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Fugitive Knowledge and Body Autonomy in the Folklore and Literature of Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor

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Abstract: Religious beliefs, political posturing, and decisions made by the United States' judiciary aside, the means for regulating both fertility and maternity have been utilized by women for centuries through the use of herbs, seeds, and roots in conjunction with both conventional and folkloric knowledge. While these methods are seldom acknowledged overtly, their coded presence exists in literary representations written by Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor, among other writers not addressed here. However veiled, the existence of this knowledge is significant for its indication of women's epistemology, reproductive agency, and body autonomy. My research indicates that the demand for women's body autonomy has perpetuated throughout generations of women, despite religious, politicized, and legal contentions claiming otherwise. Through an examination of historical medical literature, folkloric theory, and literary analysis of Hurston and Naylor, I aim to substantiate that women's body autonomy is both synonymous and indispensable to women's health.

Keywords: reproductive agency, emmenagogue, fugitive knowledge, semitropical pharmacopeia, *Mama Day*, *Nanny of the Maroons*, *Ricinus communis*, folkloric pathways, Janie Crawford, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Amidst battles for Covid-19 vaccine mandates and accessibility, media coverage of judicial proceedings stemming from state-sanctioned racialized violence, and the exacerbation of gendered workplace/space inequality via a new virtual reality, the year 2021 tallied yet another conflict over the legality of abortion in the United States, with conservative Supreme Court justices aimed to walk back the legalization of a woman's constitutional right to terminate pregnancy as per *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Notwithstanding popular support through a narrative situating abortion from the 1973 Supreme Court decision to the present (and specifically utilized by pro-choice supporters underlining that court rulings are subject to precedent), the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), with Justice Samuel Alito avowing that "the 1973 *Roe* ruling and repeated subsequent high court decisions reaffirming *Roe* 'must be overruled' because they were 'egregiously wrong,' the arguments 'exceptionally weak' and so 'damaging' that they amounted to 'an abuse of judicial authority'" (Tottenburg and McCannon 2022). Conversely, despite the 2022 Supreme Court anti-abortion ruling, and in addition to Justice Alito's claims otherwise, it must be acknowledged that women have been actively controlling their fertility for centuries (Orr 2017). If we are to put U.S. politics aside and instead focus on a long cultural record, specifically through the channels of folklore and literature, it becomes apparent that women have utilized the natural environment in conjunction with information both formulated and communicated outside of conventional and/or institutionalized channels—what folklorist Marilyn Motz calls "fugitive knowledge"—to aid in family planning methods known as abortion but less-often termed as such. While these methods are seldom acknowledged overtly, their coded presence exists in literary representations written by Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor, among others not addressed here. Although subdued by inconspicuousness and further veiled

through a lack of presence in the criticism, the existence of this knowledge is significant for its indication of women's epistemology, reproductive agency, and body autonomy. My research indicates that the demand for women's body autonomy has perpetuated throughout generations of women, despite religious and politicized contentions which claim otherwise. Thus, through an examination of historical medical literature, folkloric theory, and literary analysis of Hurston and Naylor, I aim to substantiate that women's body autonomy is both synonymous and indispensable to women's health.

Organized women's movements addressing the separation of sex from procreation are common in the current day and began taking shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Never existing within a vacuum, politicized struggles for women's body autonomy often bypass intersectional concerns, propagating racist and classist bias with regard to health care accessibility. Birth control methods housed within a Westernized medical industrial complex and further bound in political and religious regulation create wide gaps in availability, affordability, and depending on a woman's social location, bear a burden of social stigma and hardship. For example, when recently assigning a definitional essay to my first-year composition students attending a state university located within a majority Catholic demographic in the U.S. Deep South, several submitted essays defining abortion as murder, with arguments heavily leaning on religious and political rhetoric in service of the pro-life movement, and uniformly short on counterpoint and/or nuance. From a pro-life perspective, women's physical and emotional health is devalued, and her socio-economic standing dismissed regarding the cost of child-raising. Instead, all focus rests on women's culpability for not prioritizing the unborn fetus over herself. Much like Supreme Court Justice Coney-Barrett's statement that women can just as easily give up a child for adoption as terminate a pregnancy (Talbot 2022), pro-life rhetoric bypasses and/or neglects negotiating the physical, emotional, and financial toll that childbearing exacts on a woman.

However, although social norms indoctrinate a reliance on Westernized medicine as the only viable modus, the historical record reveals this is not the only option women have availed by. Considering a folkloric standpoint from beyond the politicized medical perspective, possibilities exist outside "traditional modes of expression [and] have persisted in the interstices of modern industrial society" (Motz 1998, 348). Whereas anti-abortionists rally around the notion of terminating pregnancy as "unnatural and abhorrent," cultural evidence supports that "whatever the economic system, state of scientific knowledge or law, and however dangerous or limited their options, women have tried to end unwanted pregnancy" (Orr 2017, 41). In other words, while the reasons for terminating pregnancy may be variable, the act of doing so is anything but unnatural—and historically has often been seen as the most healthful/humane decision for the well-being of the group and/or family. Still, the act of disseminating this information is complicated for the way it is classified as controversial, dangerous, and even deadly. Consequently, women must find alternative methods to bear the tradition, conveying their logics through innovative measure and approach, otherwise known as coding. In the creative expression and/or writing of women and marginalized populations, particularly contentious themes are often addressed through signifiers to create a level of protection for the writer/creator in the face of structural authority. This process is most often deliberate but, as Joan Radner and Susan Lanser point out, "coding need not be a conscious act" to have an impact on those who understand its meanings (1987, 414). Radner and Lanser focus on the strategies by which women encode feminist meaning into their texts and posit that "coding occurs in the context of complex audiences, in situations where some of the audience may be competent to decode the message, but others—including those who might be dangerous—are not" (1987, 414). This coding process is found in eighteenth and nineteenth century women's reproductive health literature, with medicines and procedures known as emmenagogues widely available to regulate women's menstrual cycle.

Contrary to the belief that techniques of fertility control were unavailable to American women prior to the nineteenth century, herbal remedies and tinctures which induced menstruation (read, terminate pregnancy) were widely available and included in American medical journals published throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. Family planning, "deliberate family limitation," and

“direct birth control” methods used by women living in the early Delaware Valley are demonstrated through substantially lower birth rates occurring during times of food insecurity and war, indicating that technologies of “fertility restriction” were likely being used (Wells 1971, 80; Smaby 1988, 75; Klepp, 2014, 71). Susan Klepp posits that while it was widely agreed upon that pregnancy meant an entire “suppression of the menses,” the absence of menstruation could equally be attributed to signs of either physical or emotional sickness and that “rheumatism and pleurisy, thought to be caused by colds, were linked to obstructed menstruation” (2014, 79). Illness could be strictly diagnosed as “obstructed menstruation,” or it could be interpreted as a symptom of a range of afflictions such as despondency, hysteria, or parasites—all of which had overlapping cures (79). Women were able to self-evaluate their physical and emotional state and determine if their ‘suppressed menstruation’ was a sign of pregnancy or a sign of illness. In this way, varied “definitions of disease” allowed women a way to deal with unwanted pregnancy for “it was widely known, if little recorded for posterity, that restoring menstruation could abort” (80). Medical journals included “unusually inclusive lists of emmenagogic medicines and procedures” which were largely herbal derivatives used to treat the amenorrhea and flush out the uterus (81). Women could buy these herbal remedies from male druggists and physicians who sold pills, designed to be swallowed in liquid or pill form. Moreover, women with kitchen gardens, a common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, could easily grow the herbs themselves.

While legislators in the early Delaware Valley didn’t rigidly adopt or enforce the English stature on abortion, efforts to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy after “quickening” or movement was felt by the mother were considered a misdemeanor offense (the murder statute applied only after a live birth). This is not to say that women avoided abortive actions; on the contrary, they just changed the language surrounding the issue. Similar measures were taking place in the U.S. South during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, specifically noticeable through the examination of birth records of enslaved women before and after emancipation. Liese Perrin (2001) found significant evidence, mainly extracted from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives, that chewing cotton root was a widespread form of birth control used by enslaved women of the U.S. South. Unfortunately, as Perrin explains, the data is hard to find and even more difficult to prove. Deborah Gray White’s research points to several cases in which women were documented as being infertile by plantation owners, only to have several children after emancipation. White identifies a great challenge in being able to prove that contraception was used, as “[t]hese matters were virtually exclusive to the female world of the quarters, and when they arose, they were attended to in secret, and were intended to remain secret” (1985, 84). That said, data and research supporting theories of enslaved women using their knowledge of herbal pharmacopeia for birth control exists, specifically to allow for the timing of two years or more between pregnancies. Moreover, because enslaved women’s reproductive bodies were used to increase a plantation owner’s property holdings, women who found ways to avoid pregnancy were participating in a powerful form of resistance, and arguably advocating for Black women’s collective independence.

Critical scholarship surrounding Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* often revolves around Janie’s quest for independence and her journey to selfhood. Curiously, questions relating to her body autonomy, in terms of either her ability to control her reproductive health and/or conceive children are largely overlooked. The few critics who do address issues of fertility and/or motherhood have done so under the pretext of comparing Janie with the erotic and childless Haitian goddess Ezili Freda. Derek Collins proposes that it is “not in the nature of Janie’s /Ezili Freda’s love to produce children” (1996, 145). Daphne Lamothe makes an argument for Janie’s resemblance to Ezili Freda by way of similarities to Janie’s “physical appearance, romantic relationships, and her interactions with the Eatonville community” (2005, 159). At another turn, Lamothe compares Janie to Ezili Dantor, associated with “maternal rage, [the] working class, and motherhood” (162). What is discounted in these comparisons, however, is the subjectivity of Black women’s reproductivity and specifically Janie’s reproductive health and body autonomy. Considering the spiritual bond Hurston crafts between Janie and her ecological environment, Janie’s reproductive agency can be seen within a

larger context of ancestral memory and diaspora, specifically African traditions of herbal medicine and rootwork. More pointedly, I believe Hurston refers to the medicinal powers of *Ricinus communis*, or the castor bean plant, to signify Janie's knowledge and use of reproductive contraception.

Scholars have situated Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* within the African American literary tradition in multiple locations. Darryl Dickson-Carr includes Hurston in a significant body of Black women's literature from the Harlem Renaissance that can be labeled "domestic fiction" (2004, xxxvi). Dickson-Carr describes domestic fiction as "often focused on the home, marriage, and family, but not for the sake of extolling these institution's virtues" (xxxvi). Instead, much of this work sought to "demonstrate repeatedly that for African Americans, each institution was fraught with danger that stemmed directly from racism's effects" (xxxvi). *Their Eyes* can be read as what Radner and Lanser would call a coded critique of the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage, with Hurston inscribing a gendered and racialized hierarchal social structure within the dynamics of Janie's marriages—as well as Nanny's and Leafy's experiences with sexual and racialized violence before and after emancipation. In all these ways, *Their Eyes* fits the description of domestic fiction. However, the text offers more to consider with its complex vocal multiplicity, what Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) labels a "speakerly" text. While there are numerous problematics with folkloric representation of the underrepresented, such as Susan Richie's designation of "ventriloquist folklore," wherein the folklorist ends up speaking for the folk group, Richie also contends that "the 'mutism' of cultural groups is only a problem within a world where the ultimate aspiration is to have a voice" (1993, 369). As per Richie's logic, Hurston goes to great lengths in her efforts to code information pertaining to Janie's reproductive agency, letting the text (as opposed to the folklorist) speak for the folk. In other words, Hurston signifies/speaks to the power of Black women using herbal pharmacopeia in a "speakerly" way that will only be heard or decoded by those familiar with the tradition.

When telling her life story, Janie mentions the conjured magic of herbs, roots, and two-headed doctors, although never by implicating herself in their use. In this way, what is said (and what isn't) is a significant narrative choice on Hurston's part, one which alludes to Janie's knowledge and ancestral memory of African oral tradition and the semi-tropical pharmacopoeia found in the flora and fauna of both the U.S. South and West Africa. In her essay "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women," Marjorie Pryse states that the "ancient power" Hurston associates with Janie's "awakening" is representative of how "[B]lack women have long possessed 'magical' powers [to tell] stories" (1985, 3). She argues that Hurston "invest[s] her female protagonist Janie with the 'magic' of authority that makes storytelling possible" (12). Pryse uses the term "conjure" in her essay as a stand-in for creative narrative authority. For Pryse, Janie's "magic" is her storytelling ability. That withstanding, Hurston arguably signifies a connection with spiritual power that goes beyond the act of simply telling a story. To nuance Pryse's idea, it should be noted that when Janie is sixteen, she is awakened to powers of the natural world such as "the singing she heard had nothing to do with her ears [and] the rose of the world was breathing out smell" (Hurston 1937, 183). Janie is "seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers" (184). Simultaneously, she is experiencing a sexual awakening, seeing the world "through pollinated air [that] be-glamored Johnny Taylor's rags" (184). These are two related but separate experiences wherein Janie begins to understand how the forces of the natural world can be manipulated to affect human well-being and simultaneously, is sexually awakened to the powers of hormones, pheromones, and sexual pleasure.

Following Janie's multi-sensory arousal, Nanny wakes up from her "sick-headache dream" to chastise Janie for kissing Jonny Taylor. As Nanny informs Janie of the sexual violence that both she and Janie's mother suffered at the hands of white men, the narrator describes how "Nanny's head and face [resembled]... ancient power that no longer mattered...[and the] cooling palma Christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head ...had wilted and become part and parcel of the woman" (Hurston 1937, 184). It's hard not to visualize Janie's arrival at her "foundation of ancient power" just as Nanny's vitality is fading away (184). The palma Christi leaves bound to Nanny's head come from a plant

scientifically identified as *Ricinus communis*, commonly referred to as the castor oil plant. Due to its anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, the uses for castor oil are numerous, ranging from a stimulant laxative to hair-loss treatment. Most importantly in this context, as early as 1850, castor leaves are documented as being used to induce menstruation (Smith 1850, 954) and used “traditionally by women in many countries for birth control” (Salhab et, al. 1997). A 1997 study conducted on rabbits to evaluate the contraceptive effect of castor seeds found that 81% of female rabbits who received treatment failed to become pregnant—a modern validation of the plant’s potency. Considering this information, Hurston’s mention of these specific leaves is arguably significant to Janie’s reproductive freedom, especially with regard to Hurston’s work on folkloric pathways of information transference. In sum, Hurston’s choice to name this specific plant in relation to Nanny’s head can be recognized as a literal signification that goes beyond metaphoric and/or aesthetic purpose.

Janie wraps wet castor leaves around Nanny’s head to alleviate her headache—having been informed of their healing properties (and presumably other local roots and leaves) at some point in her life. Hurston’s narrator makes clear that Janie is forging a connection with the natural world around her, as evident when, shortly after her marriage to Logan Killicks, she affirms that she “knows things that nobody had ever told her ... the words of the trees and the wind” (Hurston 1937, 194). Traditional rootworkers would identify Janie’s “secret knowledge” as a calling, understood by those who possess a gift for ‘hearing’ the natural world and an ancestral connection to bear the tradition. In other words, Hurston intentionally drops signifiers pertaining to rootwork, conjure, and hoodoo to convey both Janie’s ancestral memory, and her proximity to power in the form of herbs and roots. Considering the health risks related to Black maternity and the overarching responsibility of motherhood, Janie’s quest for liberation can arguably be connected to her lack of progeny. To be clear, this is in no way implying that the journey to selfhood and independence is irrelevant or unavailable to mothers. Arguably motherhood, in and of itself, can serve as a journey to self-actualization and independence. That withstanding, Janie does not get pregnant throughout the span of her three heterosexual marriages. If Janie had, her concern for her children’s well-being may have outweighed her personal desires, aligning her actions more closely with Nanny’s desire for Janie’s upward social mobility vis-à-vis a conventional marriage and to fulfill Nanny’s dream for Janie to “take a stand on high ground” (188). In the very least, Janie’s modes of motherhood would be fodder for judgement, potentially diverting the reader’s attention from her personal quest for actualization and reshaping the narrative into a critique of maternity.

In lieu of its absence in *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s oeuvre doesn’t shy from pregnancy on the page. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, published three years prior to *Their Eyes*, follows the life of Pastor John Pearson’s wife, Lucy, from the time she is eleven years old to her death, and includes her seven pregnancies in between. Significantly, aside from Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks, she openly reveals sexual activity with both Joe Starks and Tea Cake. Janie explains that after seven years of marriage, “the bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in” (Hurston 1937, 232), interpreted by this critic to mean that for the first seven years, it is. The language pertaining to Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake, when it isn’t sexually charged, is actual sex, “doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible” (287). Physiological issues preventing conception are never brought up or even questioned within the narrative. In sum, throughout all her sexually active years and partners, there is never mention of desire for or an aversion to having children—from Janie or anyone else. This isn’t to say Hurston omits maternity in *Their Eyes* overall: Janie’s neighbor and local café owner in the Everglades, Mrs. Turner, explains she has lost five of her six children in childbirth—trauma that she bore at the hands of the white doctors she specifically chose to deliver her babies. This, in addition to Nanny’s account of the white planter who sexually assaults her resulting in the birth of her daughter Leafy and, subsequently, Leafy’s sexual assault by her white schoolteacher resulting in Janie’s conception, likely cause Janie to internalize an eschewal to pregnancy. To understand how Janie could manage this, we must consider the fugitive knowledge she would gain through living with Nanny, a formerly enslaved woman.

African healing traditions such as rootwork and herbology were brought to the U.S. via the Transatlantic slave trade and used widely by Black women who lived on plantations such as Nanny did. The name “Nanny” is significant in its association with Nanny of the Maroons, an eighteenth-century Jamaican rebel leader who is said to have possessed Obeah power. Nanny of the Maroons is now hailed as a national hero in Jamaica, with her picture displayed on the \$500 bank note. She was originally from Ghana, and a member of the Ashanti tribe. It is likely that Hurston knew about her specifically because she spent time in Jamaica with the Maroons at Accompong (Hurston 1938, 21). In his study of plantations in South Carolina low country, Charles Joyner explains that “Africans had brought their highly esteemed pharmacopoeia with them ... as part of their oral traditions [and found] the semitropical environment similar enough to that of West Africa that such knowledge was easily adapted to somewhat new flora and fauna” (1985, 148). Nineteenth-century medical journals have been found to contain articles reporting on “enslaved women’s use of tansy, rue, pennyroyal, and cedar berries to end a pregnancy”—the same herbs listed in the medical journals from Klepp’s research from the early Delaware Valley (Fett 2002, 65; Klepp 2014, 83). Furthermore, although institutional acceptance of female contraception was highly controversial throughout the U.S. until the second half of twentieth century, there is ongoing research on the natural methods women used to resist reproduction as means to control their own bodies.

It is plausible that Hurston intended for both Nanny and Janie to possess this knowledge, access to the “ancient power.” Hurston’s own knowledge of herbal medicine was extensive and topically discussed in several sections of *Mules and Men*. John Carlos Rowe theorizes that Hurston uses discursive “double-consciousness,” through her “tendency to ‘code’ messages into narratives she imagined were subject to the unofficial but still powerful censorship of the prevailing white social order” (2000, 256). With attention to the amount of secrecy surrounding the topic, Hurston’s authorial decision to code this information is logical, especially with respect to keeping these practices cloaked in secrecy—the allusion only obvious to those in the know. The transfer of this information is passing down of the legacy, stories, and traditions from old to young, as in the case of Nanny and Janie—but also the transfer of knowledge between friends, the comradery of Black female alliances to build networks and strength—such as portrayed by Janie and Phoebe. Characters in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* also transfer knowledge within community networks and similar to Hurston, Naylor codes her text in relation to herbal pharmacopoeia with a “speakerly” quality that refuses to be silenced on issues of women’s reproductive health. In this regard, abundant similarities connect Hurston’s *Their Eyes* with Naylor’s *Mama Day*. However, Naylor is more forthcoming in her willingness to reveal the tradition of herbal medicine and while Hurston can clearly be recognized as an influence on Naylor’s writing, Naylor arguably updates the tradition.

Naylor’s *Mama Day* is complex in its framing and only at the end is the reader made aware that the conversational tone throughout the narrative is a ghostly dialogue between protagonist Ophelia, otherwise known as Cocoa, and the ghost of her deceased husband, George. It’s not as if the ethereal component comes as a complete surprise—Miranda, commonly known as Mama Day, is a healer with extraordinary powers who lives on the Gullah Island known as Willow Springs. She is Ophelia’s great aunt and similar to Hurston’s Janie, many critics have pointed to her proximity and engagement with the myth of the goddess (Frosch 2015, Meisenfelder 2000, Tucker 1994). Further, Mama Day represents a community of women who “preserve their cultural memory through the repetition of material practices...and the transmission of personal and communal stories” (Lamothe 2005,155), much like Janie’s conversations with Phoebe on the back porch. Attentive to all Willow Spring’s women, Mama Day is a well-known midwife and “her fertility magic includes an intricate knowledge of and skill with the female reproductive system” (Frosch 2015, 15). For example, when called to help Carmen Rae with her sick children, whose neglectful mothering borders abuse, Mama Day “couldn’t understand these women who balked at killing a baby before it got here and then living so they’re sure to kill it after” (Naylor 1989, 192). Contrary to beliefs that the island is either stuck in the past or a utopic paradise,

Naylor proves over and over again that “traditional ways and the communities that maintain them have the resilience to survive and adapt to temporal and social changes” (Lamothe 2005, 155). This is demonstrated in the way Mama Day will support or challenge traditional belief depending on how it serves a practical purpose. Although she never specifically talks about abortive techniques, much like the coding found in the texts previously discussed, Mama Day alludes to it, articulating that she grows “senna pods, coltsfoot, horehound, white cherry bark, and black cohosh” in her garden (Naylor 1989, 193). Naylor also sets up a tri-fold dichotomy between Mama Day, a vaudeville bootlegger claiming to be a conjurer called Buzzard, and a woman named Ruby whose powers rival Mama Day’s in strength, but are used for destructive, chaotic purposes. In this way, Naylor normalizes the very literal power of herbal medicine. As opposed to Hurston’s characters, Naylor is willing to disclose a bit more in terms of means and method, though arguably owing a debt to Hurston in relation to a longer literary and folkloric tradition.

Hurston calls upon ancestral memory through Nanny’s allusion to Nanny of the Maroons, just as Naylor writes the legend of Sapphira Wade as a palimpsest of the Igbo belief in Africans who escape enslavement by ‘flying home’ across the Atlantic. Sapphira’s indelible influence can be seen as instrumental in shaping all the women in the narrative, from Mama Day to Ruby. Although I agree with Lamothe’s viewpoint that Naylor “does not explicitly foreground the Gullah Island as a site of resistance to colonial domination by alluding to the myth” (2005, 156), it’s important to note that Sapphira’s defiance of heteropatriarchal power resonates with all the women of Willow Springs. It clearly echoes through Mama Day’s actions, such as her dismissal of Buzzard and her resistance to assist Bernice with conceiving a child. Lamothe argues Naylor “waxes ironical” in Mama Day’s remedy for Bernice’s infertility being the mastery of domestic arts comprised of cooking, churning butter, and weaving, turning her into a “natural woman” (2005, 166). On the other hand, Mama Day’s remedy succeeds in building Bernice’s independence through her newly minted ability for self-sufficiency—particularly important when living on an island and perhaps a foreshadowing to the strength Bernice will need to manage the grief of losing her child. In the end, the matriarchal hierarchy is left intact and, however outraged readers may be at George’s death (Frosch 2015, 5), the fact remains that Cocoa’s illness subsides with George’s fatal heart attack. This results in forming what Thomas Frosch calls a “dual goddess” linking Mama Day with Cocoa: “old and young, priestess and neophyte, symbolic mother and daughter,” so that Mama Day is free to move on (2015, 13).

As the legacies of structural racism in the present day can be directly linked back to the Transatlantic slave trade, it is important to recognize how Black women’s resistance and resilience has persevered through time. Gendered body autonomy issues are further complicated through race, place, class, and as we consistently witness, shaped in the public sphere through a political system dominated by patriarchal structures and dominant white male society. When considering Hurston and Naylor in conversation together, the point may not be to look back in time for answers but, rather, to understand the present much like Naylor’s Mama Day does when she states that, if in the future the beloved tradition of the winter solstice candle walk were to end, it would signify that “it won’t be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory” (Naylor 1989, 111). In other words, while herbal technologies are still available to women in the current day, institutionalized medical and reproductive procedures should take a woman’s needs and choice into consideration, first and foremost. Hurston may not have intended for Janie’s quest to selfhood to rely on the herbal medicinal legacies of her ancestors—but, then again, it may be her point entirely. In the end, Janie’s struggles are certainly gendered and indicative of her social location. Through her personal journey, she overcomes social and environmental trauma to finally tell her story. What we can take from a past (which isn’t even past) is that the demand will provoke the means. The struggle surrounding body autonomy is indicative of an ongoing need—and as Mama Day explains, if the need ceases to exist, it will not be in the world we currently know.

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