In Search of Heidi Durrow within a Black Woman's Literary Tradition: On Reading *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*

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Abstract A version of this paper was delivered on February 23, 2012, as part of the Books and Coffee Series at Purdue University. This paper presents Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, and it discusses the role of biography in both the writing and receptions of her novel. In addition, it argues that Durrow's novel revises and expands received ideas concerning the black women's literary tradition in the U.S.
Key words black women's literary tradition; Heidi Durrow; *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*

In the novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2011), author Heidi Durrow tells the story of Rachel Morse's search for self following the traumatic death of her mother and siblings: Rachel, her younger siblings, and her mother, Nella, fall from the rooftop of their Chicago apartment, and Rachel is the lone survivor. Much of the novel's tension involves a complex narrative (told in both shifting and alternating character and narrative voices) of the unfolding events that surround this tragedy, including the dramatic question of whether Nella and her family were pushed from their rooftop. Did Nella push her children from the rooftop? If so, how could a mother do such a thing? Where was Doug, Nella's boyfriend, on that fateful evening, and what role did he play in the tragic event? Rachel is the lone survivor of the fall, but she is traumatized physically and emotionally, and so the details of what happened are largely unknowable, although they are hinted at throughout the narrative. Readers learn the circumstances of how the family falls from the rooftop through at least four different narratives: Rachel's sudden memories; Rachel's confession to Brick; Doug's confession to Laronne; and Nella's sobriety journal. These narratives come at the end of the novel and

reveal that Nella's jump from the rooftop is influenced by her desperate desire to protect herself and her children from the violence of her racist and sexist boyfriend. Rachel, under duress, chooses to jump after her brother is pushed and her mother jumps with her infant sister. The story of Rachel's search for self, for her new identity in the wake of this tragedy, however, is framed by the specter of this unspeakable event, and so these questions loom large over the central narrative.

Virtually orphaned, given her father's absence, Rachel is sent to live with her paternal grandmother and aunt in a predominately black community in Portland, Oregon. Since Rachel is the "light-skinned-ed," blue-eyed, biracial daughter of a white Danish mother (who she refers to as Mor) and Roger, her African American father, pressing questions concerning the nature of racial and cultural and gender identity also largely shape her search for self. She is not only recovering from the trauma that brought her to Portland, she's adjusting to living in a community where her relatives, neighbors and peers find her outward appearance remarkably different and potentially vexing. Within this Portland community, Rachel observes many implicit and explicit rules concerning how to perform race (blackness) and gender (femininity). Given Rachel's seeming isolation from black communities prior to moving to Portland, many of these rules are foreign to her. Therefore, Rachel's narrative reveals, through an outsider's perspective, how blackness and femininity are largely constructed and performed via expressions of language, social customs, and beliefs. For example, early in the novel Rachel describes her experiences with her new classmates in Portland, Oregon:

> I am light-skinned-ed. That's what the other kids say. And I talk white. I think new things when they say this. There are a lot of important things I didn't know about. I think Mor didn't know either. They tell me it is bad to have ashy knees. They say stay out of the rain so my hair doesn't go back. They say white people don't use washrags, and I realize now, at Grandma's, I do. They have language I don't know but I understand. I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes. I put all these new facts into the new girl. (10)

The "new facts", this fictitious "new girl" are largely gathered from Durrow's own experience of acculturation. Like Rachel, Heidi Durrow has a white Danish mother and an African American father who served in the military, and, like Rachel, Durrow's parents divorced when she was an adolescent. More specifically, Durrow has reported how she hoped to capture in her novel, her confusion, and the confusion of others,

about her racial and cultural identity. Because Durrow was a biracial child with blue eyes, she was often asked about her racial identity:

> "What are you?" People kept asking me this, and I thought it was so peculiar, so I would say the truth. I would say, "I'm the very best speller in my whole class." And they would laugh, and they thought, "No, no, I mean, what are you?" And I would say, "Well, I'm good at math, and I think I'm a good poet, and I like to read, and they'd say, "No, are you black or are you white?"

A central theme of her semi-autographical novel is to provide a story about biracial identity that reveals how race is socially constructed through the eyes of a young girl. Indeed, quite a bit of the popular interest and promotion of this novel (in reviews and interviews) hinge on parallel narratives that describe her own family background and biracial identity.[1] However, in addition to Durrow's own biography, critical readers should, of course, consider the literary works that might have influenced Durrow as she crafted the novel's central themes and literary elements.[2] Durrow offers her audience a number of direct references and literary allusions to other works of fiction, and I'd like to very briefly note some of them here: The novel's epigraph is taken from Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929), which explored themes of racial passing and racism. Rachel's mother, who is named Nella, is an obvious reference to this significant author. More specifically, the epigraph reads: "If a man calls me a nigger it's his fault the first time, but mine if he has to do it again," which foreshadows that Nella's final act was influenced by either her profound guilt at not anticipating and protecting her children from her lover's racial hatred or by her possessive love and desperate intent to control her children's fate…or both. Either of these motivations significantly links Durrow's Nella to Sethe, another literary mother as depicted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), who chooses filicide over the horrors of racism for her children. In addition, falls from a rooftop figure in both Larsen's *Passing* and Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. While Larsen's *Passing* ends with the uncertainty of the circumstances surrounding Clare Kendry's fall, Durrow's *Girl* holds these questions as one of its central critical tensions to be more fully answered at the novel's end. Finally, as mentioned previously, Nella's sobriety journal is one source that reveals the contexts of the family's fall from the sky, and her meditations and confessions give insight into Nella's naïve and insightful perspectives on race, gender and motherhood. Nella's entries remind me, if somewhat tenuously, of the possible connections that might be made here to Alice Walker's provocative crafting of Celie's letters to God in *The Color Purple* (1982).

I underscore here these cursory, and somewhat limited, intertextual connections, because I'd like to consider how Durrow, given her biracial and bicultural identity, might approach the question of whether (and how) her work fits into the literary and cultural production of a black women's literary tradition. In search of an answer, I came across an essay authored by Durrow titled, "Dear Ms. Larsen, There's a Mirror Looking Back," published in a 2008 issue of the literary journal P*oemmemoirstory*. Although her essay is titled "Dear Ms. Larsen, There's a Mirror Looking Back," I imagine that it could have been titled "In Search of Nella Larsen" or "Looking for Nella." The essay clearly signifies on Alice Walker's now classic essay that was variously titled "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" (1975) and "Looking for Zora" (1983). Walker's essay powerfully expresses her interest in reclaiming the life and literary legacy of author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston via a travel narrative that depicts Walker's trip to Huston's "birthplace" in Eatonville, Florida. Her search for biographical information frames her critique of Hurston's marginal position in American literature and literary histories, and eventually her search leads her to Hurston's gravesite, which is unmarked. Walker, in honor of a cultural and racial and literary kinship that she feels for Hurston, purchases a marker for the grave that reads "Zora Neale Hurston, 'A Genius of the South,' Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist, 1901 – 1960" (Walker, "Looking for Zora" 107). In addition to "Looking for Zora," Durrow also references Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South" (1974), which asserts that black women writers might look for literary models in the creative legacies of their mothers and grandmothers who left evidence of their "genius" in the "low" arts of quilting, gardening and storytelling (237-243).

Durrow uses direct references and allusions to Walker's essays in "Dear Ms. Larsen" in order to critique Walker's arguments concerning the cultural and racial genealogies that define a tradition of creativity in black women's literature. While doing so, Durrow writes herself into that tradition. The essay is framed by an epigraph excerpted from Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" that reads: "The absence of models, in literature and as in life, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—*even if rejected*—(my emphasis) enrich and enlarge one's view of existence" (Mirror 101). I emphasis the phrase, "even if rejected," because Durrow's subsequent narrative offers a partial rejection, at least, to the idea that a black woman writer must have a black mother as her model. The essay begins:

> I am visiting the grave of someone I did not know. […] This visit is a homecoming. It is the end of my long quest to make peace with an artistic

> ancestor and literary role model. It is the end of my struggle as a writer to make my racially-and culturally-divided past whole. […] I am looking for what only Nella Larsen---a woman writer who is racially and culturally my twin—can give me: a lineage, or as Alice Walker describes it, "continuity," a place in a tradition of black women writers who are also white. (101-102)

Significantly, Durrow alludes to Walker's visit to Zora Neale Hurston's gravesite to underscore the importance of her "homecoming" quest to Larsen's unmarked grave. Like Walker, Durrow ends her essay with a description of a headstone placed on Larsen's grave that reads: "Nella Larsen: A Novelist Remembered" (109). The powerful cultural meanings of kinship and lineage and funeral rights, across both essays, give this real and literary practice its rhetorical power, and Durrow's use of these motifs reveal her very personal search for self, as a bi-racial woman, within this literary tradition.

Durrow suggests that Walker's essays, and the literacy legacy that Walker and Zora Neale Hurston represent, are reserved for black girls with black mothers, whether figurative or real. Durrow's essay includes vignettes of memories and imaginations of her white mother as a successful local writer, but these "imagi-memories" are noted as counterpoints to her daunted desire to be a part of the growing community of black women writers of the 1980s and 90s. She states, "The most important lesson she learns is unspoken: black girls become black women. She will never become what her mother is. She will be a great *black* writer" (103).

In Durrow's quest to be a black woman writer who is also white, I wonder to what extent does her first novel, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, revise representations of black girlhood within the black women's literary tradition? I mentioned the possible intertextual connections with black women's literature previously, and Durrow's novel makes a significant allusion to *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison. The novel is about a little black girl who tragically believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful and, therefore, more lovable to her family and community. Durrow gives high praise to this novel in her essay:

> My favorite book-the book that introduced me to the idea that stories could be written with the lyrical language of poetry, and to the power of a novel to reflect and heal; the deepest grief---was Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. How I loved Pecola. How I wept for her. "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by *the evil of fulfillment*."[3] Not once, *not ever* in repeated adolescent or college-age readings of the book did it occur to me that I was Pecola's mirror

> opposite. I was the little black girl with blue eyes who yearned for my difference to disappear. (104)

That Durrow strongly identifies with Pecola as her mirror opposite suggests an opportunity to compare Rachel's character (who Durrow has drawn from her own experience) with Pecola's literary foil, Maureen Peal. In *The Bluest Eye,* Maureen Peal is the kind of girl who Pecola wants to be. The first mention of Maureen Peal comes from Claudia who states: "This disrupter of seasons was a new girl in school named Maureen Peal" (62). From the perspective of the novel's protagonist Claudia and her sister Frieda, Maureen is "A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards" (62). Maureen's beauty and class privilege provide her with an "unearned haughtiness" that informs her social demeanor and her access to social praise, and Maureen never seems to lack for friendship among her peers: "She enchanted the entire school […] She never had to search for anybody to eat within the cafeteria […]" (63). Claudia and Frieda are too young to understand "the *Thing* that made her beautiful," but her unearned privilege leaves Claudia and her sister envious at the very thought of Maureen, and they search for "flaws to restore our equilibrium" (63). Even as they argue with Maureen, they know that their envy is misplaced, and they also know that they "can not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world" (74).

Claudia, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*, and her sister Frieda remind me of Durrow's Tamika Washington and her clique of friends who envy Rachel's difference and taunt and torment her through grade school and high-school. There are, of course, a number of differences in their characterizations, but Claudia and Frieda are among the black girls in *The Bluest Eye* who, in response to Maureen, "stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids" (62). Likewise, Durrow's Tamika echoes Morrison's Claudia, when she says to Rachel, "You think you so cute!" (9-10). Despite her conflicts with Claudia and Frieda, Morrison's "new girl" enchants all. However, Durrow's "new girl" and her great difference, her blue eyes and her Danish heritage, isolate her from most of her peers. She states, "There are fifteen black people in the class and seven white people. And there's me. There's another girl who sits in the back. Her name is Carmen LaGuardia, and she has hair like mine, my same skin color, and she counts as black. I don't understand how, but she seems to know" (9).

Durrow revises Morrison's figuration of "the new girl" as represented in *The Bluest Eye*. Her revision expands rather than contracts our view of "the Maureen

Peals of the world." While Maureen's light complexion and hazel green eyes only hint at the "evil of fulfillment" that comes with the privilege of racialized beauty, there's no indication that Maureen (like Durrow) wishes that her hazel green eyes will disappear. Maureen knows she's cute and, during an argument between the girls, she's not above proclaiming that she is, as she retorts that Claudia and Frieda are "Black and ugly black e mos" (75). Readers might be left with the feeling that new girls like Maureen Peal simply revel in the "*Thing*" that makes them cute (74). However, Durrow's Rachel, in contrast, is haunted by her "new girl" status. Rachel states at the very beginning of the novel, as she leaves the hospital with her grandmother, "My girl in a new dress feeling has faded. My new girl feeling has disappeared" (1). She seems relieved that the fleeting feeling of specialness returns "briefly" when the bus driver comments on her "prettiest blue eyes" (1). But there are a number of instances in the text when Rachel becomes the "new girl" to deflect the trauma of her past and present, as when she grieves the loss of her family and adjusts to the "new facts" of race and gender in her new home in a predominately black community. For example, she "pretends" to be the "new girl" to meet her grandmother's gendered expectations, and she becomes the new girl to cope with her taunting classmates (6, 69). While *The Bluest Eye* allows readers to see the privilege that comes with the unearned status of Maureen's normative beauty, Durrow's Rachel allows readers to explore this privilege as impermanent and imaginary as a coping strategy to deflect the envy of her peers. There are far too many allusions to "new girl" to reference here, but their frequency in Durrow's novel underscores the critical important of this allusion as a revision of "the new girl" in *The Bluest Eye*.

I began this talk by discussing the similarities in Durrow's biography and her fictional narrative as a means to consider how Durrow challenges and revises racial discourse in her novel and, in the process, writes both to and against a black woman's literary tradition. Durrow's novel and biography not only reveal the challenges of a young biracial girl, they also reveal the challenges of her white mother. In a 1994 interview included in the anthology *Black, White, Other*, edited by Lise Funderberg, Durrow describes how, following her parents divorce, her mother, who had never held a job, returned to college and worked part-time. The family received welfare and "lived in a poor black neighborhood." Durrow states, "And that's when we became colored. I think" (351). I wonder if Durrow's intends her mother to be included in that "we" and, if so, how might we read then, by extension, Nella's racialized experience in the novel? The term "colored" reminds me of segregated water fountains and bathrooms with black and white signage---the material evidence of racial prejudice during U.S. segregation. There is also, of course, a literary history of black writers documenting when they became colored. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, writes of becoming

colored in her essay ”How it Feels to Be Colored Me” published in 1928. The phrase, and Hurston’s essay, represents an active making and remaking of race and racial difference. One is not simply “of color,” but one is “colored.” Rachel’s mother, Nella, is neither black nor biracial, but her fate is linked to that of her “colored” children. Durrow’s novel, in linking the fates of Nella to her children, makes a literary allusion to Morrison’s Sethe and extends the permeable boundaries of social constructions of race and racism, since even a “white” mother can intimately and fatefully experience racial prejudice if she has black children.

If we read, then, the plight of Durrow’s “colored” Nella and the choice that she makes to commit murder-suicide in light of the epigraph of Durrow’s novel, then the question of Nella’s racial guilt must also be considered. Nella is surprised to find that her life is so difficult in the U.S., and she struggles to make a living for her biracial children. When she comes to America, she expects to make good on the romance of the American dream. But when it comes to race, the American dream becomes the American tragedy. This tragedy of American racism is not simply that Doug (who is white) calls her children jigaboo and later, while beating them, the “n” word. Nor is it that Nella’s whiteness can’t protect her children from his racism or the racism and colorism of others. The other tragedy that this novel offers is that Nella’s whiteness, her racial privilege and cultural difference, unwittingly implicates her in the American tragedy of racism when she, with remarkable naïveté and great affection, refers to her own children in racist terms.

Durrow links *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* to a literary tradition of black women writers through the use of direct references and literary allusions to the works of writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen. As she revises Alice Walker’s influential essays on black women’s literary tradition, she decenters Hurston as central to that tradition and claims a kinship with Nella Larsen who shares her distinctive biography as a biracial woman of Danish and African-American descent, and she makes a room of her own within that tradition of black women writers. In the case of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Durrow challenges representations of light-skinned-ed and light-eyed black girls as the uncomplicated beneficiaries of racial-privilege through her representation of the “new girl” in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. Finally, as Alice Walker largely defined a literary tradition in terms of creative matrilineal genealogies and, perhaps, imagined all the mothers as black, Durrow’s novel offers an opportunity for readers to consider the shared fate of white and black mothers of black children and the potential and particular legacies of black writers who are also white.

Notes

1. On the day this talk was delivered, Heidi Durrow was the keynote speaker for Intersections-A Student Conference on Diversity at Purdue University. The conference theme was Living at the Crossroads: An Exploration of Multiracial and Multicultural Identities.

2. Werner Sollors suggests that William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) are likely influences on Durrow's experimental point of view and tragic flying scene, respectively. See Sollors, Werner. "Obligations to Negroes Who would be Kin if they were Not Negro." *Daedalus* 140.1 (2011): 142,153,8-9. *ProQuest Research Library*; *ProQuest Technology Collection*. Web. 22 Oct. 2012.

3. Durrow quotes *The Bluest Eye*. Emphasis mine.

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