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Black Feminism and African American Folklore Traditions: Acts of Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological knowledge of African American, Haitian, and Jamaican folklore is the cornerstone of her storytelling. As such, in approaching issues about race, gender, and class in the narrative, Hurston emulates W.E.B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness to artistically address the cultural, sexual, and political needs of Black women. More significantly, she revivifies literary tropes from the Black feminist perspective. According to Tolagbe Ogunleye, Hurston integrated her research of folk culture into her novels, like *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), because of what it represents— "a line to a vast, interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions" (436). In fact, African American folkloric themes and motifs are deeply rooted in the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). However, as Claire Crabtree has observed, "Critics have largely neglected or misunderstood Hurston's conscious use of traditional or 'folk' materials in the novel" (54-55). Notably, Crabtree argues that Hurston's intention was to illustrate the intimate connection between folklore and "the themes of feminism and Black self-determination" (55). In addition to this, Hurston also reimagines the British Romanticism through an amalgamation of this expertise in anthropology and mimesis, which, in turn, "indelibly shaped African American fiction" (Aguirre and Lempert 56). Therefore, this analysis will further examine the correlation between the basic tenets of Romanticism, African American folklore traditions, and the Black female protagonist's

empowerment in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Consequently, I will argue that Janie Crawford's journey to self-awareness and her female liberation are inextricably linked to the traditions of African American folklore and Romanticism.

Understanding Janie's formative years is vital to the analysis of the African American identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston exposes the complexity of race and ethnic consciousness in Janie's revelation of her skin color at an early age: "'Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!'" (Hurston 9). When Janie shares her childhood memories with her friend, Phoeby, she recalls her experiences living with her grandmother, Nanny, in "the backyard cabin of a benevolent White family" (Crabtree 62). The Washburn family, according to Janie, were "quality white folks" because they appeared to be sympathetic towards her and Nanny. This recollection underscores Janie's first realization of the *outer Black self*: "Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin' pictures… But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest" (Hurston 8-9). For Janie, her "interiority and exteriority" were in harmony until this moment (Pattison 17).

Significantly, Janie's revelation indicates that she understands "race is an element of exteriority" whereby inner thoughts can be inconsistent with "the exterior self she projects" (Pattison 17). Hereupon, the man's photograph triggers Janie's double consciousness— "'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (3)" (Pattison 18). Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness is heavily embedded in the narrative of the novel. As Deborah Clarke points out, "Recognizing visual difference, Hurston suggests, is crucial to understanding how identity is constructed: by skin and color" (599). Hence, Janie's recognition

of these differences—the inner self versus the outer self—eventually becomes her liberating power later in the novel:

> Then she thought about herself. Years ago, she told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass…She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. (Hurston 87)

Here, this depiction of Janie accepting "this place outside of herself (her racialized, sexualized skin as beautiful and empowering)" was clearly Hurston's intention to control the visual field in relation to race and gender (Pattison 18). By doing so, Hurston's Janie provides an alternative to the power of the gaze regarding the visibility of Black women's bodies in the Black and White patriarchy. Since Janie was the product of an interracial sexual assault, "[Hurston] thus manages to present a material self that can withstand the power of the gaze, transforming it into a source of strength" (Clarke 600). As Clarke argues:

> Thus, to expand "what we see" increases what we know. Throughout the novel, Hurston's use of visual imagery challenges dominant theories about the power hierarchies embedded in sight, long associated with white control, with Plato's rationality and logic, and, from a Freudian perspective, with male sexual dominance. She recasts the visual to affirm the beauty and power of color to provide a vehicle for female agency. (600)

As such, Hurston constructs a multifaceted network of personal and historical contexts within her female protagonist to challenge "the language of the visual" that often objectifies Black women (Clarke 602).

Interestingly, many critics have neglected to fully explore Hurston's utilization of the character, Nanny, in Janie's transformation. For the most part, the interpretations focus on the theory of binary opposites—negative attitudes versus positive attitudes—wherein Nanny is essentially the antithesis of Janie. Crabtree, for instance, states that Nanny's negative attitude towards "Blackness and femininity" creates "negative realities" for Janie (61). Moreover, Crabtree relies on the analysis of Mary Helen Washington to assert the following: "[P]eople in Janie's life fall into two categories: 'those, like Nanny, whose self-esteem and sense of identity are tied up with the standards dictated by white society, and others, like Tea Cake, who retain close bonds with the Black community and have about them a kind of integrity and freedom'" (62). Nanny's expectations for Janie's life indeed are derived from a distorted mindset regarding female sexuality in a male-dominated society. Nevertheless, critics, like Crabtree, perhaps misconstrue Hurston's intent for Nanny's role in the narrative. The characterization of Nanny, in fact, is paramount to understanding the parallels between the African American folk culture in the Jim Crow South and Janie's evolution as a Black woman. Although Crabtree has correctly observed that Nanny's "rich imagery of her language" makes her a sort of "poet of the folk" who brings together "the strands of folk expression, Black self- determination, and women's equality," she still concludes that Nanny's purpose in the novel is primarily juxtaposition for Janie's growth as a character (61).

Of course, the takeaway is Nanny represents "that other kind that loved to deal in scraps" (Hurston 89). But perhaps, Hurston, as an anthropological folklorist, was hoping the reader

would look beyond the surface interpretation of Nanny to "challenge the dominant discourses of race and gender" (Pattison 10). In other words, to interpret Nanny's oral history, as mere foil for Janie, discounts the significance of her experiences with racial oppression and sexual abuse in the plot of this story. As Ogunleye elucidates:

> Zora Neale Hurston (1995) referred to African American folklore as being the "boiled-down juice of human living" (p. 875). She maintained that folklore is the art of self-discovery as well as the first creative of a people, shaping and rationalizing the natural laws they found around them. As circumstances developed, African people—like all people—created theories and personalities to explain what they have observed, experienced, or would envision for the future. Hurston also asserted that it was from the folklore of African Americans that prose and other black literary art genres and forms emerged that are characterized by a "long and complicated story with a smashing climax" (p. 881) …. All that African American people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernible in this folk literature. (435-436)

When Nanny tells her personal story, as Ogunleye suggests here, "her powerful use of metaphor and vividly imagistic language" emblematically becomes the *necessary evil* for Janie's subsequent autonomous thought-process in her three marriages (Crabtree 60). However, before Janie gets to that space of female liberation, Hurston deftly charts her path with profound ties to Nanny's slavery past of subjectivity and patriarchal authority, which I will address later in this analysis.

Equally important is Nanny's perception of Janie's female body through the lens of Black men and the Southern White patriarchy: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah

can see" (Hurston 14). For Janie, Nanny's proclamation about Black femininity in the Southern landscape contributes to more conflict within her mental state. Despite this dilemma, Janie learns to navigate the duality of selves— "interiority and exteriority"—throughout her journey of self-awareness and female liberation (Pattison 17). In addition, Janie's sophisticated sense of self at the end of the novel resonates with the reader because Hurston established this exceedingly early in the story:

> Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (Hurston 11)

Here, Hurston's depiction of Janie's first encounter with her feminine sexuality demonstrates a complex Black female character who is profoundly intertwined with nature. As Alessandro Albano writes, "Hurston offers an innovative understanding of black femininity as inseparable from the natural world" (23). Hurston's masterful implementation of natural imagery in the narrative, for instance, presents the reader with a glimpse into the depths of Janie's sexual awareness, specifically regarding love and marriage: "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!" (Hurston 11). Janie's desire to be like the pear tree— "the beginning of the world"—indicates that she believes her feminine sexuality is connected to the

cycles of nature (Hurston 11). Furthermore, Janie describes Nanny's reaction to seeing her kiss a boy as "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm" (Hurston 12). Janie is essentially saying that she wants to be "*any* tree in bloom…to struggle with life," and for her; Nanny represents a dying tree that is disconnected from its natural foundation (11). From Janie's perspective, Nanny could not possibly understand her passionate thirst for life because her grandmother was "some old tree" that is an "ancient power that no longer mattered" (12).

To fully comprehend the significance of Janie's "prolonged relationship with nature," the theoretical framework regarding Hurston's aestheticism must be considered (Hajjari et al. 39). Hurston's essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), provides insight into her philosophy about African American artistry during the Harlem Renaissance. Mercedes Aguirre and Benjamin R. Lempert expound:

> In the essay, Hurston outlines the defining features of African American cultural expression. Black expression, she says, is more about *how* things are done than *what* is done. It is a process of imitation and reimagination. To Hurston, black culture "lives and moves in the midst of white civilization." Yet it borrows and reworks the elements of white culture in a subtle and creative way. (10-11)

Aguirre and Lempert's analysis here demonstrates that Hurston believed an individual's culture should be understood as "a combination of influences" (11). With this ideology in mind, Hurston reveals an avant-garde prototype that has discernibly fashioned her literary work: "a powerful form of artistry that operates through creative mimicry—that is, through the imitation of some aspect of art or language altered to create something new" (Aguirre and Lempert 9). Because of these metrics, Hurston scholars often find themselves on either side of the spectrum with respect

to Janie's personal growth as a character. For instance, as Leila Hajjari et al. have noted, "Despite her apparent growth and self-awareness gained by suffering and contemplation in nearly 24 years, the critics who acknowledge her development oppose those who criticize the so-called pastoralization of the protagonist's life" (36).

Hajjari et al. further state that Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been mostly studied "under the rubrics of African American culture," wherein "the readings are typically concerned with the analysis of the protagonist's personality in her African American society, e.g., the study of such issues as language, racial discrimination, and male authority" (35). The authors argue that reading the novel out of its traditional context—meaning, an emphasis on Janie's "connection with the pear tree as a synecdoche for nature"—illuminates Hurston's ingenuity in reimagining another literary movement, Romanticism (Hajjari et al. 35). To that point, Hajjari et al. affirm:

> Janie Crawford possesses most of the qualities that are found in romantic heroines; her mental and emotional obsession by the pear tree, a synecdoche for nature, is the shaping force of her identity, individuality, and subjectivity. Despite its modern context, the novel portrays the adventures of a romantic heroine who moves from the Blakian world of innocence to the world of experience and from thence to the world of organized innocence. (50)

Janie's development from youth to adulthood— "Blakian *innocence* to *experience* to *organized innocence*," according to Hajjari et al., denotes that the "pear tree-bee vision" is the true inspiration for the protagonist's self-discovery and ambiguous progression (35, 38). Therefore, as illustrated in the novel, Janie uses nature and her feelings as the "vehicle of self-understanding" rather than the forced reasoning from others (39). Intrinsically, Janie becomes Hurston's

prototype of the African American romantic hero in the manner of Walt Whitman— “she sings her ‘self’” by “remaining loyal to her original vision” inspired by the pear tree (40, 41). For this reason, the context of Hurston’s Romanticism deserves a more substantial look into how her African American protagonist’s life exhibits similar tenets of the British romantic ideology.

Hurston cultivates Janie’s essence—"socio-political or spiritual development”—using the philosophical and mystical undercurrents depicted in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794) written by the English poet, William Blake (Hajjari et al. 36). They contend the following:

> Janie experiences initiation, quest, and recognition, which are the three necessary steps in her romantic growth; she subdues the urge for conformism seen in Nanny and self-consuming subservience in Leafy despite all the social pressures. She preserves the vegetal matter of the two preceding generations (Nanny and Leafy) while instilling a new spirit by remaining loyal to her original vision of the pear tree in all the three stages of her development. (41)

Accordingly, as indicated here, Hurston provides the reader with the Blakian state of innocence in 16-year-old Janie—which is, the first stage in her development, i.e., the *initiation*:

> Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously…. This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. (Hurston 10)

Janie's "transcendental inclination of *watching* things" evokes the "erotic, naturalistic romanticism" as seen in Whitman's poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass* (1855) (Hajjari et al. 42). For Janie, the vision of the bee pollinating the pear tree is metaphorically orgasmic for her—an overtly sensual relationship with the natural world:

> She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (Hurston 11)

In this halcyon stage, Hurston portrays Janie's innocence as "seeking confirmation of the voice and vision" in "all other creations except herself," which, in turn, prompts the second stage—the *quest,* entering the world of experience (Hurston 11).

Viewing Janie's psychological construct from a romantic perspective offers an extraordinary dynamic between the protagonist and her grandmother—a conflict of ethos. Compared to Janie, Hurston renders Nanny with realistic observations of "the relationship among people in society" in which the grandmother's beliefs are distinctly "at odds with Janie's romantic vision" of love and marriage (Hajjari et al. 43). Nanny mainly embodies the characteristics of a woman who has not only seen but has also experienced the real-life harms under a patriarchal system that subjugates women. She says, "Whut Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey, Ah don't want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on" (Hurston 13). Yet Janie, at this early stage of her life, is confounded by Nanny's worldview because she is in the Blakian state of innocence. Nevertheless, Janie is destined to change due to Hurston's literary, aesthetic design:

"Romanticism is defined in terms of change and of *becoming*. It opposes stagnation and fixity. Janie, in her immaturity and innocence, has to undergo change, the change that accompanies experience" (Hajjari et al. 43). Crucially though, "Nanny's realism" has everlasting implications on Janie's consciousness as she embarks on her peregrinations of the self (Hajjari et al. 42).

In this phase of acquiring knowledge via experience, Janie's transformation is as inevitable as "it is inevitable in nature" (Hajjari et al. 43). The true measure of her loyalty to nature—that is, the gauge by which she weighs the value of love—is tested in all three of her marriages. Since Nanny arranged her first marriage to Logan Killicks, Janie quickly finds out that her vision of love and marriage is counterintuitive to adulthood, insofar she acknowledges that her "dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 25). As a result, Janie's womanhood is defined by the conventional standards in her society, whereby she is positioned "deep into the gloom of her second phase of Blakian experience" (Hajjari et al. 45). And this phase continues for the next two decades of Janie's life—more pointedly, in her second marriage to Joe Starks, solidifying the harsh reality of her male-dominated society.

The Blakian world of organized innocence, i.e., *recognition*—Janie's unity with nature, is ultimately fulfilled when she marries her third husband, Tea Cake. In this final stage, Janie's lifelong devotion to nature is revivified because of Tea Cake: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (Hurston 106). As Hajjari et al. write, "She sins against nature and against the pear tree by marrying Logan Killicks…She suffers for more than 20 years with the climactic pain of losing Tea Cake only to rejoin and to repeat her vision of the bee and the blossom through the telling her story to Phoeby" (49). The adventures of Hurston's African American protagonist subsequently provide the reader with a new understanding of Romanticism

in which the romantic heroine's affinity to the pear tree, a synecdoche for nature, is the "shaping force of her identity, individuality, and subjectivity" (Hajjari et al. 50).

So, Hurston's praxis of Romanticism for Janie's "tripartite development" ostensibly unveils a deeper truth about American history (Hajjari et al. 35). Emphasizing that the Black culture "lives and moves in the midst of white civilization," Hurston offers the reader a lyrical, dream world in which an African American female protagonist overcomes the stark realities of the Jim Crow Era (Hajjari et al 11). This "organistic view of romanticized pastoralism" recontextualizes the Black female experience to not only assuage the bitterness of subjugation but to also provide female agency and empowerment as well (Hajjari et al. 37). On the other hand, however, Hurston does not wholly disregard the bona fide worldview, i.e., Nanny, during this period. Hurston's notion of the Black identity is therefore seen as a depiction of a "collective portrait of a people"—an African American culture relying on its "adaptability to survive amidst an antagonistic culture" (Aguirre and Lempert 30, 35). Accordingly, by objectifying the romantic ideology for Janie's personality, Hurston revivifies the literary tropes while simultaneously echoing W. E. B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness. Within this scope, namely, W.E.B. DuBois argues that "things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave" (Aguirre and Lempert 21).

Respectively, the tree motif in the narrative also suggests a broader issue in Janie's overall development as a Black woman during the Jim Crow Era:

> You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. (Hurston 16)

Many critics, surprisingly, overlook the plausibility of Nanny's psychological trauma from slavery being passed down to Janie. That is, with this negative rhetoric about "feelings dragged out drama from the hollows of her heart," Nanny is unconsciously instilling in Janie her severe emotional distress with respect to race and gender in the South (Hurston 16). And Janie, without realizing it, mimics this behavior, living vicariously through her grandmother. Understandably, the critical approaches to the novel focus on Janie later coming to the realization that "[s]he hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love" (Hurston 89). Thus, as Pattison points out, "Many critics, including [Péter] Szabó's and [Jocelyn Hazelwood] Donlon, have detailed the oppressive discourses of race and gender embedded in Eatonville—the hegemonic forces that compel Janie to seek spaces of resistance" (13). Yet the interpretations do not delve into a comprehensive analysis of race and gender regarding the implications of Nanny's colonized state of mind, perhaps, haunting Janie in her three marriages. Nanny's mindset—which is ingrained with the slave master's viewpoint that Black people are inferior and not worthy of better circumstances—affects how Janie behaves towards the men in her life. In this regard, Hurston's larger aim was to expose another angle of freed Black women's mental and emotional anguish in the postbellum South. Referring to Louis Althusser's term interpellation, "the process of being passively, unconsciously drawn into dominant social assumptions," Nanny's aspirations for Janie derives from the White hegemony, which encapsulates the Black folk culture in the novel (Parker 243). Consequently, Nanny's storytelling pathos about her past life as a slave— "Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate"—leaves an indelible mark on Janie's psyche for years (Hurston 20).

Hurston, as stated earlier, starts Janie on this course tethered to Nanny's world of subjectivity and patriarchal authority. When Nanny tells Janie that she must get married because

"youse got yo' womanhood on yuh," she chooses Logan Killicks for her husband (Hurston 12). For Janie, Logan Killicks is nothing like the "things sweet…lak when you sit under a pear tree" (Hurston 24). Despite this disappointment, Janie still marries Logan because she trusts what was told to her: "Yes, she would love Logan after they were married. She could see no way for it to come about, but Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so" (21). But what is truly noteworthy is Nanny's advice to Janie when she later complains about not loving her husband:

> If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and…Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It's jus' makes you sweat. (Hurston 23)

Hurston here suggests that some oral traditions in the Southern Black culture mimics the "hegemonic white patriarchal authority" (Pattison 9). Furthermore, Hurston also manages to lay the groundwork for the subjugation of Janie, specifically, when Nanny says, "Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody" (Hurston 23).

Janie's brief marriage to Logan Killicks was long enough for the reader to understand Hurston's strategy for sketching out "masculine oppression as a necessary prerequisite to self-actualization" (Miller 75). With respect to Logan's subjugation of Janie, his patriarchal dominance is illustrated in a variety of ways. For instance, when Janie attempts to assert her will, refusing to shovel manure as he demands, Logan, without any hesitation, silences her: "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (Hurston 31). Hurston depicts Janie, on numerous occasions, pushing back against Logan's wielding of his

male authority, but to no avail. He eventually forces her into submission with the threat of physical violence— “Ah’ll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!” (Hurston 31). Remarkably, Hurston does provide Janie an opportunity to escape her oppressive marriage with Logan Killicks, but only to place her in a worst environment of misogyny and patriarchal strictures.

We are indeed presented with Hurston’s pattern of subjugation for Janie through the eyes of the “cityfied, stylished dressed man,” Joe Starks: “You behind a plow!... A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (Hurston 27, 29). Given that, as Clarke indicates, “Janie’s visible beauty makes her vulnerable to both adoration and abuse” (601). Thus, Clarke has observed:

> In establishing a rhetoric of sight, Hurston ensures that black bodies remain powerfully visible throughout the novel, particularly the bodies of black women. As Audre Lorde has noted, visibility is the cornerstone of black female identity, “without which we cannot live”: Within this country where racial difference creates constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism… (600)

Therefore, Janie, “already captivated by Joe Starks’ image of her,” in a sense, is unknowingly manipulated by his male gaze because Joe *sees* her. And ironically, Janie’s visibility in the Eatonville community while married to Joe Starks is one of the main reasons behind her lack of female agency and marginalization: “Her hair was NOT going to show in the store….He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in it…That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store….She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others” (Hurston 55). The Eatonville community’s store thus becomes a space of male

domination over Janie. Like Logan Killicks, Joe "wanted her submission," especially in the presence of other men (Hurston 71). However, even when Joe tells her, "You getting' too moufy, Janie," she refuses to be silenced by him (75). This is pivotal because Hurston provides the reader with the dynamics of the misogynistic, sexist male and the outspoken female: "Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!" Joe replies, "Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one" (71). Although this characterization of Joe Starks illustrates a sheer contempt for women, Hurston goes much further with his masculine oppression: "Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more" (71). Joe Starks, unlike Logan Killicks, physically abuses Janie to the extent that "she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains" (72). Understanding Hurston's methodology of "oppressive masculine spaces" cultivating the road for Janie's self-actualization and autonomy, then, Joe Starks is the overriding factor to it all (Pattison 9). And in doing so, Hurston uses natural imagery to illustrate the magnitude of Janie's despair: "The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in… She wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (Hurston 71).

As readers, we see the arc of Janie's development in clear focus after Joe Starks' death: "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*" (Hurston 89). Here, as stated earlier, Nanny's pathos left such an indelible mark in Janie's psyche, whereby she saw "her life like a great tree in leaf" with "dawn and doom was in the branches" (Hurston 8). Although Joe Starks, according to Janie, "did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees," it was Nanny's

memory— “still powerful and strong”—which caused her to be initially apprehensive towards his advances in their first meeting (29). Janie thought that she could subdue Nanny’s shadow by following Joe into the “far horizon” (29). And yet, again, her grandmother’s past looms out of the darkness into her life: “She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels” (76). However, Hurston does provide Janie another avenue to “*go* there tuh *know* there” with her third husband, Tea Cake (192).

According to Shawn E. Miller, most feminist critics have problems with the interpretations that celebrate Tea Cake as “Janie’s liberator” because “he displays all the nasty characteristics” of her other male oppressors. But, as Miller has observed, some of these feminist critics “who have become troubled by Tea Cake,” ironically, still insist that “he is part of Janie’s progression toward autonomy, if not its end” (80). Perhaps this confusion in the reading indicates a misinterpretation of Hurston’s message in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As I mentioned earlier, Hurston establishes a path for Janie based on a foundation from the oral traditions of the Southern Black culture, mimicking the Southern White hegemony. Considering the setting of the novel, Janie does submit to all three men in some form; though, there is one exception. Janie offers “no resistance to Tea Cake’s commands, which are often as patriarchal as those of Killicks and Starks” (Miller 83). As Miller argues:

> Unlike Killicks, for instance, who says directly to Janie that she will do the work he tells her to do, Tea Cake invents charming reasoning for his wanting Janie to pick beans with him. In short, he allows her to bow down without losing face…. Hurston, by allowing Janie to achieve her vision of marriage by submitting to a man, has seemingly winked at an oppressive tradition. (80,84)

Hurston's use of African American folklore is certainly predicated on "the slave narrative tradition," which, in turn, allows Janie the ability to negotiate her masculine oppression (Miller 85).

In this manner, Hurston sets up a "liminal space for Janie's transformation" (Pattison 22). Appealing and submitting to Tea Cake's patriarchy with flatter, Janie increases the amount of her power beyond her imagination. Janie has "spaces of agency on the muck," in comparison to her life in the cultural milieu of Eatonville (Pattison 22). The narrative voice in the novel, for instance, tells the readers: "Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor!" (Hurston 134). To bring Janie's story full circle, Hurston makes Janie return to Eatonville, after Tea Cake's death:

> The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day. (Hurston 2)

Here, the readers thus are presented with "the communal gaze," which in and of itself, empowers Janie (Clarke 606). In fact, she knowingly says, "Ah reckon they got *me* up in they mouth now" (Hurston 5). And Janie, as Hurston intended, is now a source of strength who can withstand the power of the gaze. As Clarke elucidates:

> Hurston establishes the full power of the visual… Initially subjected to the defining and objectifying power of a communal gaze, Janie…learns to employ vision in ways that are self-affirming rather self-sacrificing. Returning to Eatonville…Janie finds herself in a position very familiar to her: the object that all eyes are upon…. But when she keeps on walking, refusing to stop and acquiesce to their voyeuristic desires, talk becomes specularization: "The porch couldn't talk for looking." (604)

As such, Hurston manages to situate Janie's story in the "collective folk consciousness" (Crabtree 55). This is significant because as Crabtree notes, "a folklore tale is in part determined by its replicability…In folkloristic terms, Janie's story in a memorate or true experience narrative placed within a fictional framework but nonetheless privileging itself and asserting its own authenticity" (56). Accordingly, the front porches of the Eatonville community will be energized for a lifetime with the storytelling of Janie Crawford's journey of "de big 'ssociation of life": "They passed nations through their mouths" (Hurston 6,1).

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that the traditions of African American folklore and a revision of the tropes of British Romanticism are an integral part of Janie Crawford's transformation to self-awareness and liberation. Ultimately, by objectifying the romantic ideology for Janie's personality, Hurston reworks the elements of Romanticism alongside W.E.B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness to create a Black feminist, avant-garde prototype in the literary genre. Nevertheless, the story of Janie's journey is problematic for most critics because they cannot determine how "she arrives at her complex sense of self" (Pattison 9). Surely, I agree that there are textual inconsistencies and contradictions, but the historical context behind the setting of this novel—the Jim Crow South—is the pathway to some clarity. Understanding the role of the traditional folk experience as well as Hurston's reimagined

romantic ideology in the narrative helps explain Janie's evolution from resistance to submission at novel's end. Hurston's literary technique for allowing Janie to use "submission as a strategy of resistance" is based on the slave paradigm— "empowerment not through escape from conventional expectations, but rather through satisfaction of them" (Miller 85, 84). As Miller argues:

> Janie, who is incapable of single-handedly unmaking conventional marriage, must find a way to appropriate it in order to achieve her own ends. She is not responsible for externally-imposed sex roles, nor should we interpret her submission to them as whole-hearted consent to their justice; however, she has learned in her first marriages that defiance, though just, though heroic, is quixotic if not wholly disastrous. (92)

Seemingly controversial, Janie's "covert feminism" that Miller suggests here is truly in line with who she is as a Black woman in the postbellum South (Miller 85). Recall what Nanny says to Janie about not loving her husband, Logan: "Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody" (Hurston 23). Hurston's deployment of the traditional folk experience and Romanticism in the narrative thus provides her female protagonist an opportunity to achieve a level of agency for her feminine empowerment. But even more important, she contrives Janie's character arc by revivifying romantic literary tropes to impart an unalloyed truth about the history of the American South. And not surprisingly, her unique approach to storytelling "reminds the reader how difficult negotiating social constructions of gender have been and continue to be," especially in the bowels of racial and sexual oppression (Newell 134).

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