Since the 1970s, the personal voice has been brought to bear more and more often on literary criticism, leading Nancy Miller to describe the 1990s as a time of “confessional culture” that manifested itself in academia with “personal criticism and other autobiographical acts” (But Enough xiv, 1–2). Though we have now entered a new century, the trend does not appear to be waning, yet autobiographical criticism is still often greeted with hesitation. While many scholars using personal writing in their criticism claim with Ruth Behar that such work is well-suited to addressing “serious social issues” (B2), critics point out that the personal voice does not actually effect change. Daphne Patai, for example, announces that “personal disclosures” and “self-reflexivity [do] not change reality. [Such approaches do] not redistribute income, gain political rights for the powerless, create housing for the homeless, or improve health” (A52). Despite the clear lack of direct political intervention wrought by personal criticism, however, I am not willing to dismiss it as completely irrelevant to questions of social justice. Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983) is one text that shows how self-conscious autobiography can be a useful tool to wield in a politically-motivated critical practice. Three of Walker’s essays in particular—“Beyond the Peacock,” “Looking for Zora,” and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”—demonstrate how personal criticism can use performative elements to increase its effectiveness. Walker’s particular style of performance involves the use of story narratives that emphasize the highly constructed and textually mediated qualities of her self-representation. Readers are thus encouraged to interpret Walker’s writing on multiple levels—not only as personal testimony but also as literary criticism and allegory—effectively bringing the personal voice into criticism without
falling into traps of essentialism. As it renegotiates readings of the past, then, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens demonstrates the way literary criticism can use performative autobiography to influence cultural practices and potentially change material lives.

THE DEBATE OVER PERSONAL CRITICISM

i. The pros

Although the reasons why critics choose to write autobiographically vary enormously, three factors are central to the use of personal criticism in Alice Walker and other writers who are committed to literary criticism as a vehicle for social change. First, autobiography allows scholars writing from traditionally marginalized positions to simultaneously assert the legitimacy of their viewpoints and challenge perspectives that have been presented as disinterested and universal. Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt thus claims the personal voice as a way “to assume the validity and authority of one’s voice, the significance of one’s experience, and the implicit value of one’s insight and perspective” (197). Such a gesture is political in itself on occasions when it challenges ideas about who is allowed to speak. At the same time, autobiographical criticism has the power to change dominant discourses by raising awareness of views outside of the mainstream. Many black feminist critics especially prize the disruptive power of scholarship: Barbara Smith proposes a “highly innovative” literary criticism that the black feminist critic “would think and write out of her own identity” (137), while scholars such as Deborah McDowell and Valerie Smith believe that attention to the experiences of black women may potentially radicalize discourses of race and gender. When followed to its logical outcome, the wariness of false universals and the valuing of multiple viewpoints lead to a vision of literary criticism that perpetually attends to issues of difference. Mae Henderson thus calls for “a multiplicity of ‘interested readings’ which resists the totalizing character of much theory and criticism” (162). Such a vision may be at least partially realized through autobiographical criticism as it focuses on the local and the particular.

Autobiographical criticism may do political work not only by acting as an antidote to universalizing tendencies but also by affirming the value of personal writing, a genre long devalued in its associations with both women and African Americans. The slogan connecting the personal and the political in the Women’s Liberation Movement implicitly points to a long tradition of women’s writing that includes diaries, memoirs, and letters. Autobiography has also figured strongly in African American traditions, often in variations of the slave narrative. However, such personal writing has begun to receive widespread critical attention only in the last twenty-five years, and it still is often read as a sign of the times instead of being considered on the basis of its
own literary merit. Embracing autobiography in literary criticism, then, is one way of claiming personal writing as a valuable genre. Jane Tompkins further suggests that traditional scholarly writing tends to maintain “the public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private hierarchy” that “is a founding condition of female oppression” (1104). She calls for more personal modes of writing because “to adhere to the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women’s being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge” (1105). Other scholars have similarly turned to autobiographical criticism as part of an effort to reclaim and revalue a heritage of life-writing while introducing alternative methods into a critical realm long dominated by white males.

The use of autobiography in criticism may finally be important as it inspires change not only in the academy but also outside it, as readers are drawn into a culture of activism. Personal criticism has the potential to inspire political action in its readers in two ways: through the author’s engagement in the subject matter and through connections forged between literary criticism and material conditions. Many scholars who have experimented with autobiographical criticism have brought new enthusiasm to their work, leading Marianne Torgovnick to suggest that a personal investment is important because it can infuse writing with an “eloquence” that engages both the author and the reader (qtd. in Williams 421). Frances Murphy Zauhar concurs, observing that when “the model of the detached analytical” critic has been replaced with the critic “engaged in and even transformed by [. . . ] literature” (107), the reader is more likely to become personally invested in the project as well (115). As personal criticism appeals to both the “heart and intellect,” readers are more likely to continue the political work initiated by the text (Behar B2). Furthermore, the personal voice often renders criticism more widely accessible than would traditional academic prose. As Ruth Behar argues, one of the most compelling reasons to use a personal voice is the “desire to abandon the alienating ‘metalanguage’ that closes, rather than opens, the doors of academe to all those who wish to enter” (B2). Autobiographical criticism, then, often sparks enthusiastic responses in a wide range of readers who are drawn into the text by the scholar’s visible personal investment.

Personal criticism may also move readers towards activism by bringing literary criticism out of a purely textual realm and into contact with the socio-material. Jane Tompkins thus turns to personal writing because academic language is too far “from the issues that make feminism matter. That make her matter” (1104); she hopes that using an openly subjective discourse will allow her to better connect scholarship to her lived experiences. The autobiographical anecdote (a distinct kind of personal writing) enacts a similar gesture toward material conditions. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt suggest that the anecdote acts as “an interruption that lets one sense that there is
something—the ‘real’—outside of the historical narrative” (50), while Joel Fine-
man explains that the anecdote is always literary but “is nevertheless directly
pointed towards or rooted in the real” (qtd. in Gallop 3). Of course, literary
criticism tends to be connected in many ways to the cultural milieu whether
or not it includes personal anecdotes, but autobiographical writing makes such
connections explicit. Readers are then more likely to recognize what is at stake
in the particular critical project, and they may feel compelled to join the dra-
matized struggle in which the author is engaged. Bringing autobiography to
criticism can potentially inspire social change, then, as it challenges dominant
views, values personal writing, and inspires activism through its investment in
the criticism as a response to lived conditions.

ii. The cons

While many scholars have used the personal voice to invigorate their criti-
cal work and address injustices, the reactions of other scholars have not been
wholly positive. Although some resistance to personal criticism may stem from
defensiveness or unwillingness to reconsider received paradigms, four potential
problems may keep personal criticism from being politically effective. First,
because personal writing by nature has an inward focus, it can end up being
self-absorbed and limited in scope rather than ultimately moving towards
social change. If a narrative is meaningful only to the person who wrote it or
to a select group of listeners, its political power becomes moot. Linda Kauff-
man thus wonders, “Are ‘we’ feminist scholars solipsistically talking only to
ourselves?” (1156), and Nancy Miller explains, “At its worst, the autobiogra-
phical act in criticism can seem to belong to a scene of rhizomatic, networked,
privileged selves” (Getting Personal 25). Daphne Patai puts it even more force-
fully: “I doubt that I am the only one who is weary of the nouveau solip-
sism [in academic writing]—all this individual and collective breast-beating,
grandstanding, and plain old egocentricity” (A52). Any personal writing that
does not consider who the audience is and what it hopes to accomplish is likely
to fall into such a pattern.

Second, because the personal is often considered less valid than traditional
styles of academic writing, those who use such an approach risk being silenced
and/or reinforcing gendered dichotomies. Many academics will immediately
take scholarship less seriously when it incorporates a personal voice, leading
Nancy Miller to comment, “[W]e’re not sure we want ourselves going to the
bathroom in public—especially as women and feminists—our credibility is low
enough as it is” (Getting Personal 8). Using the personal voice may also be prob-
lematic in feminist work since the implied values of “sincerity and authenticity
[. . . ] inevitably lock us back into the very dichotomies (male intellect versus
female intuition; head versus body, etc.) that so many feminists have spent so
much time trying to dismantle” (Kauffman 1162). Such risks are serious matters
because criticism intended to effect social change may end up contributing to the binary thinking that is one of the major roots of unjust practices.

Third, autobiographical criticism can inhibit dialogue by relying on the authority of experience. Here, an “authentic” voice uses subjectivity as a way of silencing alternate opinions, perpetuating rather than disrupting the claim to authority traditionally associated with the objective voice. David Simpson calls this maneuver “invok[ing] ‘liberal authenticity’” and says it “can be reduced to a statement like ‘I felt it, therefore it is true’” (qtd. in Heller A9). Linda Kauffman further explains, “By insisting on the authority of my personal experience, I effectively muzzle dissent and muffle your investigation into my motives” (1156). In some cases, the association between personal experience and scholarship can dictate, either implicitly or explicitly, who is “allowed” to discuss women’s literature or minority literature. If literary criticism hopes to address injustices, a personal voice that silences other voices is ineffective because it reinforces a model of relation based on domination.

Finally, personal criticism often rests in an identity politics as one member of a group speaks representatively, ignoring differences within that group. That is, many times when scholars write from a personal perspective, they point to their position based on gender, race, or another cultural marker, and they seem to be “speaking as” a member of a particular group or “speaking for” a particular group (Miller, Getting Personal 20). David Simpson labels this a “native identity politics,” and he translates it as, “I felt it. I am white. Therefore, this is what white people feel!” (qtd. in Heller A9). Such positioning becomes ineffective on the one hand because it can reduce cultural groups to biological functions, as if all women are the same or all African American women are the same. In addition, however, even when cultural influences are acknowledged, an identity politics can develop in which differences among people within a single group are ignored. Furthermore, when people speak representatively of an entire group, they also tend to assert that group’s difference from (an)other group(s), reinforcing problematic oppositions and stabilizing categories that tend to be fluid and hybrid in actuality. Each of these four drawbacks to personal criticism could lead to a critical practice that inadvertently perpetuates rather than changes oppressive practices.

**iii. Self-conscious negotiations and Alice Walker**

Using the personal voice in literary criticism may potentially be either revolutionary or conservative. As scholars have used autobiography and encountered both its inspirations and its frustrations, however, they have worked through my list of “pros” and “cons” in a number of fruitful ways. The most successful negotiations tend to bring poststructural theory into autobiographical practice, so that the critics simultaneously construct and deconstruct a personal story as they write with highly self-conscious and self-reflexive styles. Such literary
criticism is performative rather than naturalized. “Naturalized” personal criticism would use an autobiographical voice that presents itself as transparent, as if reading about a person is to fully know and understand that person and his or her experiences. “Performative” personal criticism, on the other hand, highlights the way an identity is taken up and used in a certain way, drawing attention to autobiography’s mediation through language and cultural context. As a performative approach keeps people from being reduced to their representations, notions of identity remain fluid and changeable; an essentialist identity politics can then be resisted rather than enacted through the autobiographical criticism.

Although Walker’s In Search essays were written before the heyday of poststructural theory, they anticipate the theoretical turn to performative writing to a great degree. Walker uses the story narrative to combine her highly particularized experience with literary allusion and symbolism, helping her to bring “real life” onto the page while paradoxically highlighting the fictionalized presentation of that “life.” Walker is thus able to achieve the positive effects of personal criticism while largely avoiding its pitfalls. Like much personal criticism aiming to effect socio-political change, Walker’s volume challenges dominant ideas of the time by asserting the value of marginalized voices (those of African American women in particular in this case); it explicitly values autobiographical writing; and it calls readers “beyond contemplation to action” through Walker’s own investment in the text and through attention to unjust social conditions (Mittlefehldt 206). If Walker presented herself in naturalized terms, however, much of her political work would be sabotaged with the implication that race and gender are stable categories that define the individual. Instead, Walker presents herself as a somewhat fictionalized character, inhabiting certain roles in each narrative. This turn to performance not only moves beyond self-absorption as it attends to audience reception, but it also implies a fluid and changing notion of subjectivity that avoids gendered dichotomies, resists claims to authenticity, and problematizes an identity politics. In other words, while Walker’s autobiography accomplishes political goals, its performative story elements keep it from operating within foundationalist assumptions that could ultimately reinforce the status quo.

ALICE WALKER TELLS A CRITICAL STORY

Although Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens works as an integrated whole in many ways, three essays in particular—“Beyond the Peacock” (1975), “Looking for Zora” (1975), and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1974)—exemplify a personal criticism performed through story narratives. The three essays share a sense of quest and tend to comment upon one another as themes and symbols are woven together among and between them, yet each
moves in a distinct direction. The importance of personal story narratives is suggested not only through the quest themes but also as Walker “signifies” on the writers Flannery O’Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, and Virginia Woolf. “Signifying,” as Henry Louis Gates explains it, is a critical approach with African American roots that enacts repetition with difference. The repetition pays tribute to the precursor writer, while the difference is a way of revising the precursor’s story or practice, often exposing its limitations. Walker’s particular choices of precursor writers highlight the importance of story that guides her personal critical voice. The fictional elements of Walker’s personal stories are finally suggested in the use of three motifs in the essays—houses, mother(s), and gardens—that bring the literal and symbolic together. As the motifs are introduced in detailed and concrete ways, they perform several functions: they particularize Walker’s background; they bring Walker’s critical work in touch with material existence; and they operate as symbols with significance beyond Walker’s personal experience. The work that the essays aim to do, the writers that they draw upon, and the symbols that they use come together to create a model of a radical and performative personal criticism.

Although “Beyond the Peacock,” “Looking for Zora,” and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” are guided by different purposes, they share a sense of quest that is suggested in their titles. The phrases “beyond,” “looking,” and “in search” all point to dissatisfaction with what is currently visible and a commitment to bring into sight that which has remain hidden. This sense of quest manifests itself in the essays with an emphasis on process—Walker writes about journeys, both literal and figurative, which the essays simultaneously recount and enact. That is, the essays present an ongoing process of discovery and recovery rather than a final destination of completed work. The focus on quest positions the essays within a long story tradition, and it also adds a mythic dimension to Walker’s writing. Quests, after all, are grand and important rather than ordinary or everyday. In Walker, however, the ordinary and grand are brought together: she tells simple stories of ordinary lives, but these stories are written as a matter of communal survival. Walker is very aware of the history of oppression of African Americans, and she recognizes the importance of building a heritage to help African Americans thrive. Ruth Behar might have been characterizing Walker’s essays when writing that “the best autobiographical scholarly writing sets off on a personal quest and ultimately produces a redrawn map of social terrain” (Behar B2). Walker’s quest to help claim, recover, and build upon stories is a means to her own survival as a writer, but it is also a way to support the African American community.

Despite the common quest theme, the essays move in quite distinct directions. “Beyond the Peacock” both problematizes and affirms an integrationist approach to literature through the specific example of Flannery O’Connor. Here, Walker recounts a visit she and her mother made to one of their former
homes and the former home of O'Connor, just down the road. In the course of the visit, Walker muses on O'Connor's significance and on her own troubled response to a privileged white Southern writer. "Looking for Zora" turns to the building of a black women's literary heritage as it enacts and encourages recovery work that can provide markers of the past for future generations. Walker tells of her journey to Florida, where she tracked down Hurston's burial spot so as to mark the site with a headstone. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" continues to affirm an African American women's literary heritage. In order to explore the roots of black women's literature, Walker considers the plight of black women and the creative work of both Phillis Wheatley and her own mother under incredibly adverse conditions. While Wheatley may be the more conventional literary foremother, Walker values her own mother's use of gardening as an alternative expression of black women's creative ability. Together, the essays turn again and again to the invisibility of a black women's literary heritage and begin to build—or rebuild—a tradition of storytelling and creative expression that can help support the African American community.

Walker's commitment to story as a way of moving her personal voice into a cultural conversation becomes apparent as she signifies upon Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, and Virginia Woolf. In "Beyond the Peacock," Walker adopts O'Connor's mission in writing but modifies her use of fiction. As Walker understands it, O'Connor writes about characters "in times of extreme crisis and loss" in order to help readers recognize their "responsibility for other human beings" (56). Walker similarly seems intent on inspiring "both personal and cultural levels [of transformation]" (Mittlefehldt 206). However, O'Connor tends to offer negative examples while Walker portrays positive, even utopic, models. This difference becomes apparent as Walker retells O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" to her own mother. While O'Connor's story focuses on a mother and son who have trouble getting along because of their different perspectives, Walker and her mother tend to respect one another's viewpoints. For example, Walker changes her description of O'Connor's character from "old" to "middle-aged" due to her mother's objections (49). Walker's narrative also varies from O'Connor's because it uses a first person autobiographical voice rather than a third person fictional perspective, allowing Walker to highlight the way her background affects her reading of O'Connor. Still, Walker comments on O'Connor's Catholicism in order to bring fiction and biography together, and she embeds the retelling of O'Connor's stories in her own narrative. Despite the differences, then, the connections between the two writers throughout this essay draw attention to the stylized aspects of Walker's personal narrative.

Zora Neale Hurston stands in contrast to O'Connor, for Walker fully embraces Hurston as a role model in "Looking for Zora" and, in the process,
makes storytelling more central.\textsuperscript{12} Dianne Sadoff argues that the “structure and material [of “Looking for Zora”] imitates and so recalls [Hurston’s] \textit{Mules and Men}” (12), in part because both Hurston and Walker return to the South with an “ideal” vision that is revealed as false through their use of “self-irony” (14). More importantly, both Hurston and Walker are interested in claiming and preserving their African American heritage. Their journeys and interviews allow them to come to story in community with others, while their publications are a means of both saving and sharing what they have found. Additionally, although both Hurston and Walker present their quests autobiographically, they both use the term “lies,” which subtly recasts expectations of autobiography. In \textit{Mules and Men}, the people Hurston interviews commonly call their folktales and legends “lies.” When Walker references these “black folk tales that were ‘made and used on the spot,’ to take a line from \textit{Zora}” (98), she echoes her own lines from a few pages earlier, where she had described her claim to be Hurston’s niece as a “profoundly useful lie” (95, Walker’s emphasis). In each case, stories (“lies”) are treasured for their usefulness rather than their factual veracity. Walker thus demonstrates her willingness to take on a role (such as that of Hurston’s niece) in order to accomplish a mission, and she also suggests that even “lies” can contain some measure of truth: Hurston “is [her] aunt,” even though the familial bond is a figurative rather than a literal one (102). As she uses the term “lies” and Hurston’s approaches, then, Walker implies that her personal writing may be partly folktale—a narrative to be shared on a storefront where its significance is based on what it might symbolize—what it might accomplish—rather than on how closely it follows actual events.

Walker finally signifies on Virginia Woolf, particularly her \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Both writers combine attention to socio-material conditions with performance and symbolism. However, the African American oppression Walker writes of tends to be more horrific than the injustices suffered by the middle-class white women of Woolf’s text, and Walker becomes more personally involved in her text than does Woolf. In her well-known volume, Woolf argues that women have been categorically denied the conditions necessary to produce literature—a fixed income and a private space in which to work. Walker similarly considers the material circumstances that have affected the literary production of African American women, but to do so, she inserts relevant details into passages quoted from Woolf’s work:

“For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts [add ‘chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one’s body by someone else, submission to an alien religion’], that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.” (Woolf qtd. in Walker 235; bracketed phrases are Walker’s)
Walker thus uses Woolf’s ideas but re-contextualizes them so that they speak to the experiences of Phillis Wheatley, as well as to the situation of the many black women who were unable to produce creative writing despite a potential talent. At the same time, the change Walker is working towards becomes more pressing because the oppression she catalogues makes Woolf’s concerns pale in comparison.

Walker also signifies on Woolf’s use of a persona in *A Room of One’s Own*. Although Woolf uses “I” throughout her text, she separates herself from this “I” near the start of the volume: “’I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them” (Woolf 4).13 The use of a persona allows Woolf to use symbolism throughout her text to make points on multiple levels. For example, she writes that “a man’s figure rose to intercept” her just as her thoughts were running wild, and he compelled her to walk on the path (6), an image related to the discussions of boundaries, transgressions, and gendered positions that Woolf continues throughout her text. Such an approach calls for readers to actively interpret rather than passively receive ideas, so that “it is for [the reader] to seek out [. . .] truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping” (Woolf 4–5). Alice Walker does not adopt a persona as Woolf does, but neither does she “reject her predecessor’s self-neutralizing aesthetic and voice-dropping narrative practice” (Allan 132). Instead, Walker combines the performance of Woolf with an insistence on her own material and interested existence in relation to her text. Walker emphasizes the text as performance by introducing the importance of story and using metaphorical language. “In Search” thus begins with a metaphorical poem, and Walker insists on her own identity as a storyteller: “[T]hrough 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). Here, “stories” and “lives” become intermingled, and stories themselves become ubiquitous—they are unconsciously “absorbed.” Walker’s extensive use of literary symbolism continues to foreground performative aspects of her narrative. Still, Walker clings to her own material situation in a way that Woolf does not, explaining that she looks in her own backyard—her personal past—in order to answer larger questions about black women’s literary heritage. Walker’s combination of allegory and direct involvement in her text encourages readers to engage in textual interpretation in order to understand and act on issues that affect actual human beings.

While Walker’s playful recuperations of O’Connor, Hurston, and Woolf constantly highlight the importance of storytelling in her personal criticism, the use of figurative language reinforces the performative elements of her
autobiographical writing. Nancy Miller suggests that symbolic language is particularly suited to writing that calls for social change:

[M]etaphors are to be taken very seriously [...] as an economical way both to theorize outside of systems dependent on a unitary signature [...] and to imagine in the material of language what hasn't yet come [...] into social being. [...] Perhaps what seems most “feminist” to me about the uses of both metaphor and narrative criticism is the self-consciousness these modes of analysis tend to display about their own processes of theorization. (Miller Getting Personal xii)

Walker's essays use three important motifs to render their work both concretely specific and symbolically representative: houses, mothers, and flowers or gardens. As the personal becomes presented as story complete with metaphorical language, readers are encouraged to interpret the narrative both literally and figuratively rather than reduce it to either one person's experience (and thus not terribly important in a wide-ranging sense) or to a “mere” story (and thus not terribly pressing because it is not “real” or “true”). Each of the three motifs functions among the essays in particular ways to forward Walker's project and her call for others to engage in issues of social justice and literary heritage. While each is always literal on one level, houses also symbolize literary roots and traditions that take various forms, the mother points to literary precursors, and flowers or gardens represent an idealized field of African American women's literary heritage. The images together work within a single though diverse project of literary recuperation and growth.

The houses, as concrete manifestations of injustices, graphically communicate the disparity between the preservation of white and black cultural heritages. In "Beyond the Peacock," Walker's former house is in the middle of a muddy pasture, surrounded by fences and "no trespassing" signs (43-44). When Walker and her mother eventually reach it, they see that two of the four rooms have rotted away; the two that remain are used to store hay. The whole scene represents the roots and the history of African Americans and their literatures—difficult to access and left to disintegrate, with some irrevocable losses already apparent. Such a theme is reinforced in "Looking for Zora," for Walker has a difficult time finding Hurston's grave because the area is covered with waist-high weeds and a map to mark the location has to be hand-drawn from memories and oral communication. As a final "home" for Hurston, such a grave graphically indicates the neglect that black writers have suffered, which Walker explicitly notes by including a quote from Robert Hemenway describing Hurston's "resting place" as "generally symbolic of the black writer's fate in America" (93). Walker also visits the last neighborhood in which Hurston had resided which, like Walker's former home, is difficult to access: Walker and her companion need to ask several people for directions, and the street is unpaved
and "full of mud puddles" (113). This dire physical setting seems appropriate when the young people who live there "had no idea Zora ever lived, let alone that she lived across the street" from them (115). While all of these experiences can be (and should be) read symbolically as signs of an undervalued black heritage, Walker introduces affect into her narrative in order to bring the symbolic in touch with the material actuality of what she describes. She thus explains in restrained tones that "normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense because they bear no relation to the depth of emotion one feels" (115). As such passages combine attention to the specific scene of devastation with a sense of its overwhelming communal implications, readers are called to join Walker in responding to the problem.

O'Connor's house in "Looking Beyond" stands in startling contrast to Walker's former home and Hurston's former neighborhood and gravesite. O'Connor's last residence is close to the road and is attended to by a caretaker, with a small, shabby house set behind it where slaves had probably once lived. Walker writes, "Her house becomes—in an instant—the symbol of my own disinheritance, and for that instant I hate her guts" (57). In such a way, Walker again simultaneously invokes raw emotion and explicitly draws attention to the way material signs of disparity operate as symbols, representing oppressions that might be less tangible. Symbols, then, are not illusive or without effect. On the contrary, Walker relates the psychic burden of acknowledging injustices: "For a long time I will feel Faulkner's house, O'Connor's house, crushing me" (58). In other words, Walker feels oppressed by the white literary heritage that has been preserved and honored at the expense of her own black roots, and the concrete structures provide a visual manifestation of a weighty cultural problem.

The house symbolism is rather discouraging, but it is answered with a more positive focus on mothers and the maternal.15 It is Walker's mother who ignores the "no trespassing" signs when they revisit their former home, and the presence of Walker's blood mother keeps O'Connor from intruding into the maternal position that threatens Walker with the dispossessment of her specifically black roots. Walker's "mother" is thus a literal woman at the same time that she serves as a figurative path to the preservation of a black woman's heritage. In "Looking for Zora," Walker claims that Hurston is her aunt in order to access information about her, but Hurston becomes Walker's "metaphorical mother as well" (Sadoff 8). "In Search" most significantly places importance on the mother as a source of inheritance, support, inspiration, life, nourishment, and instruction—in short, the mother empowers the daughter, whether she takes the form of a literary precursor, a peer, or a literal maternal figure.

The mother is always intertwined with the final motif of importance in the three essays: flowers or gardens. "In Search" begins with an epigraph that pictures the relationship between the mother and daughter as that of a plant.
The poem, “Motheroot,” suggests that the mother acts like a nourishing root that eventually helps the flower (daughter) blossom, though the root herself remains invisible. More often, however, the mother is not part of a plant herself but instead is the gardener, able to plant gardens (literary works) that grow and multiply, building and sustaining communities with their beauty and life. Thus, in “Beyond the Peacock,” Walker’s mother is not impressed with the pretentious peacock that blocks O’Connor’s driveway. The peacock, associated with O’Connor, damages gardens, just as the white literary tradition has damaged that of blacks.16 In “Looking for Zora,” Walker discovers that Hurston enjoyed gardening just as her own mother did (114), and even among the weeds at Hurston’s gravesite Walker notices that some “are quite pretty, with tiny yellow flowers” (104). The importance of gardening is most noticeable in “In Search” when Walker discovers her own creative roots:

Whatever she [Walker’s mother] planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. [...] And I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. [...] To this day people drive by our house in Georgia [...] and ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art. (241)

The “rocky soil” indicates the oppressive conditions under which African Americans have produced art, the “cuttings” suggest that art can inspire other art to “grow” or flourish, and the recognition of the gardens (or art) becomes a source of communal pride that draws people together. In “Beyond the Peacock,” a similar testament to the creative ability of African American woman counters the rotting house of Walker’s childhood: the daffodils planted by Walker’s mother “have multiplied and are now blooming from one side of the yard to the other” (44). Such an image keeps despair at bay by encouraging the valuing of nontraditional sources of creativity, and it simultaneously suggests literary writings will flourish and multiply as the daffodils have done.

As Walker makes language and style work for her on multiple levels, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens brings personal writing, storytelling, and literary criticism together to form meaningful narratives that can both draw attention to problematic conditions and provide hopeful alternatives. Walker’s literary criticism is thus connected directly to the way people live at the same time that it brings orderliness to the messiness of lives; indeed, recasting lived experiences into a tightly-knit narrative is a key way to begin transforming a history of abuse and neglect into a vision of renewed life. By drawing on the work of other authors and using literary devices, Walker keeps her writing from becoming simplistic or reductive. Instead, its mediated qualities are consistently highlighted even as its bearing on material lives is made clear. While not all personal criticism needs to take on Walker’s approach of storytelling, Walker
does provide a strong example of autobiographical writing that uses performance to move its readers to political activism. Readers are called to engage in and actively interpret Walker’s text in order that they more fully engage in and actively interpret their own worlds.

Notes

1. Jane Tompkin’s “Me and My Shadow,” first published in New Literary History in 1987, is one of the earliest texts to receive attention for its use of personal criticism. The autobiographical trend in scholarship visibly gained momentum during the nineties, evidenced by a number of articles published in The Chronicle of Higher Education (see, for example, Scott Heller, Liz McMullen, Ruth Behar, and Daphne Patai) as well as by anthologies such as The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism (1993; edited by Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar), The Politics of the Essay (1993; edited by Ruth- Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman), and Confessions of the Critics (1996; edited by H. Aram Veeser). See these texts and Jeffrey Williams for analyses of why personal criticism and other forms of experimental scholarship have become widely used since the nineties.

2. Houston Baker writes, “The generative conditions of African life in the New World that privilege spiritual negotiation also make autobiography the premiere genre of Afro-American discourse” (“There Is No More”136). Richard Yarborough further explains that, before the twentieth century, black writers were primarily interested in “establishing the credibility of their literary voices and thus their view of reality,” and autobiography made a more fitting weapon than fiction did “in the battle to gain a hearing for the true version of the Afro-American experience” (111).

3. William Andrews explains, “[C]ritics [. . .] have treated Afro-American autobiography [. . .] as a commentary on something extrinsic rather than as statements of something intrinsic to themselves” (79). He calls for Afro-American autobiography to be considered as its own genre, “important to study for its own sake” (80).

4. Much of Alice Walker’s personal writing in “Beyond the Peacock,” “Looking for Zora,” and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” can be considered anecdotal. While any autobiographical anecdote would fall under the heading “personal writing,” not all personal writing is anecdotal. The anecdote is generally a brief story based on an actual event that is used to illustrate a point.

5. Gallagher and Greenblatt are referring specifically to the use of the anecdote in new historicist criticism, but their observation can be applied to the kind of personal anecdote Walker uses without distorting their argument.

6. Black feminist critics, especially, have recognized the problems that arise when black women’s fiction is viewed as continuous with the lives of black women. At the same time, scholars recognize the dangers of ignoring the social position of the critic, for scholars of color do need to dominate the study of minority literature rather than become silenced, once again, by the voices of white critics. See Deborah McDowell, Houston Baker, and Tania Modleski for more elaborate discussions of the twin dangers of marginalization and exclusivity.

7. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, for example, uses the repetition of the stilted phrase “Now did I” in order to include the interruption of kitchen routines in her scholarship without naturalizing her experiences: “Now did I go downstairs, now did I cut up a pear, eight strawberries, now did I add some cottage cheese,” and so on (4). Linda Kauffman tells a story of her childhood but follows it with multiple interpretations and critiques of those interpretations. Nancy Miller refuses the division of theory and the personal, partially by bringing “occasional” writing into her scholarship (that is, essays that were written for particular occasions, some of which called for less formal tones than Miller may have generally used when writing a book) (Getting Personal xi, 15). Jane Gallop uses the “anecdote” as a point
of departure, bringing theory and personal writing together in a manner somewhat akin to Miller's approach. A great many other variations of performative personal criticism could be recounted, but Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow" is notably absent from my list. Her self-presentation tends to be "naturalized" rather than "performative." She writes, "This is what I want you to see. A person sitting in stockinged feet looking out of her window" (1108) and "That is why, you see, this doesn't sound too good. It isn't a practiced performance, it hasn't got a surface. I'm asking you to bear with me while I try, hoping that this, what I write, will express something you yourself have felt or will help you find a part of yourself that you would like to express" (1107). Tompkins seems intent on having readers "see" her and "connect" with her, while the writers I label performative are more interested in showing readers portraits with very visible frames, making the mediated quality of representation quite clear without sacrificing contact with lived experiences.

8. For more on the political power of Walker's essays, see Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt.

9. I spend more time developing the importance of narrative, the critical framework of womanism, and a sense of Walker's entire volume of essays in my dissertation, Practice, Practice, Practice: Innovative Feminist Literary Criticism, a work in progress from which this essay is taken. For ideas about the value of narrative, see Susan Stanford Friedman's Mappings, Jay Clayton's The Pleasures of Babel, and Toni Morrison's "Memory, Creation, and Writing." For comments on In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, see Tuzyline Jita Allan, Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt, and Dianne Sadoff.

10. Gates emphasizes signifying as an approach that disrupts racism: "The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey—he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever running, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language—is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed, is our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act" ("Blackness of Blackness" 286). I am not arguing that Walker signifies on O'Connor, Hurston, and Woolf because the precursor writers are racist, but instead because revising these writers' approaches allows Walker to bring conventions of fiction and performance into her writing without losing her own personal investment in the text.

11. Parenthetical citations refer to Walker's In Search unless otherwise noted.

12. Walker's writing has often been linked to that of Hurston, especially in terms of storytelling as a theme. See, for example, Molly Hite's The Other Side of the Story and Henry Louis Gates's The Signifying Monkey.

13. Woolf's use of the term "lies" is consistent with that of both Hurston and Walker.


15. See Sadoff for an analysis of matrilineage in Walker.

16. Walker finds the peacock that blocks the driveway "inspiring," but her mother answers that "they'll eat up every bloom you have, if you don't watch out" (59)—an exchange that effectively expresses Walker's mixed feelings about O'Connor as a literary precursor.

Works Cited


