go.
And unmarked graves atangled
In the brush
Turn our own legs to trees
Vertical forever between earth
And sun.
Here we are not quick to disavow
The pull of field and wood
And stream;
We are not quick to turn
Upon our dreams. (223)

Walker acknowledges Black women, artists, and writers who sustained and flourished the cultural reservoirs to wage through the socioeconomic and racialized structure and developed new visions of humanity. According to the poem, the African American subject like the tree holds her position entangled in the “unmarked graves” and flourishes upright. Her figuration reminds the African American aesthetic resilience and renovation of a gardener in the rural South. It also reminds us

Walker's search for the artistic subjectivity that leads her to Hurston's grave and when she finds her feet entangled in the grave under a tree surrounded by weeds in a deserted graveyard. It is noticeable that Walker acknowledges the African American feminist subjectivity in the historical context in the postanthropocentric approach to vegetative life. Inspired by her mother's "invisible" and aesthetic presence in her garden, Walker can appreciate the vegetative life's agency. Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari's study is an important source to understand Walker's postanthropocentric agency in her life writing in which flora is not an "limpid object of knowledge" in the "beautiful and architectonic gardens" like the visual objects for classification and categorization. Rather, flora functions as a medium by which her subjectivity takes shape with the desire for multispecies relationships and solidarities (7).

Walker's assemblage of nature and culture is not confined to a particular geography and ideology; rather, it prevails across racial differences against modern individualist subject. According to Thadious M. Davis, Walker in her emphasis on private and daily practices of gardening, "refuses to find comfort in small victories over the containment imposed by the racial structure" (347). Walker aims to break down the dualist binaries of self and other in modern American literary canon and social system. Walker's essay on "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" is such an example in which Walker reflects on the racial and discursive dichotomy between herself and Flannery O'Connor in the context of nature/culture hierarchy in the Southern agricultural system. Walker narrates that she decided to accompany her mother to visit O'Connor's and their own abandoned house on the Eatonton-to-Milledgeville road in Georgia in 1974. Walker and O'Connor lived their lives there with huge socioeconomic differences in 1952. Walker describes that she wanted to know by this visit what could be "learned" about materialist differences behind the literary perspectives. Walker first visits her own

dilapidated house that is situated on the “Flannery’s Field” that indicates O’ Connor’s family background of ownership. Walker writes about her house “considering the sad state of the house it is amazing how beautiful its setting is. There is not another house in sight. There are hills, green pastures, a ring of bright trees, and a family of rabbits hopping out of our way” (44). Walker’s mother is surprised and delighted to see the blooms “just look at my daffodils” in the wracked house. In the contrast, O’Connor’s house along with peacocks is still well furnished and well taken care of. Walker acknowledges O’Connor’s writing for “she caused white women to look ridiculous on pedestals, and she approached her black characters—as a mature artist—with unusual humility and restraint” (59). However, Walker articulates that “peacocks” are symbols of racial hierarchy and privilege in the society and literary canon that can delimit literary imagination and politics of affinity. For Walker’s mother, peacocks are dangerous to daffodils in the garden, “they’ll eat up every bloom you have, if you don’t watch out” (59). Walker concludes, “they sure don’t stop to consider they might be standing in your way” (59). Walker is in search of an assemblage in her literary garden to know the whole truth, “I would never be satisfied with a segregated literature. I would have to read Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O’Connor, Nella Larsen and Carson McCullers, Jean Toomer and William Faulkner, before I could begin to feel *well* read at all” (43). Walker’s search for diversity than exclusions in her literary garden resonates with the material art of gardens in rural Georgia and elsewhere. According to Westmacott, gardens in the South like the region were “shaped by the oldest co-existence of western and non-western influences in the North American Continent” (87).

Walker’s subjectivity in solidarity with the earth and flora is reflected in her political activism for human rights and environmental justice. She describes her activism in her essay “Only Justice can stop a curse”:

Earth is my home—though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe. So, let me tell you: I intend to protect my home. Praying—not a curse—only the hope that my courage will not fail my love. But if by some miracle, and all our struggle, the Earth is spared, only justice to every living thing (and everything is alive) will save humankind. (342)

Walker candidly describes that environmental justice is impossible without a critical posthumanist approach to counter the ideologies of racial totality and human sovereignty. She offers one of the radical feminist voices to criticize Israel government's dehumanization and dispossession of the Palestinian Muslims in her life writing. She equates Israel's "ultra-nationalism" with imperialism. According to Walker, "Israel must exist –because Jews, after heinous world maltreatment deserve affirmative action, but when it moves into other people's lands, when it establishes colonies in other people's territories, when it forces folk out of their kitchens, vineyards and beds, then it must be opposed" (350). She gives an account of her conversation with a Jewish friend on the issue, "'But doesn't that land belong to people?' I asked. 'They're not doing anything with it,' he replied. I thought I have a backyard I'm not 'doing anything with.' Does that give you the right to take it?" (349). Walker does not perceive Palestine/Israel conflict with the traditional lens of divisions between Arabs/Jews based on the religious conflicts in the dominant discourse. She describes that "Every affront to human dignity necessarily affects me as a human being on the planet, because I know every single thing on earth is connected" (353). Walker approaches the issue in the posthumanist spirit. She draws support from the unacknowledged objects and common experiences in daily life, and from the intersectionality of social justice and environmentalism.

Walker interweaves the African American aesthetics of gardening in the South with her activism for environmental justice beyond the racial and geographic differences. According to Deborah G. Plant, Walker joined forces with CODEPINK in Palestine/Israel in response to the

2008-2009 bombing on Palestinian homes in Gaza, where she met with families and listened to their stories for solidarity. Plant notes:

As in Rwanda and the Congo, Walker listened to women narrate the details of the ruthless and deliberate destruction of Palestinian homes and surrounding gardens and orchards. “An old, old man, leaning on a stick,” spoke to her in English. “Come look at my house!--They broke my house, he said, by bombing it, and then they came with bulldozers and they broke my lemon and olive trees.”-- “The Israeli military has destroyed over two and a half million olive and fruit trees alone since 1948,” Walker observes. “Having planted many trees myself, I shared his sorrow about the fate of these trees.” (174)

Walker questions, “how doofus humans are going to look, still firing rockets into apartment buildings full of families, and dropping bombs on school children and their pets, when the ice melts completely in the arctic and puts an end to our regressive, greed-sourced rage forever?” (174). Plant-thinking helps to understand Walker’s critique of the war and the environmental crisis centered on her posthumanist, collective and innovative belonging with the earth. Modern concept of cultivation as production and domination has pushed the world to a dead end.

Her last essay “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” in *Our Mothers’ Gardens* concludes Walker’s critical conversation on human and nature interdependence by connecting the earth to her personal experience as a writer. After several years of self-torture and unrest at her scarred eye, Walker realizes that the scarred eye has been an irresistible source of “sight” if not “beauty” for her. This recognition occurs at the moment when her three-year-old daughter Rebecca looks into her eyes intently and exclaims: “Mommy, there’s a world in your eye... Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?” (393). Walker and her daughter have been viewing the visual images of the earth on television program called “Big Blue Marble” that reminds Walker of “a picture of grandma’s house” (392). For Walker, the earth is an intimate place, a home. Her relationship with the earth is based on the recognition of human responsibility and collectivity. For the human eye, it is a matter of “sight” than beauty to see the earth. Ruth Beilin in “Cultivating the

Global Garden” describes that in modern capitalist advancement in technology in the late twentieth century, mechanical camera from the Apollo mission visualized and “captured” the earth as a contained and controlled “productive” entity or a “garden” in terms of its difference from the unknown and unmanageable wilderness, the outer space, and the other. Beilin describes that these images represented earth as a garden, “outer space seems nebulous, whereas Earth appears more tangible, more easily interpreted, captured in the ‘objective’ eye of the mechanical camera. Earth is presented in its productive colors—blue for water, green for cultivation—the colors of its garden resources” (764). This view of the “global garden” from the satellite images replicates modern Western view of agriculture for production and domination based on the demarcation of self/other, culture/nature, human/non-human, and production/preservation. Beilin’s study concludes that we need to create new images or “mosaic of integrated and interconnected patches” based on culture and nature relationship without traditional dichotomies to imagine a different future on this earth.

Walker’s life writing in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* is her posthumanist search for the new designs of gardens, material and discursive, where human ontology, epistemology and political activism is based on the assemblage of nature and culture relationships. Unlike the neoliberal human subject based on Southern agriculture, Walker inspires African American feminist and ecological concept of human identity, collectivity, and responsibility. Motivated by her mother’s gardening in rural Georgia, Walker searches for the “people of earth” to complicate and counter the modern “genre of human” based on the hierarchy of race and anthropocentrism. Evidently, Walker creates an alternative image and design of the garden in which the assemblage of self and other, human, and non-human, culture and nature, and material and discursive complicates the modern thought of cultivation, sovereignty, and totality. By writing *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Walker honors those who are “closer to nature”.

Notes

1. Stephane Robolin's *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-Era African American and South African Writing* (2017).

Following V.W. Mudimbe, Stephane Robolin highlights that 'the etymology of 'colonialism'--whose Latin root, *colere*, means to 'cultivate or design' —reflects, beyond land expropriation proper, a western will 'to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs'". According to Robolin, in the south Africa and Americas, the European's "initial agricultural exploits (gardens) grew into imposing colonial formations claiming sovereignty over enormous territory and its inhabitants and subsequently developed into powerful modern countries underscores the connections between gardening and racial statecraft" (133).

See also, Thadious M. Davis' *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (2011),

2. See Leo Marx (1964), William M. Denevan (2001), Whitmore and Turner (2001), Anand Pandian, Jake Kosek, Donald S. Moore (2003), Bonnie Lynn-Sherow (2004), Kimberly K. Smith (2007), Simon Glendinning (2010), Sonya Pomentier (2017). Feminist study is also important to know the ideological formations of nature and culture from the perspective of gender, for instance, Sherry B. Ortner (1974), Carol MacCormack, Marilyn Strathern (1980), and Teresa de Lauretis (1987).
3. Cited from Thadious M. Davis' "Alice Walker Matters: The Fruits of Gendered Space" (p.346) in *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature*.

4. See Dianne D. Glave's "A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its Design': Rural African American Women, Gardening, Progressive Reform, and the Foundation of an African American Environmental Perspective." (2003)

See also Ben A. Davis (1971), William Lanier Hunt (1982), Felder Rushing (1987), and Richard Westmacott (1992), Melissa Walker, James C. Cobb and Charles Reagan Wilson (2014) for African American gardening in the South.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This research project focused on African American Feminist analytic of intersectionality in environmental humanities. Contemporary feminist theories in New Materialism with emphasis on conceptual intersectionality were integrated into African American feminist historical study of race and nature to articulate their contemporary relevance and critical engagement with environmental humanities. Each chapter led critical study of Eurocentric modern epistemology in the analysis of different genre in African American women's life writings to articulate their impact on and relationship to scholarship on alternative knowledge practices based on ecological consciousness and environmental justice. Beyond theories, the research enriched its scope with the support of African American environmental history, culture, and ecoliterary traditions.

The study focused on Zora Neale Hurston, Lucille Clifton, and Alice Walker as critical knowledge producers whose life writings not only deconstruct racism and anthropocentrism in the Eurocentric modernity but also move beyond the dominant discourses to articulate their ecological onto-epistemologies and activism against environmental racism. This research contributes to the development of African American feminist praxis in environmental humanities in which methodology, onto-epistemology, and ethical activism are tightly interwoven. The integration between African American feminism and New Materialism based on intersectionality articulated African American women writers' vital intellectual contribution to the politics of coalition against the "interlocking structure of power" in the normatives of race and nature. The study projected that African American women life writers' intersectionality, as opposed to parallelism, contributes to

the contemporary feminist transcorporeal coalition between human actors and nature in their historical contexts. Their knowledge practices based on critical plant wisdom moves beyond the dualist and hierarchical dichotomies of self vs. other, human vs. nonhuman, culture vs. nature, material vs. discursive, and intellectualism vs. activism. The study demonstrated that African American women writers develop posthuman onto-epistemology based on “living with and through” flora in their critical conversation with the modern epistemologies of anthropology, visual technology, and agriculture in their situated contexts. Similarly, the study highlighted that African American women life writers motivated by the intersectionality of nature and culture develop the ethics of environmental justice against racialized labor in different geographical, sociocultural, and historical contexts.

The chapter on Zora Neale Hurston’s autoethnography, *The Dust Tracks on a Road* elaborated how Hurston complicates and counters the modern anthropological construction of the African American indigenous lumber identity and forests as “tabula rasa” and “terra nullius”. Hurston deconstructs both racialized labor and anthropocentrism in her inquiry about the Black indigenous lumbers culture in the forests owned by industries in Polk County, Florida. The study demonstrated that Hurston, based on her indigenous feminist subjectivity, resignifies Black lumbers, culture, and forests to develop critical environmental sustainability. The study highlighted that Hurston’s autoethnography explicates her indigenous feminist subjectivity motivated by her folk cultural relationship with nature in Eatonville, Florida. Her autoethnographic writing reflects that she maneuvered her indigenous subjectivity to critique modern anthropology and anthropocentrism by focusing on Black lumbers and their indigenous culture in the industrialized forests. In the intersectional study of racism and anthropocentrism in *The Dust Tracks on a Road*, the research explained that Hurston’s liminal perspective of indigenous

feminism based on nature and culture relationship can revitalize the discourse of environmental sustainability.

The chapter on Lucille Clifton's *Generations: A Memoir* demonstrated that her heteroglossic life writing interweaves her family oral narratives with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* as the intellectual coalition against racism and anthropocentrism in modern visual representations. The study explained that Clifton in her account of her migrated family life in the industrialist North America articulates her African American feminist politics of conceptual photography against the racialized representations of the African American migrants. She counters dispassionate, transcendentalist, and dualist representations of culture and nature in modern visual technologies. The chapter relied on African American feminism and New Materialism in this study to demonstrate Clifton's feminist subjectivity to "see" human beings and nature as meaning-generating agents connected with multiple others in the historical contexts. Clifton successfully transforms objectivity in modern visual technology as the method of domination and control with her heteroglossic life writing based on the African American feminist conceptual photography and ecofeminism. The study demonstrated that Clifton's heteroglossic writing marked with embodied technology develops posthuman feminist rationality that is achieved by responsible attention to the difference and intersectionality of culture, nature, and technology in knowledge practices.

The chapter on Walker's autobiographical essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, explained her material and discursive gardens as an "assemblage" based on nature and culture relationship in onto-epistemological and ethical frames to complicate the humanist subject of cultivation/domination in the Eurocentric modernity. The study revealed that the connection between cultivation and racism can be found in America's European colonial

histories, where the designs of cultivation not only damaged natural environment but also subdued those who were “closer to nature” psychologically, culturally, and historically. Following African American feminism and New Materialism, this chapter highlighted how Walker reinvents human identity in association with plants and flowers in rural Georgia's situated context of sharecropping with her critique of the modern Western “genre of human” based on racism and anthropocentrism. Walker’s account of material and discursive gardens in her life writing unearths African American feminist labor in cultural, intellectual, and political lives to grow revolutionary change against racism and anthropocentrism originated in the sharecropping system of cultivation.

Focus on African American women life writers as critical knowledge producers offers an intellectual opportunity to explore and articulate women’s subjectivities beyond the conservatism of biological determinism and cultural essentialism. Moreover, demonstrating African American posthumanist and ecological consciousness in intersectional coalitions with culture, nature, and technology dissociates the human identity from the extreme categorizations of nationalism and ethnic identitarianism. The study re-orientes the human condition in its wholeness in relationship with the planet in critical knowledge practices. A theoretical coalition between African American feminism and contemporary theories in environmental humanities in the study of women’s life writing elaborated that African American feminist critique of modern Western epistemologies is the human issue that should not be confined to the demarcations based on gendered and racialized discourses. Recognition of different genres of assemblage, autoethnography, and heteroglossia in African American women’s life writings unfolds their textually inherent qualities of critical conversation and coalition in the re-writing of knowledge practices on nature and culture relationships. The research on ecological belonging, critical knowledge practices, and activism against environmental racism based on the feminist analytic method of intersectionality articulated

African American feminist praxis in the environmental humanities that can be further explored in relevant directions.

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