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"AH AIN'T BROUGHT HOME A THING BUT MAHSELF": CULTURAL AND FOLK HEROISM IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND ELLEN DOUGLAS' *CAN'T QUIT YOU, BABY*

by

KIMBERLY G. COCHRAN

Under the Direction of Dr. Thomas McHaney

ABSTRACT

In scholarship discussing Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's self-realization is central to her identity, and many scholars view and discuss her as a cultural hero. But her success is conditional on circumstance rather than composition of character, a fact this essay explores through a careful comparison between Janie and Tweet, a character from Ellen Douglas' *Can't Quit You, Baby*; specifically, while Janie ultimately succeeds in her world—even while confronting gender oppression—she improbably avoids the additional, crippling subjugation of racial prejudice that Tweet endures. Through this and a discussion of definitions and Hurston's work as a folklorist/writer, I attempt to show that Janie can be more effectively described as a folk hero, a title that: (1) accurately identifies her functions in her fictional society and in literary fiction and (2) satisfies Hurston's goals in the novel while also accurately reflecting Janie's journey to self fulfillment.

INDEX WORDS: Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie, Cultural hero, Folk hero, Folk, Ellen Douglas, *Can't Quit You Baby*, Tweet, Racial oppression, Gender oppression, Self fulfillment, Self realization

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2009

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To my husband and son, Nate and Noah, who have yet again given me purpose in completing what seemed to me impossible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TITLES

Can't Quit: *Can't Quit You, Baby*

OED: *Oxford English Dictionary*

Telling Memories: *Telling Memories Among Southern Women*

Their Eyes: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

CHARACTERS

Jody: Joe Starks

Nig: Philip Carrier

Tea Cake: Virgible Woods

Tweet: Julia Carrier

CHAPTER I

ESTABLISHING DEFINITIONS AND PLOTTING A COURSE

Scholars have critiqued myriad aspects of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* along with many of her other works; the latter twentieth century in particular saw an explosion of scholarship regarding the status of the fictional Janie Killicks Starks Woods and her self-realization and achievement in the course of the novel. She has, in effect, become a female African American cultural hero to many readers and critics who view her development in a positive, pervasive manner.[1] Yet little has been done to dissect Janie's remarkable journey in terms of reality on the dual levels of gender and race, specifically in consideration of Hurston's goals in the novel. If one views the cultural hero as a character who changes the world around her through "invention or discovery" ("Culture Hero," *Wikipedia*), one must look to the effects of reality on the supposed cultural hero. In order for the hero to be truly effective, her story must function within the guidelines of plausibility. Further, one must view the cultural hero in terms of whether the story could be duplicated by other figures or even repeated by the same character; in this, the aspects of highly unlikely circumstances must be considered. Because so much of the heroic journey must be based on conditional factors and extreme events, the possibility of the creation of a real cultural hero seems more akin to fiction than life, revealing the idea of a true cultural hero to be a myth.

The concepts of the folk hero and the cultural hero are, admittedly, murkily defined ones. Definitions and citations refer only to the term "culture hero." The specific wording provided by the *Wikipedia* source for cultural hero is one who changes the world around her through "invention or discovery." This is relatively vague, providing few if any guidelines as to who can achieve the status of cultural hero. Some definitions include the concept of the mythological; the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* denotes that the culture hero can be an ordinary human but is "typically mythological." It further

[1] Notably, while Janie may be seen as a female African American cultural hero, she is not necessarily an African American *feminist* cultural hero. This is discussed in more detail on page 58.

explains that while the said hero may in some cases have "founded" his/her society, he/she may also have simply shaped the existing culture in some way. Indeed, a listed example from the 1954 publication *Mind* states, "The culture-hero has a vague complex status, part-man, part demi-god." A simplistic, general secondary definition is of a "prominent or important" person within a society. Notably, the primary definition of the term also indicates that the cultural hero must "embod[y] the culture of a particular society" ("Culture Hero," *OED*). An intriguing secondary definition of culture hero from another dictionary database further suggests the role of the mythological cultural hero (as this source is definitive that the hero is either mythological or "mythicized") and notes that the hero is considered to have to have furnished society the means of existence or survival (as, for example, Prometheus is said to have furnished fire) ("Culture Hero," *Dictionary.com*). Though the concept of mythology would nicely supplement a discussion of Hurston's use of the folkloric in *Their Eyes*, Janie seems to reject the role. Upon her return to Eatonville, she comments, "'You must think Ah brought yuh somethin'. When Ah ain't brought home a thing but mahself" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 4). Janie's comment is true in that what she does offer Pheoby, her story, is part of herself. To look, then, at Janie without the hint of mythology, one must consider her journey as "real," not symbolic, a series of human events central to the novel and the concept of her self-development, basically plausible, and able to be duplicated. That is, any woman might have these relationships, travels, and encounters with a real—not a mythical—natural world. As noted by the *OED*, for one to be a cultural hero speaks to the notion that the hero represents the *essence* of a particular culture.

"Folk hero," on the other hand, is defined as "pertaining to, current or existing among, the people" ("Folk," *OED*). Though she is significantly separated from being "common" by appearance and by an inability to truly "fit in," Janie certainly lives among her people—even to the extent of being isolated among them from whites. In part, this very separation from whites creates Janie's inability to be a commoner (as fellow African Americans seek to "otherize" her) and creates her identity as a folk hero (she is given the opportunity to reject identity as "folk" but continually chooses it over "sophistication"). Various definitions refer to class as an important factor—those considered folk representing a particular

class or opposing the "sophisticated or cosmopolitan." In this, Janie certainly identifies herself as "folk" through her words and actions. Moreover, the *OED's* definition of folk is rather broad, offering the possibility for "folk" to refer to an individual, which Janie certainly emphasizes herself as being throughout the narrative, or any group, including race. Examples of folk heroes are typically real people, figures compiled from realistic elements of actual people, or characters that could be real people. Even in the case of an actual person, though, (as in the case of Davy Crockett, for example) the realistic story becomes blended with lore in folk legends. Because Janie operates primarily within her own race (not performing in the face of racial oppression) but does confront gender challenges, she can be a folk hero for women, African Americans, or—most specifically—African American women

Because *Wikipedia* is a Wiki, it, by nature, includes the opinions of the general public since anyone can offer definitions to the article provided on the website. Thus, the definition of folk hero offered by *Wikipedia* is more generalized and may more accurately reflect how the reading public receives a character such as Janie. This source provides for a real or mythical figure to play the role of the folk hero. It states that "The single salient characteristic which makes a character a folk hero is the imprinting of the name, personality, and deeds of the character in the popular consciousness. This presence in the popular consciousness is evidenced by mention in folk songs, folk tales, and other folklore" ("Folk Hero"). In *Their Eyes* Hurston creates folklore and a character that functions as the folk hero. In this definition, its characterization as folk functions on dual levels: (1) Janie and her deeds are mentioned/discussed by the commoners of Eatonville (and many common folk she encounters throughout her journeys) within the novel and (2) the text itself is discussed in reality, as folklore should be.

A comparison of the two similarly composed characters, Janie in *Their Eyes* and Julia (Tweet) Carrier in *Can't Quit You, Baby* (*Can't Quit*), illustrates the special circumstances of their lives and time. In a sense, Janie operates outside the reality of her contemporary South in terms of race because much of her story puts her in an all-black town or an all-black community of part-time agricultural workers. Janie's tale lived in altered circumstances might have been very different. Tweet, on the other hand, spends her life in highly segregated white scrutiny in a racially conservative state, working for white

people on a farm and in town. The two characters reveal that the idea behind the cultural hero is conditional on time, place, and circumstance as well as composition of character. To be sure, Hurston's thorough understanding of the rampant bigotry of her native South can be revealed through her biographical information and writings. So if Janie's success is wholly dependent on the tenuous lack of racism, the question then becomes whether or not Hurston even intended Janie to function as any sort of racial hero. Considering Hurston's anthropological training and her expressed/demonstrated desire to preserve the folklore of African-descended Americans, it seems logical to explore if Hurston's goal in Janie's story was to create a plausible character who presents to her readers a folk hero functioning in a story that preserves the folkloric nature Hurston so valued.

CHAPTER II

COMPOSITION OF CHARACTERS: WHY COMPARE JANIE TO TWEET?

The character Tweet may help reveal Janie's failure to meet the required definition for cultural hero. These two African American female characters have remarkable similarities in their stories that warrant their direct comparisons—though, certainly, beneath the surface of these likenesses are notable divergences of circumstance and/or result. Externally, both women tell life stories to female companions, though Janie's black friend Pheoby is a far more willing recipient of her gift of story/oral tradition than Tweet's white employer Cornelia. Both live in the South, Janie in Florida and Tweet in Mississippi. Though Janie is continually admired for her beauty Tweet is scarred by illness. Both have an unusual physical characteristic, however, which makes them unique. Janie's hair is a constant source of appeal to men—those to whom she is married and many to whom she is not—and Tweet has remarkable eyes, which are a source of beauty in her youth (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 7). Though Tweet becomes a step-mother, she is close in age to her stepdaughters and more friend than parent; thus, both Janie and Tweet are without the experiences of childbirth and motherhood. This is crucial in that both women must seek their femininity and womanhood within themselves.

The childhood experiences of the women mirror one another, which leads to a similarity in strength of spirit. Janie's mother was—the text is somewhat unclear—raped or taken advantage of by her teacher, who ran away from town (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 19-20), and Tweet's mother was impregnated at a very young age by a callous father who also abandoned her (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 18). Janie and Tweet are raised by their respective grandparents, a watchful grandmother in Janie's case and a caring grandfather in Tweet's. Both women marry to find security—Janie's grandmother propels her into an oppressive, loveless marriage, and Tweet finds an honest but somewhat unfaithful partner whose nickname is "Nig" because he works so hard. Janie does not discover her deep-seated resentment for Nanny's narrow view for many years after Nanny's death: "She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. […] Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever

made, the horizon […] and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 89). This restricted "horizon" draws attention to the novel's opening lines about the affairs of men: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns […], his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men" (1). Hurston's narrator contrasts this hemmed-in horizon with the life of a woman, which is ruled not by such limitations of place and time but only by her memory: "women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth" (1). In essence, Janie's rejection of Nanny's/man's manner of living frees her. This may, in a way, predict Janie's behavior with, and victory over, the men in her life.

Though Tweet's grandfather is kind, her father Julius tries to kill her by burning the shack where she and her grandfather live and then sells her land inheritance to a white man in an underhanded, illegal deal. In response to his further crime of attempting to steal the money left to Tweet by her grandfather, Tweet shoots a hornets' nest so that the resulting stings nearly kill Julius, much to Tweet's delight (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 58, 110-23). Thus, both Janie and Tweet gamely embrace bitterness for parental figures who, inadvertently or purposefully, wrong and restrain them.

The women's blatant honesty about family and past[2] pairs with other similarities of character/personality. Janie and Tweet share resilience throughout their lives, despite the hardships and respective tragedies they endure. Tweet even notes that, though her luck turns sour at age fifteen when Julius re-enters her life, she was "born lucky" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 18-9). Her caretaker grandfather dies soon after in the aforementioned murder attempt by her father and stepmother, and Tweet pragmatically marries Philip "Nig" Carrier for security. Though he is hardworking and not unkind to her, Nig is unfaithful in their marriage, and Tweet's life is filled with injustices at the hands of whites, from the Lord

[2] The honesty itself, though present in both characters, is far from identical in its manifestations. This is further clarified in the discussion of personality differences on pages 9-11.

family to Wayne Jones, the restaurant owner. She ultimately suffers an aneurysm, loses the power of speech, and struggles to communicate. Yet Tweet's strength lies in her voice (detailed in the later points on personality differences), and though her tragedies might have silenced another, "might have put off a less committed storyteller […] Tweet talked on" (7). Janie is a storyteller as well, though she is prevented during her first two marriages from sharing the pleasures of tale-telling.

Janie is confronted with more than just her own troubles. Her grandmother attempts to position the weight of her own life's burdens on Janie's shoulders. She tells the story of her child born of an unwilling relationship with her master, the cruelties of a jealous mistress, and Janie's mother's ruin. Such events, Nanny believes, justify her insisting that Janie enter a loveless marriage with Logan Killicks, a much older and unimaginative but stable partner in Nanny's eyes (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 15-20). Nanny counters Janie's notion that marriage should include love, instead insisting that sorrow is a persistent, natural part of life. She says, "'Taint no use in you cryin', Janie. […] But folks is meant to cry 'bout somethin' or other'" (24). Soon thereafter, Nanny dies, leaving Janie to her unhappy marriage. But Janie perseveres, abandoning Logan for Joe Starks, who then reveals himself to be yet another character who attempts to stifle Janie's spirit. She spends many years married to him, struggling with and then accepting his limitations. In response to his physical abuse many years after their nuptials, "Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. […] [But she had always been] saving up feelings for some man she had never seen" (72). Eventually she defends herself verbally to Jody's vicious attacks, ridiculing his lost virility, and he dies. Then Janie meets and falls in love with Tea Cake, as unpromising drifter who nevertheless becomes her soul mate. After Tea Cake's untimely death by Janie's hand—following his crazed attempt to harm her because he has contracted rabies while fighting a dog—Janie returns home to Eatonville, aware of but undisturbed by the vicious gossip of the townsfolk and eager to tell the full story of her adventures.

An equally powerful aspect of their personalities is the faith Tweet and Janie keep in themselves as a result of positive experiences in youth. Those whom the women truly love remain with them in

spirit, and one example of each appears in each novel. Tweet's grandfather saves her from her intended burning tomb at age fifteen then dies by the roadside just after their escape. But upon seeing his dead body lying in the snow, Tweet notes that he appeared as if "he hadn't fallen down, he had laid down on his back, closed his eyes, straighten[ed] his legs, folded his hands on his breast. Much as to say, It's OK, Tweet. I'm just going to take me a little nap" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 57). Considering Tweet's childhood fear of ghosts and demons, her comfort in the corpse of her grandfather is worthy of note. Later, when she goes to collect his money with her stepdaughter Cynthia, Tweet informs the girl that Grandpa died there: "You don't need to be scared of him, I say. I wasn't never when he was alive" (116). Her comment indicates her belief that her grandfather is still in the place where he died, and because of her relationship with him, she is comforted by that fact. Janie, too, encounters the spirit of her departed loved one, though his presence is possibly metaphorical even to her. At the close of the novel, Janie retires to her bedchamber and "commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was […]. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking […] Here was peace" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 193). This passage speaks to Janie's finding strength within herself, like Tweet, based upon positive memories.

Many differences also exist between these two female characters. They live in different times, the early twentieth century for Janie and the 1940s through 70s for Tweet. Although the time of Janie's life should be far more repressive than the time in which Tweet lives, the absence of whites in most of Janie's adventures causes the difference, not anything she herself does. One major difference between *Their Eyes* and *Can't Quit* is the awareness of current racial events Douglas brings into her novel. Broughton and Williams observe that Douglas' novel depicts "women both enclosed by and alienated from families, women with cross-racial relationships, women with a strong sense of the South as *place*, women who are mature sexual beings" (64). One could not say the same for *Their Eyes*.

In general, Tweet is far more pragmatic than Janie.[3] While Janie is forced into marriage, Tweet proposes to Nig on the basis of logic (she needs a protector, he needs a mother for his children) (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 60). Janie, however, is unwilling to accept less than her adolescent dream of fulfilled sexuality while Tweet accepts not only less than a dream but, eventually, an unfaithful husband, reasoning that upon his return home she cannot refuse him—for many reasons, not the least of which is her basic sexual attraction to him (210). Indeed, Tweet is far more straightforward in her sexuality than is Janie. For Janie, sexuality comes in the form of a bloom, which is alternately blossoming, being smothered, or being hidden throughout *Their Eyes*. Janie's concerns center around her own fulfillment, and after Jody's success in Eatonville, money ceases to be a consideration. Tweet, however, must continually labor for a daily or weekly wage or suffer the indignities of sharecropping, which Susan Tucker describes in her study of white women and black domestics *Telling Memories Among Southern Women (Telling Memories)* as a crippling and dehabilitating job just "a step away from slavery" (20). Tweet and Nig face limited employment opportunities for African Americans, and they must support not only themselves but also two children. Had Janie faced the obstacle of caring for young, she would have been hindered in her travels and, thus, self-fulfillment. The quintessential practicality of Tweet's nature is revealed in her imagined commentary to Cornelia in New York: "If it's wash, carry it home, wash it and iron it. Get you a red wagon and a basket and carry it back. Hold on, that's the message. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on. If it's water, drink it, wash with it, cook with it. If it's a cotton sack, hmmmm….My advice, if it's a cotton sack, go get you a better job. Let go, let go, let go" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 196).[4] Simple and basic, the advice—internalized by Cornelia—reveals an orderly and responsible mind, rife with practical, cause-and-effect advice. This is evident even to Cornelia through the measured amounts of attention she

[3] Admittedly, the scarring that destroys Tweet's physical attractiveness may increase this characteristic in comparison to Janie's continued and unusual beauty. Tweet has experienced both the advantage of beauty and the disadvantage of disfigurement, certainly a sobering and perhaps embittering experience.

[4] The line "Keep your hand on the plow, hold on" is from a spiritual Douglas heard, sung by Marian Anderson (Douglas, "An Interview," Ellis 118). As to Tweet's character, this may reveal that even as late as the 1970s Tweet combated racial struggles just as potent as those present in the African American community for decades.

pays Tweet (though, to be sure, Cornelia is unaware of the more intricate, perhaps creative aspects of Tweet's personality.)

Further, Tweet is actually far more forceful and vocal than Janie, breaking the barriers of gender and race on many occasions. In contrast, Janie's voiced disapproval is infrequent enough to warrant literary treatment on each occasion. Consider, for example that the narrator carefully details each time that Janie pronounces her unhappiness: to Nanny regarding her proposed marriage to Logan and then regarding her unhappiness in the actual marriage (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 13, 22); to Logan regarding his desire for her to worship his acreage and his selection of her as his wife (31-2); to Jody regarding his denigration—of women in general and then of her own body in particular—and on his death bed regarding his mistreatment of her (72, 78-9, 85-7); and to Tea Cake regarding his flirtation with another woman (137-8). Each time, Janie is rebuffed in some manner (physical violence, verbal violence, death itself, and violent sexual desire) and falls silent, not getting any satisfactory response to her complaint. In two situations, however, she quietly leaves (abandoning Logan after several days and figuratively separating herself from Jody as she tucks a portion of herself away from him). With Tea Cake's infidelity, she responds with physical violence herself. But, ultimately, she is overcome by her love for him as "he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible" (137). The next morning she is only able to teasingly question if he prefers the other woman, but later, when Tea Cake is truly insane, she takes his life (keeping only the memory of him at his best and most liberating).

Tweet tells Cornelia a handful of life stories, including her resistance to her oppressors, because her narration is tempered by her audience. Likely, these do not comprise the entirety of Tweet's verbal dissent in her life. Consider, as an example, her confrontation of Mr. Lord in his backyard. She cannot bear the injustice of Mr. Lord's refusal to pay what she and Nig are owed from sharecropping; she grasps a hatchet, intent on taking a goose from Lord's lake to feed her family on Christmas. Mr. Lord claims that he is in control even when he has clearly lost it: "Now Tweet, he says, You more than welcome to that goose. You take her home and enjoy her, you hear me? Nig, you take Tweet on home. She don't

hardly know what she's saying, much less what she's doing" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 105). The white landowner must retreat to appealing to the marital/gender control of her husband to maintain racial control. Yet Tweet succeeds in taking from Mr. Lord's plenty without repercussion. Both men are wary and unprepared for her determination and strength of character. The occasional nature of her outbursts mirror Janie's infrequent but powerful use of her own voice amongst men, but Janie never surmounts the dual challenge of gender and race as Tweet does in this scene with the aptly named Mr. Lord.

While Janie, living most of her years in an all-black town with a wealthy husband, finds herself capable of leaving situations of conflict, Tweet would have little success in similar action; mired in the deep South with no training suitable to find work outside sharecropping, the service industry, or domestic labor, Tweet very likely feels trapped. All she can do to protest her lot is to readily and audibly admit her rage. She does so on many occasions: describing how she would enjoy stabbing Mr. Lord, detailing the imagined bloody scene grotesquely (103); relishing the idea of hornets killing her wicked father, Julius, and laughing that he never fully recovers from the atrocious care he receives in the colored hospital (123); when she regrets that the Drano she puts in the douche bag for Puddin Greene (Nig's mistress) eats through the plastic before it is used (209); and when, just escaped from the throes of stroke-induced silence, she tells Cornelia of her loathing for her and all whites—"You ain't got *sense* enough to know I hated you. I hate you all my life, before I ever know you. […] Every day, every hour of my entire life from the day I'm born. […] I hate you, hate you, hate you" (254). Remarkably, her audible demonstration is voiced to a white woman, which *Can't Quit*'s narrator admits should and does alter/mitigate the story she is willing to tell.

In *Can't Quit*, the narrator attempts to define the complex nature of Tweet's and Cornelia's relationship, ironically pleading with the reader to attempt to ignore the racial implications and ultimately conceding that as difficult as the reader will find this, the characters find it all the more impossible (5). Though she contemplates the divide between Tweet and Cornelia throughout the text, a later description is particularly apt as the narrator ponders that she "want[s] to remember that every act in a human life has layer upon enfolded layer not only of imagining, but of circumstance, beneath it" (239). Coupled with

this, she recognizes that as the narrator she has only heard Tweet speak to Cornelia, her white employer, which may not be authentic. Shying away from Tweet as she might be (sans her carefully constructed social civility towards whites), the speaker wonders, "What tangle of snakes have I been skiing over?" She reasons that, whatever realities she cannot know, they "surely [are] not more complex business [than race]. […] But the truth is that there is no way Tweet could present herself so that you [the reader] would be absentminded. No way. She is black. Cornelia is white. She is servant. Cornelia is mistress. She is poor. The measure of her poverty is that she considers Cornelia (who thinks of herself as modestly well-off) immensely wealthy" (239-40). The comparison between the two characters shows that many factors, most of which are related to racial status, all contribute to an environment in which both cannot ignore the differences between them. Tweet, we learn, is especially aware, as the disadvantaged African American employee, of the white bookstore owner's exalted status even though her choices in stories, syntax, and speech are continually modified by her sense of Cornelia as an audience. Tweet is still rather forthright, though never so much as in her uncensored confessional to Cornelia in the final scene.

This delicate situation between the races is reiterated by *Telling Memories*, where in her preface, Tucker discusses that the events surrounding slavery and black oppression from hundreds of years passed are a part of the contemporary Southern conscience. With her interviewees, she says, "the memories and facts seemed to coexist and inform each other in ways that I needed to keep continuously in mind in analyzing what was said." Despite the fact that the unvoiced history permeated everything said by all the women, she finds almost exclusively that interracial associates discussed neither race nor class amongst themselves. Tucker notes that all the stories are only the ones the women were willing to share, chosen and told selectively: "For black women, revision made possible the discussion of 'bad times'—injustices and even cruelties—with a spirit of strength. […] In speaking anew or for the first time of these memories, they reconstructed the past. The telling of their stories, then, seemed to become an act that changed the past" (2-4). In fact, she finds that black domestics interviewed by Tucker's African American assistant told stories in more depth and much more quickly than those whom she, a white woman, interviewed. For every one or two visits of her assistant, Tucker would visit three or four times

hoping for more guarded information, but the domestics could not overcome years of social training to open up to a white woman (7).

Despite such similar cultural training, Tweet is so aware of—and possibly consumed by—her rage that she is able to voice it, though perhaps inadequately and ultimately unsatisfactorily for her. If Tweet cannot achieve the status of cultural hero with her strength of character and willingness to voice her mind, then Janie, lacking Tweet's scenario, would almost surely never achieve the status of a cultural icon.

Another difference between the two women comes in the attitudes of the respective grandparents. While Nanny encourages Janie to limit herself, Tweet explains that her Grandpa "want[ed] me to be independent—knew he'd be gone time I was full-grown, so he taught me to be cautious, foresighted, taught me to stand on my own feet" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 17). Moreover, though Tweet's anger at her father is considerable, she never detests her main caregiver. After Grandpa's death, she also forms a friendly relationship with her mother, who is never completely absent from her life. In *Their Eyes*, Janie considers finding her mother after Jody's death but ultimately decides that "she ha[s] no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all" (Hurston 98). Truly, Tweet seems to have had a healthy upbringing, and whatever strength Janie derives from her particular challenges, this certainly does not make her stronger than Tweet. But the relentless struggles with which Tweet is confronted seem to culminate in her aneurysm, manifesting in a stroke and the loss of her voice. She overcomes this state, but for a time at the end of *Can't Quit*, the reader might believe that Tweet has been broken and silenced by her own rage against whites. Yet even then she perseveres. Tweet's clear strength of spirit reveals that her failure to triumph over all her challenges and find true self-realization is certainly not the result of a character flaw. She speaks hard truth to Cornelia, who is herself transformed, and the reader is left with an epiphany best expressed, for Tweet and Cornelia, by the song that is the book's title. The ending of *Their Eyes* also brings together two women, one whose life is relatively repressed and one who has fulfilled the rule "got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 192).

CHAPTER III

TRUTH AND INTENTIONS IN STORYTELLING

Central to the arguments in this essay are two questions: to what extent are these novels realistic, and if *Their Eyes* is not realistic, what are Hurston's intentions in the character of Janie? *Can't Quit* is extraordinarily realistic in its presentation of characters and setting. To begin, Douglas' authorial reputation speaks to the notable (and uncommon in its pervasiveness) role of reality in her novels. In a 1983 interview, Jerry Speir remarks on Douglas' reputation for "dealing most realistically with race relations as a major theme," even adding that critics have come to expect it from her books (86). In an interview published five years earlier, the author answers a question regarding the "normalcy" of her characters. She explains: "One of the things that would make me decide that I was going to write this story rather than that story would be because I had known, say, a woman or a man whose character interested me, and who could be used to make a general statement about the world I live in. Something about his or her life and character says something very general about the society" (Douglas, "An Interview," Hood-Adams 37). Basically, her characters achieve the voice of a culture because she chooses them for their representative nature. Broughton and Williams describe the lives of these fictional people as revealing the "'predicament of people in society,' rather than with 'the fate of the lonely hero'" (46). Tweet and Cornelia fall into this category, as do many women sharing interracial associations in Douglas' novels. In such situations, blacks and whites exist in more than "stereotypical relations to one another […] The interest in storytelling itself becomes subject matter" (Broughton and Williams 66).

This emphasis on storytelling, resulting in realism, works on dual levels in *Can't Quit*: first, on the part of the narrator telling the story of the two main characters, and second, on the part of Tweet telling her memories. Douglas' own attitude towards her narrator enhances the authenticity. In a 1993 interview with Betty Tardieu, Douglas discusses the role of this novel's narrator, who breaks from the story at hand to comment on the situation as she sees it. Douglas believes that the narrator is the "fourth corner" of the "four-way tension in the book," and she stresses that though the narrator is a white woman—for, obviously, that is Douglas' authentic point of view—the narrator is not actually Douglas or

any other character but, rather, a fictional writer. In fact, Douglas remarks that "over the years, [she has] gotten more and more interested in what's true and what isn't true and how impossible it is to recognize the truth or to tell the truth or to read a book and know it's true," admitting that it has become a "preoccupation" for her (Douglas, "I'm in That" 123).

She goes to great lengths, therefore, to write a story with a resonance of veracity, and she has considered what elements best achieve it. Douglas says, "Before I started writing it, I began thinking about it as a collection of stories told by black women. […] But then, as I was thinking about how to construct it, the first question I had to think about was who is she telling the stories to and under what circumstances is she telling the stories?" (137). She notes that she drew the stories directly from an African American woman she knew named Mathelde, to whom she dedicated the book (Douglas, "'I'm Writing'" 217). In addition, she avoids having the narrator report from Tweet's point of view, instead allowing Tweet's actions and memories to speak for themselves. As a Southern white woman who had employed African American domestics (Manning 92) and to whom Mathelde had told her stories, Douglas describes Cornelia's position much more accurately. The author surmises that she herself knew little of how black people relate to one another outside the presence of whites and, thus, was ill-prepared to present those scenes except in the stories she had been told, which accounts for the believability of Tweet's representation of herself to Cornelia. Douglas' admitted use of this knowledge in the book reaffirms the part reality plays in her novels, for as Susan Tucker notes in her study of real women who lived the roles played by Tweet and Cornelia, "Revision occurs […] because the past that really was and the past that is remembered are always separate. Interpreting and reinterpreting the past are crucial for survival, strength, and carrying on" (4).

The narrator understands the imperfect art of narration, as well. Acknowledging inherent error in human memory and the re-telling of a story, the narrator opts throughout the novel to avoid quotation marks, which indicate a certainty in recounting. The practice also indicates that though this story is fictional, to misquote the characters *would* matter because their stories *could* be real. Too, the narrator

notes that the representations of the characters are filtered through her eyes and are not necessarily a completely accurate portrayal.

Differing from *Can't Quit*'s setting significantly, *Their Eyes* nonetheless has documented elements of reality in it. The town of Eatonville existed; it was Hurston's home until her teenage years. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road,* Hurston claims to have been born there (she was not—she moved there at age three [Wall 961]); she calls it "a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all" (*Dust Tracks* 1). Though Eatonville was not the first all-African American town in the United States, it was the first to organize its own government. Aspects of the novel clearly reflect facets of Hurston's own life (or, possibly, she enhanced portions of her own story in the later *Dust Tracks*; Hurston frequently blurred truth). In her autobiography she writes of Joe Clarke, who was an aggressive African American that played a major role in the establishment of the real Eatonville and owned the general store where men sat on the porch and told fantastic stories (*Dust Tracks* 2-5, 45-50). Living in Eatonville, Hurston was separated from the kind of whites she would encounter in Jacksonville and beyond, where she first knew that being an African American was a differentiating factor (70). Thus, for many years, gender oppression and not racial oppression was the main challenge in Hurston's life. Her father preferred her passive, feminine older sister, not the headstrong Zora who resisted his attempts to train her in meek womanhood. Hurston's mother refused to allow this, informing her father that she would raise Zora as she chose, leaving the elder sister to their father. Hurston's mother also argued with Zora's father on many occasions, and Hurston notes that for a man accustomed to being held in high regard among men, "that is a griping thing […]—not to be able to whip his woman mentally" (69). Ultimately, this primary conflict found its way into Hurston's story of Janie as the character's main challenge.

Hurston's travels, throughout northern Florida as well as the southern and northern United States, are also a powerful testament to her understanding of the realities of racial oppression. During her life, she worked at different times as a waitress, singer, domestic, and manicurist (Wall); obviously she was intimately acquainted with not only racism in general but with the difficulties in struggling for wages as

an African American, specifically in the South as she worked her way through school. Notably, she devises the plot of *Their Eyes* so that Janie avoids some of the most crippling aspects of racism: working for whites for low wages, living in a town permeated by white prejudice, and poverty. For Janie to avoid these factors, she must live in an impossible Eatonville entirely devoid of whites, be married to the fictional Jody who corresponds to the strong-willed merchant Joe Clarke of Hurston's autobiography, inherit from that husband who dies when Janie is relatively young, and be childless.

In determining Hurston's opinions and intentions, scholars have little but the words and actions of this remarkable author by which to gauge her. Yet, to be frank, Hurston seems little concerned with unquestionable "truth" in her writings. As Jennifer Jordan notes, she was "a skillful fabricator of self images" (106). In her autobiography, she even falsifies her birth place and birth date, making herself several years younger. Annoyed with expectations that her works reflect all the harsh realities of African American life (what she calls a "race attitude"), Hurston comments in an article on the fact that black creativity is stymied by the expectation of certain subjects: "'Ought I not to be singing of our sorrows? […] If I do not some will even call me a coward. The one subject for a Negro is the Race and its sufferings and so the song of the morning [that a writer has inside oneself] must be choked back. I will write of a lynching instead'" ("Works in Progress for *The Florida Negro*" 908). Hurston is not *concerned* with reality in her writing; rather, she sought to creatively express herself. "To [the author ignoring the true art inside himself] no Negro exists as an individual—he exists only as another tragic unit of the Race," she says (908). Based on this opinion, Hurston would have been quite satisfied for Janie to not be an everywoman.

Janie's existence in an impossible world is entirely possible in Hurston's fiction, even if it is mixed with realistic aspects. The narrator of *Their Eyes* introduces the concept of relative truth to the novel, noting the difference in the concept of "truth" for men and women. In her work *Daughters of Time: Creating Women's Voice in Southern Story*, Lucinda MacKethan argues that this narrator is "an omniscient one capable of blending the talk of the community with the thoughts of the woman who is their 'subject.' The power of this voice is absolute, controlling nature […], time […], and the speech of

others" (79). But as noted by Douglas' storyteller, the imperfect narrative voice falls short of an unbiased accounting. Hurston's narrator is sublimely unconcerned with this, as Janie will be when she claims her story in her own voice. If the goals of the novel are not to present realism, stringent or otherwise, one might look to the endeavors of Hurston's own life for answers, for her own words and activities suggest that traditional realism was not Hurston's goal.

Perhaps stemming from her love of the stories told on the front porch of Joe Clarke's store in Eatonville, Hurston discovered her fascination with folklore while studying anthropology in college (Wall 964-6). In the introduction to one of her first works focusing on folklore, Hurston says, "I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folk-lore.' In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism. […] But […] [i]t was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look" (*Mules and Men,* Introduction 9). As a location for study, Hurston chose Florida because its population consisted of whites from all over the world and blacks from the South and elsewhere; she focused on Eatonville because it was home to her and was rich with stories (10). In a later essay she expounds both on her selection of Florida for study and her love for folklore:

> Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries. Folklore in Florida is still in the making. Folktunes, tales, and characters are still emerging from the lush glades of primitive imagination before they can be finally drained by formal education and mechanical inventions ("Works in Progress for *The Florida Negro*" 875).

Hurston's 1935 *Mules and Men* compiles dozens of African American folkloric stories, rituals, songs, and a glossary of terms. In addition, the collection incorporates recipes for hoodoo, root doctors' recipes, and items used in conjuring. Other writings continued Hurston's work, even documenting aspects of African descendent cultures in Jamaica and Haiti in *Tell My Horse*, 1938, which is unique for its time in its photographic documentation of island culture.

Hurston's passion was in both gathering the folklore of African descendants for posterity and preserving it in story form. She notes the importance of doing so largely because white authors and

publishers demonstrated a surprising lack of interest or inclination to do so ("What White Publishers Won't Print" 950). Thus Hurston's Janie exists in a folkloric world. Leigh Anne Duck, in her article "'Go there tuh know there': Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotype of the Folk," describes the novel as "relatively allotemporal, existing outside the time of the nation and its economy." Residents of one region in the novel seem wholly unaware of the events affecting any other area, and linear time nearly ceases to exist even in the book's descriptions. This quality was criticized by Hurston's contemporaries (278). Though Duck seems to believe that the lack of whites in Janie's world is a misunderstanding on Hurston's part of what the implications would be on the folklore of that setting, she certainly concurs that the novel's purpose was to tell folklore (266).

The novel itself, of course, also supports this notion aside from the folkloric quality of Janie's journey. Certain scenes have the sense of storytelling in the community: the singing at the lighting of Jody's lamp (46) and the buzzard dance around the carcass of Matt Bonner's/Jody's mule (61-2).[5] Too, the characters in the novel engage in the kind of storytelling Hurston valued in her Eatonville and studied later in life at many sites. The porchsitters at Jody's store tell tall tales of Matt Bonner's mule accomplishing remarkable or humorous feats (51-3, 58-9). In the Everglades, Tea Cake spins yarns about his amazing deeds (122), and he and the other men on the muck tell each Big John de Conqueror stories (157), about which Hurston writes several times in other works.

But, even with Hurston's use of the folkloric, she never sought to segregate African Americans through their stories and culture but simply to preserve them amidst the more vocal cultures surrounding American blacks. While she was intimately acquainted with the cruelties of racism, Hurston's nonfiction essays reveal a buoyant spirit free from bitterness. Indeed, she treasured her own culture enough to be rather dismissive of white culture's supposed dominance. Her thoughts on an interracial society are summed up in her essay "Court Order Can't Make Races Mix." Believing that the Supreme Court should

[5] The buzzard dance is a ritual carried on by African descendants in many regions including the Geechee/Gullah peoples of Sapelo Island, Georgia. It is described in some detail, especially in the chapter entitled "The Buzzard Lope," in the memoir *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geechee Talks About Life on Sapelo Island, Georgia* by Cornelia Walter Bailey.

have enforced equality in black schools rather than integration in Brown vs. Board of Education, Hurston insists that "It is a contradiction in terms to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association" (958). This sentiment may have stemmed from her keen self-confidence. In multiple essays she remarks, not quite tongue-in-cheek, upon her surprise that anyone would wish to separate him/herself from a person such as Zora Neale Hurston . In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she writes that she is not what she considers "tragically" African American; that is, she embraces both her racial identity and the opportunities afforded her, however mitigated by her color they may be. While acknowledging slavery's impact on the nation, she dismisses its lasting impact on her own life, noting jovially that "Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you" (827). She even states that she considers herself lucky, for whites seem to her to be often consumed with guilt for past crimes (827). Truly, Hurston was anything but driven by a need to present an African American who could function as a black cultural hero in the real world. Rather, Janie's journey is one that speaks for itself in the folkloric sense. Certainly her character takes on new life with critique and scholarship, but to hold Janie up as a heroine of the segregated South ignores not only Hurston's intentions but reality itself.

CHAPTER IV

JUSTIFYING OUTCOMES PART I: GENDER

Throughout the courses of their respective fictional lives, both Janie and Tweet continually encounter gender prejudice. Such an obstacle would almost certainly have a hampering effect on the ability of any character to find true happiness, but many critics argue that Janie does find self-fulfillment at the close of *Their Eyes*. While Tweet comes to some peace with her white female employer, and this can be viewed as a sort of gender triumph, she never achieves any level of true kinship with the opposite race or the opposite sex. Her breakthrough with Cornelia is humorous and climactic but ultimately bittersweet, as nothing changes about the core of Tweet or her life.

For Janie, though, gender oppression is a lifelong trial she can successfully face. It begins at home during her formative sexual experiences. Her first encounter with sex as a concept does not involve her own sexuality; rather, it is conjecture and vicious gossip that, by questioning the chastity of her mother and circumstances of Janie's conception, manages to insult Janie by linking her worth to her parents' morals. Because Nanny's white employer dresses Janie in a nicer fashion than the other African American children (and because Janie is beautiful), black children mock Janie about her father being pursued by the authorities for impregnating her mother. Remembering the cruel comments, Janie as an adult disputes their veracity on the basis that they ignore that her father later attempted to contact her mother (9-10). Here, whether or not Janie's mother was a willing recipient of her father's sexual advances is unclear; his attempt to contact her was not widely reported but, if true, might have disproven rape. Regardless, Janie's earliest understanding of a relationship sexual in nature is mired in doubt, possible violence, and shame. The narrator attributes Janie's establishment of consciousness to her personal sexual awakening (10), which also signals the beginning of her troubles. MacKethan points out that prior to this moment, Janie's life is lacking any self-realization in the most fundamental of ways; she has no awareness of her skin color, heritage, or even her name, as she is called so many names by different people that she is eventually nicknamed Alphabet as a child (81). Nanny's negative and violent

reaction to Janie's awakened sexuality, symbolized by a blossoming pear tree, makes "Janie's kiss across the gatepost [under the tree] seem like a manure pile after a rain" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 12-3). Here again Janie's experience with a relationship between a woman and man is fraught with shame, and Nanny's explanation of her reaction does not diminish the negative effect. She turns Janie's innocent, youthful kiss into an experience that must necessarily introduce Janie to all the ugliness of gender and racial oppression. She says,

> 'de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you' (14).

In this passage, gender is established as the main conflict in the novel. Nanny imparts to Janie that there is no way to stop racism except where no white man exists; the unspoken implication is that things could be different in such a place. Nanny also indicates that black women always will suffer at the hands of black men but without the same level of hopelessness, for she prayed and thought perhaps Janie could have a different experience. Indeed, even her misguided attempt to match Janie with a husband is in hopes that her load will be lighter as a married woman on a successful farm. She continues her response to Janie's kiss by telling her a slave narrative. Janie falls silent in this moment—her normal response to confrontation. She listens passively as Nanny describes the servitude of black women that seems inevitable, especially without the protection she seeks for Janie in marriage (16-20). Regarding the metaphor between African American women and mules, MacKethan notes that the wording "dehumanizes and unnames black women" (82). Through her actions and words Nanny has stripped Janie of the identity she sought in her realized womanhood, returning her to her previous state without a name.[6] Her attempt to advance Janie via protection has ironically had the opposite effect. But in her

[6] Christine Levecq contradicts Marjorie Pryse's view of Janie as belonging to some customary "'ancient power'" of black women who revere their foremothers at some point. Because of Janie's rejection of Nanny's ideals and hatred of the hemming in Nanny committed, "what Alice Walker did for Hurston, Janie won't do for her Nanny." Rather, Janie will re-form herself in her own self image, which is not dependent on black women of the past (Levecq 98).

comments Nanny gives Janie and the reader the novel's goal: avoid whites, for their presence destroys the black woman's hope, and overcome the traditional "mule" role beneath the black man.

Janie soon matures from child to adult; as she complains about the lack of affection in her marriage after the nuptials, Nanny belittles the death of her innocence. The text reads that Janie "knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (25). Unfortunately, Nanny's hope that a safe marriage somehow compensates for gender inequality is proved false nearly immediately. Logan tries to do what Nanny indicates men would do by saddling Janie with his work and hers. Janie is quite clear that she has no intention of playing the role of the "mule" but ultimately falls silent following her confrontation with her husband (31). Perhaps Janie, given her upbringing, would have tolerated the discontentment, for as MacKethan observes, "Janie's grandmother offers no alternative vision to supplant her culture's decree for women: servitude and diminishment. The grandmother, in marrying sixteen-year-old Janie to a wealthy, much older man, argues that [protection from a man], is the best a woman, in particular a black woman, can hope for" (78). But Joe "Jody" Starks appears on the road, tempting Janie with a new future.

Duck cites Janie's rejection of Logan Killicks for a freer future as proof of her somewhat feminist awareness; because of this, Duck argues that Hurston did not intend the novel to be only folkloric and divorced from modern ideals (278). But a story related by Hurston in *Dust Tracks* reveals a similarly themed story involving the "wood folk" and told by the men on the porch of Joe Clarke's store. In the tale, Sis Snail tells a man named "Lige" that she is "'Going off to travel the world. [She] done left [her] husband for good.'" Though she has not been mistreated, she is dissatisfied with her husband's slow nature (48-9). Likewise, Janie's departure from her home and marriage with Logan Killicks does not result from mistreatment/physical abuse but dissatisfaction. A wife leaving her husband need not be a modern, feminist development. Her story fits easily within the bounds of the folkloric. This moment signals Janie's identity as a folk hero in two ways: (1) she embodies "Sis Snail," who leaves her husband and (2) she rejects Nanny's attempt to set her apart from other black women via marriage to a relatively

wealthy man, choosing instead to live among her people. Ironically, in this attempted rejection of Nanny's ideal she ultimately will endure the very separation Nanny envisioned.

By presenting Janie with a future in Eatonville, an all-African American town, Jody has unknowingly offered her hope for the differing future for which Nanny had once prayed. Here, within reach, is the realized dream of a world (which Nanny posits might only exist across an ocean) without the added burden for African Americans of the white man. Janie, jumping at her opportunity, must see a glimmer of hope that she, too, can overcome Nanny's curse of African American women and perhaps even debunk Nanny's edict that loveless sorrow is a condition of existence. The narrator states that Jody "did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (29).

But Jody seeks to place Janie on a metaphorical pedestal in her new life as his wife. Discouraging her interaction with the townsfolk, Jody calls her a "bell-cow" (41), a possession/animal, and "Mrs. Mayor" (46), someone identified not even with his last name but his outward position. Indeed, Janie quickly experiences his dismissal taking "the bloom off things" (43) for her, a clear reference to her yet unfulfilled sexuality. Men in the town make advances and, once rebuffed, insult her appearance and ignore her (38). To them, Janie has little value except as an object of desire, Joe's wife, or an unrealistic symbol. The townspeople agree that Jody and Janie are an appropriate comparison for Isaac and Rebecca of the Bible (42). Interestingly, the roles seem to be flipped as Rebecca was Isaac's second wife and Jody is Janie's second husband. Rebecca was the favored/spoiled wife, and in this inverted portrait, Jody is the favored/spoiled party in the marriage. Isaac worked many years to earn Rebecca's hand in marriage and the children she bears; likewise, Janie works years for Jody and endures many wrongs to earn her freedom and the estate he leaves her. Theoretically, the switched gender identities impart more power and control to Janie; without the racial conflict of whites present, she can now become the powerful figure in Eatonville.

The lack of whites in the town produces a remarkable social backdrop. The African Americans begin to divide themselves into classes based on shades of color and economics, and Jody and Janie, as

the Mayor and his wife/the merchant store-owning couple, play the role of the pseudo-oppressor. The focus of the townsfolk's discontent falls on Jody for behaving like a white man and, to a lesser extent, Janie for her unwilling (though the townsfolk do not know that Janie does not want the position) perch on her metaphorical pedestal (48-9). In this all-black setting, Janie's beautiful hair and light-colored skin draw attention and fuel the townsfolk's complaints that she and Jody set themselves apart from the town. Ironically, the same lack of mixed races that protects Janie from the fate to which Nanny alluded in her discussion of the white man also condemns Janie to denunciation by the other African Americans. In this predicament, Janie finds herself alone on her separated platform, for though Jody endures his own amount of censure, it is grumbled quietly in the background; the narrator notes that because Jody is strong, others refuse to challenge him, but also that he derives that strength from the fact that others are afraid to challenge him (50). Thus, he is not actively shunned from communion with the townsfolk and freely associates with them while forbidding Janie to do so, abandoning her for his own enjoyment. He explains, "'Ah'm uh man even if Ah is de Mayor. But de mayor's wife is somethin' different again'" (60). Jody excuses his cloistering treatment of Janie, isolating her in many ways from the community. He forces her to cover her hair with a head rag, resentful of the attention her hair garners, and forbids her from speaking on many occasions or attending events he considers inappropriate. Rarely objecting to his treatment or edicts, Janie most often passively accepts his demands. In her article "'You Heard Her, You Ain't Blind:' Subversive Shifts in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Christine Levecq comments on Janie's status in the community at this time. She posits that Matt Bonner's mule, hearkening back to the mule in Nanny's advice to Janie, symbolizes all black women, not just Janie "who is bearing at the same time the work and guilt of the oppressor" in her dual role as African American woman/wife and substituted white woman detached from the common folk in the town (100). This comparison is poignant, and one may also consider the folklore surrounding the mule as also noting Janie's role in the town, which is unrealistic and constantly changing (102).

Janie's unhappiness in this role also brings to the forefront a possible goal of Hurston's as described by Jordan in her essay "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God." She asserts that, for Hurston, *Their Eyes* was at least partially a cautionary tale to an emerging group in society at the time: newly middle class African American women. She says that the book "does skillfully expose, through its delineation of Janie's marriage to Jody Starks, the devaluation and aloneness of the middle-class woman whose sole purpose is to serve as an ornament and symbol of her husband's social status." Essentially, Jordan argues that this portion of Janie's journey, her marriage to Jody, reveals that—in reality—African Americans should beware the seemingly luxuriant lives of white middle class women who are, on the surface, revered and indulged but, in reality, are kept separate from a meaningful and honest relationship based on a supposed need to shelter them.[7] Further, this speaks to societal demands that black women also fill the role of helpmate in the home, as did middle-class white women, instead of seeking their own successes (108). Janie's disappointment in her marriage to Jody is the most lasting of her miseries as she is married to him for approximately twenty years. In her union with Logan, one might dismiss her unhappiness as due to the arranged nature of the marriage or even to youthful naiveté. Certainly the expectation to perform hard labor, as Logan indicated he would require, is one many women would shun. But Janie finds herself despondent in her second marriage for more subtle, perhaps unanticipated reasons—not back-breaking labor, poverty, or unfaithfulness (for, though the reader cannot be sure, the narrator does not indicate that Jody cheats on Janie)—but a failure to fulfill her own potential in the relationship, an expectation that she would use all her talents to simply prop up her husband. By acknowledging her dissatisfaction, Janie prepares herself for whatever kind of self-realization she can have following Jody's death. Before she marries as a very young woman, Janie is preoccupied with love, not her status in comparison to other African Americans, about which Nanny is concerned (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 23-5). In her failure to be content with Jody and his money/status, Janie has further transcended Nanny's dream for her, aware now of an even greater possibility and need for true

[7] This reiterates a theme of *Can't Quit*, which is revealed not through Tweet, who is a domestic worker, but through the story's other main character, the white middle-class Cornelia; she experiences the dissatisfaction that Janie does in the helpmate role but, as she is unaware until much later in life of the reality of her marriage, she experiences a rage and dejection that Janie does not.

fulfillment. In this, she again embodies a folk hero as she specifically rejects any isolating form of sophistication.

The apex of Janie's unhappiness results from her verbal response—long overdue—to Jody's cruel public remarks about Janie's intellect and body. For some time before this day, Janie has pretended normalcy while keeping the bloom/sexuality/uniqueness of herself tucked away inside. But Jody's latest remark is too much for Janie to bear. He says, "'A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!'" In this moment, the narrator notes the beginnings of a laugh circulating the store before the onlookers, considering the cruelty of the remark, begin to pity Janie (78). She argues back, something she has very rarely done. But Jody persists, insulting her age to conceal his own inadequacies and insecurities about aging. Finally, Janie snaps, first defending herself then addressing Jody's true nature as follows: "'You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'" (78-9). MacKethan argues that Jody's remarks are akin to a verbal rape as they bare Janie for all to see. Her response, which is Janie "fighting for her life" (83), proves that Jody's "virility has depended on her silent submission. Her voice is turned back upon him with devastating results" (83). In this moment, Janie has refused passive victimhood; she asserts herself not only as worthy of defense but of retribution for the wrongs she has suffered. Her earlier defense of womankind to Jody (74-5) has advanced in her tit-for-tat argument with him. The townsfolk present are swift to place blame for the scene on both Janie and Jody, but as time passes, the societal expectations for Janie's silence reemerge (ironic, since so many other African American women in the community are quite vocal; even unwillingly, the townspeople hold Janie to a higher expectation of martyrdom.) The other men, who immediately begin taunting Jody, something they have never before dared to do, eventually fall into a pattern of maddening silent pity, as the narrator notes (77). In one statement, Jody's bravado has been stripped, and even the lowliest of townsfolk can now feel superior to him.

At the same time, many townspeople begin serving Jody, supplanting Janie as his "helpmate" since, in their estimation, she has so unsuitably abandoned her post. Saddened by her husband's disregard of her—stemming largely from his humiliation and pretended rage at her—Janie is confused by his response. She wonders why her one episode of responding to him in the manner in which he has spoken to her for many years has caused such anger (81). He continues to avoid her, even acting suspicious of some black magic she could have put on him, which Jody reasons must be making him sick; in actuality, he is simply aging and now has failing kidneys. Janie's supplanters feel free to move about her house, caring for her husband with the comment, "'Mr. Starks need somebody tuh sorta look out for 'im till he kin git on his feet again and look for hisself'" (83). In a reversed situation, no one could prevent a man from seeing/tending to his sick wife; yet, even after Jody's relentless verbal abuse of many years, the townsfolk behave as if he has suffered an unprecedented wrong at the hands of Janie and conspire to strip her of her marital rights. Because Janie is a woman in a man's world, she must struggle to establish herself as powerful enough to demand her due as a woman and a wife. The townsfolk pretend affection for Jody, mock-sheltering him from his cruel, mistrustful wife; they seek favor from him, in case he survives, or remembrance in his property distribution after his death. In truth, they care very little for the man many have resented for his power, material possessions, pretty wife, and conceit.

But Janie knows, after speaking with a doctor, that Jody is dying from kidney failure, for which he has refused to seek true medical care (83). She takes increased control of her womanhood, entering Joe's death chamber despite his protests. She ponders that in the current standing of their relationship, he is no longer her "Jody" and thus calls him "Joe." Seeing his deteriorated state, Janie feels sympathy for her oppressor. In this moment she rejects entirely the identity of the victim, instead choosing to pity Joe, taking away his power over her emotions. Then, in her final statements to her dying husband, she provides closure for herself. In this marriage she ensures that she will have no regretful words unspoken, no message she resents not having voiced. Indeed, she treats herself as a person worthy of achieving her own desires rather than a helpmate or servant to the needs of another, even another who is dying (84-7). When she is done, her pity for her now dead husband (for she was silenced largely by the presence of

death in the room) swells, and Janie considers that "Jody had been hard on her and others, but life had mishandled him too. Poor Joe!" (87). Janie oscillates freely between the name Jody and Joe now, choosing for herself how she will name him—an act which has great power—instead of allowing the status of their relationship, which just moments before he was allowed almost solely to determine, to establish how Janie addresses him. She takes stock of herself in the aftermath of Jody's dying, looking frankly at who is left now that her husband is gone (87). After the funeral, Janie burns her head rag, a symbol of Jody's oppression, and considers her life until this point. In keeping with her monumental transformation, Janie admits for the first time her resentment of Nanny (89). In doing so, Janie begins to consciously form her own vague goals as she discards the goals of others.

Janie's widowhood, for her, is a treasured time of adult solitude, something which she has never had. She continually rejects suggestions that she remarry, revealing her growth and confidence in herself. She is annoyed rather than tempted or excited by the numerous pursuits of her as she recognizes that her newly propertied state is the impetus (90-3). Then Virgible "Tea Cake" Woods enters her life; this is the perfect moment for Janie to embrace a new reality, more secure in herself (and dismissive of others, as she expresses to her friend Pheoby) than she has ever been. Tea Cake, like the figure of Johnny Taylor from Janie's first sexual experience, is an attractive man without the need for a hard-working woman (like Logan), a woman who worships him (like Logan and Joe), property (like Logan and Joe), or status (like Joe). Johnny Taylor's lack of the characteristics is perhaps only because of youth or the fact that Janie barely knew him, but Tea Cake, though younger than Janie, is an adult man she will know well. His lack of pretention is refreshing to Janie, who finds that she can easily flirt and have fun with him (94-9). On his first appearance, "she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (96). In other words, someone finally finds it normal for a woman to engage in personhood, and Janie relishes this new realization that she is not the only one who desires for her to be herself.

Tea Cake and Janie engage in a series of acts while in Eatonville that symbolize a new day and a new level of realized sexuality for Janie. They pick lemons together, which are not identical to the

ripened pears of her emerging womanhood (they are too sour), but they hint at an approaching fruitfulness for her (102). Janie allows Tea Cake to comb her hair; he luxuriates in it and never attempts to cover it up like Joe did (103). Janie relinquishes Nanny's distrust of men in general as Tea Cake attempts to prove himself and his honorable intentions. Though she is wary, Janie allows herself the possibility of trusting this younger man (106-7). They go grocery shopping elsewhere, where Tea Cake can separate Janie from her identity as storeowner, and they attend a picnic together with the townsfolk, signaling Janie's ability to now socialize with whomever she chooses. They hunt, dance, fish, go to the movies, and play games. Tea Cake, in highly symbolic acts, helps Janie plant flowers and even cuts down a tree that she hated (108-10). He is not the youthful Johnny Taylor, and he can dually fulfill her adult longings and her youthful love fantasies. Janie's sexual nature, always symbolically tied to natural, flowering plants, is within her control and free to Tea Cake because she chooses to give him that power. Indeed, it is Janie who actively goes to Tea Cake (alone!) to marry him; she is not brought along or "rescued." The decision is entirely hers and under her own jurisdiction. As she later states, "'Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means to live mine'" (114). Indeed, Janie has specifically discarded Nanny's goals for her life by choosing a commoner for her true love. It is this poignant *decision* to join her life with Tea Cake and eventually join him on the muck with other common folk thathelps make her a folk hero.

Yet there are still hints of the male-dominated world in which Janie lives, even with Tea Cake. He wants to take care of Janie, though not necessarily from a belief that she cannot care for herself—certainly different from other men who have expected Janie to work for them. But Tea Cake also separates Janie from activities he considers beneath her or inappropriate for a woman such as her (though, as she begins to work on the muck with him later on, Tea Cake's estimation of what Janie can do has grown.) A few days after their marriage, Tea Cake takes Janie's money to throw a party in the style of a wealthy person; he does not invite her, afraid she will either refuse to attend or disdain the gathering (124); he also demands that she keep her money, existing *only* on what he, as her husband, can provide to her as his woman. Janie all too eagerly acquiesces. Janie reveals her dependence on Tea Cake as she

languishes in the hotel room during his absence, terrified that he has left her. Though this could be seen as a regression in her self-fulfillment, for Janie to be afraid without a man is new for her. She has chosen to allow him this power and reacts this way not from the inability to survive without him but fear that her love is gone (122-3).

Tea Cake has considerable control over Janie because of the depth of her emotions for him (which is significantly different from control due to sheer dependence on her husband). In this state, he can ask things and commit acts that Janie did not or almost certainly would not have tolerated from her other husbands. Tea Cake demands that Janie go with him to work on the muck (133), hard labor that she categorically refused for Logan. Janie must defend her status as Tea Cake's wife when other women flirt with him (136-8). Tea Cake prides himself on Janie's beauty (encouraging her to flaunt features like her hair) and financial/social status, but that is tied to his ability to own her and make her forgo material comforts for him, revealing a glory in his control (148). In his jealousy at the admiration she elicits from others, Tea Cake beats Janie—a method by which he demonstrates his ultimate control over her. MacKethan argues that, despite Janie's overwhelming love for Tea Cake, when he beats her, her submission shows that she is not fully self-realized. The true self-realization, MacKethan asserts, comes at a later time (84). Levecq believes that this scene shows that Janie's "self" is never fully realized (107-8). The stresses of competition for Janie clearly affect even Tea Cake, who uses violence and even his flirtation with another woman to claim Janie as his own and express his manhood. As she does when Jody insists Janie cover her hair, Janie passively accepts Tea Cake's oppression. One questions what she would have tolerated in unearned retribution had her men had to deal on a daily basis with the unbearable strain of racism as well.

Revealing the consummate nature of Janie's love for Tea Cake, as he dies, she becomes not onlylover but mother to him, a role she has not played in any previous capacity (180). Janie's failure to conceive in this most fertile of environments, the Everglades, is never addressed in the text, but it is perhaps because motherly care and love would interfere with the absolution of her love for Tea Cake (or because the presence of a child would hinder Janie's freedom). In a sense, Tea Cake must fill all these

roles for her love to be fully expressed: husband, leader, friend, lover, and dependent/child. Many critics see his death as his deserved punishment for the jarring physical abuse he metes out on Janie earlier in the text. Alice Walker asserts in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* that Tea Cake's abuse of Janie "is the reason Hurston *permits* Janie to kill [him]" (quoted in Jordan 109). Though feminist and/or womanist critics see his death as in need of explaining and justifiable because of his shocking reversion to an unenlightened performance of husbandry, neither Hurston nor Janie seem to need such an excuse. The narrator beautifully explains the sorrow of that event for Janie: "It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead" (184). The shock of reverting from terrified woman at a physical disadvantage to devastated partner is palpable even to the reader. In their current, literal position, with his head in her lap and her weeping over his broken body, Tea Cake can and does fill all the roles previously mentioned for Janie. Ironically, while some critics want to rationalize this passage, it may reveal one of the most realistic elements of the novel, representing the messy, nonsensical realities of human emotion that cannot be explained. Certainly Tea Cake's abuse was unforgivable, but Janie cuddled with and forgave him for the action nearly immediately, and certainly does so in this most emotionally crippling of moments. Fate killed Tea Cake (note the choice of the words "meanest moment of eternity," not "most retributive" or "most justified"), Janie wanted desperately for him to live, and she mourns; the moment's quiet simplicity smacks of reality, not authorial reckoning. Indeed, Jordan later argues that *Their Eyes*' narrator treats Tea Cake's abuse dismissively and also notes Janie's physical abuse of him when she is jealous. She believes the beating was Hurston's tool to "emphasize Tea Cake's insecurity." Not the least among her points is the violence, particularly between Hurston and a lover, that the author describes in *Dust Tracks* (109).

Regardless of Tea Cake's abuse or distressing death scene, Janie grows in her self-reliance and confidence in many ways while on the muck. She works alongside Tea Cake, a leveling between the two regardless of its motivation. In addition, despite the objectionable nature of the violence between them, it is a shared power. Tea Cake slaps Janie around in his jealousy, but when *she* batters *him* at a later date

due to her own jealousy, he attempts to restrain her but does not respond in kind (136-8). She learns to shoot better than Tea Cake (*she* could be the hunter/gatherer) (131), and she is permitted to participate in the community with the other African Americans. The narrator says, "The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (134). In this somewhat inverse reality from her life with Joe in Eatonville, Janie interacts with not only the other women but the other men. If she has overcome gender obstacles in *Their Eyes*, it is on the muck with the common folk.

The trial following Tea Cake's death presents Janie's first contact with whites since her childhood (discussed in more detail in section V), but it also offers the opportunity to view Janie as a single/widowed woman in a public sphere. Since they see her only as a woman having killed, the court officials give only two options summarizing Janie's identity; they say, """'Gentlemen of the jury, it is for you to decide whether the defendant has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances" (188). Here Janie is reduced to either a femme fatale or a poor, delicate creature. Neither encompasses her personality or accurately describes the depth of the situation. Given her opportunity, Janie quietly explains the facts of the case, refusing to defend herself but only speaking truth.[8] In essence, she refuses to fill either role offered or to acquiesce to the traditional trappings of a widow, as reiterated by her refusal to wear mourning clothes, for, as the narrator notes, "She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief" (189). Surprisingly, Janie feels kinship with the white women at the trial, showing that through her experiences, largely devoid of racial tension, Janie has begun to focus largely on gender roles rather than racial classes. MacKethan argues that the trial is the first time Janie has felt some kinship with women as she looks to the white women in the courtroom, sensing some kind of "instinctive empathy that transcends race or class" (85). Importantly, she says, the black men "convict Janie of two sexual transgressions: she put her own life

[8] Much has been written regarding in the trial scene regarding Janie's voice (or lack thereof.) This will be noted in more detail in section VI on Janie's success.

above Tea Cake's, and at the trial, she tells her own story. Both acts threaten their manhood" (85). Hence, in a crisis, Janie's identity as a woman becomes crucial, perhaps more even than her identity as an African American. Though some critics disagree that she achieves oneness with other women, Janie is successful in the outcome of the trial and, however small the use of her own voice, it is significant and powerful enough to sway even white men.

Like Janie in her continual struggle with male figures, Douglas' Tweet confronts gender inequalities throughout her life. Notably, her reactions differ significantly, largely because she is already under the added stress of racial tension. As Janie's main obstacle in life is identified early in the text as black men, Tweet's is multifaceted; there is no singular challenge for her.

In fact, the first "gift" the narrator details Tweet offering Cornelia is telling in numerous facets of her past and present life. As the novel opens, Cornelia informs Tweet that a white man and one of Tweet's former employers, Wayne Jones, has died. In sharp contrast to the sunny scene of making preserves in which the women are situated, Tweet's anger shows: she is happy that the man has died. She shares with Cornelia that Jones continually made inappropriate advances to her while she was in his employ. In her capacity as a married African American woman and an employee, she states that her rebuff of him was extremely difficult; he "chased [her] around the table more times than once" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 4). She explains that she resorted to self-defense, wielding a meat cleaver and even brought a gun with her to work one day. Jones laughed off her defenses, making light of her rejection (9). Even more uncomfortable, Tweet says, was when she appealed to his wife, who responded that "he's just like that" (10). While Tweet tells the story, Cornelia interrupts her often with suggestions to rinse her hands lest they become chapped, diminishing the severity and significance of Tweet's story. Thus, Tweet's obstacles are established as intertwined, simultaneously present: gender discrimination/bias, racism, and discord with women both black and white. In fact, the presence of racial strife is such a ubiquitous factor that it is occasionally overlooked in Tweet's discussion of her troubles; like Janie's Nanny, the rule of the white man is simply a constant, pervasive state that cannot be avoided. Though differentiating between

gender and race based problems is possible, it is important to remember that gender and racial pressures are highly interconnected.

Tweet's wariness of men is established at a young age but not as a true child while she is being raised by her paternal grandfather. She has a healthy belief and respect/fear for the supernatural: ghosts, spirits, and demons; but she does not yet distrust all men. As an adult she states: "Evil out there. I be a fool not to know that. […] Most girl-children need to be afraid […] of brothers, uncles, daddies, mama's boyfriends, mamas, even. Not me. I'm with my grandpa and nobody else" (17). This is because, at first, Tweet has positive experiences with men—African American men—in her formative years. Her initial, sole male role model is her grandfather, an elderly Civil War veteran with whom Tweet has a warm, loving, and respectful relationship. He cares for her when her mother is too young and her father has abandoned them both. Grandpa teaches Tweet the practicalities of survival, and she thinks he is all-knowing and "meant to teach it all to" (17) her.

But Tweet soon learns that not all men are trustworthy. When she is fifteen her father Julius re-enters her life, Tweet endures his arson attempt on her life and the subsequent death of her grandfather. Julius' existence continues to plague Tweet after Grandpa's death, further scarring Tweet's previously innocent trust of men in her family. Mr. Lord uses Julius' greed and disregard for his daughter Tweet to finagle an illegal renunciation of the grandfather's will; Julius sells him Grandpa's/Tweet's land (after using Tweet's offer for the land in a bidding war, driving up the price, and refusing to split the proceeds with his child). Then he attempts to steal her other money, and Tweet's revenge is fondly remembered: using two things her grandfather has taught her, she fires a shot into a hornet's nest, resulting in lifelong injury to Julius (106-23). At about the age Janie is dominated by her romantic dreams, Tweet learns that men are to be feared, even those within the family who have the power to truly harm a young woman.

A sexually-charged Evil emerges during Julius' stay with Tweet and Grandpa. For several nights while Julius and Claree plot to claim the inheritance, Tweet tells that "evil was out there in the dark, in the cold, knocking on the walls, scratching on the roof like frozen tree limbs" (32). The almost paralytic fear that Tweet describes here consumes her only at this time. When Julius is gone and Tweet marries, this

evil ceases to play a part in her story to Cornelia. But at this point, Julius symbolizes danger on many levels, some already detailed; he also signals an imprecise incestuous sexual danger for his young daughter—likely another reason why she singles out male family members as people of whom young girls *should* be afraid. When he first arrives, the scene is oddly reminiscent of Jody Starks walking down the road in *Their Eyes*. The sexuality of the moment becomes more present as Julius discusses Tweet with his father. Tweet remembers that he says to Grandpa that she is "getting to be a woman, Or can't you see that? He looks at me like a man looks at a woman, touches my hand, and Claree grins at him, says, Watch yourself, darling" (30). This disconcerting, incestuous theme continues later as Tweet becomes a young voyeur, watching the naked Julius and his wife Claree during foreplay. The older woman mocks Grandpa, grabbing his cane and pretending to hobble about while singing to Julius, who leers at her (47-8). *This* is Tweet's first sexual experience, the end of her virginal state of mind. Her father, family, is practically a stranger to the young Tweet, who is clearly old enough to be considered a woman (for she marries Nig soon afterward). Julius sings while Claree shimmies, even addressing her—in the lyrics—as "daughter" at one point. Tweet is enraged at the derision towards her grandfather, but the experience stays with her, for she describes it in great detail to Cornelia.

Her apprehension towards white men in particular is connected to her trepidation regarding the supernatural world. Tweet explains her experiences with Julius and Claree . Her grandfather tells her, "Devil's guarding that gold [he says…]. Devil's still in there, Tweet. You keep out of there. Yeah, and more than one time I been walking down the turnrow when […] light's uncertain, seen a man pass by and he raise his hat to me. I look around after he pass and ain't nobody there. It's a white man, too. Ain't no living white man in this world would've raise his hat to me. It was the devil (28)." In this example, the Devil appears in a male form to Tweet. Though Tweet's confrontation of race and gender is frequently blended, here it is especially crucial to note that the Devil never appears to Tweet as a white *woman*. Clearly his presence as a white person is important, but the fact that it is always a man points to a revulsion and/or fear of the male gender. Perhaps this appearance of a white man at a place Tweet associates with evil is purely coincidental; perhaps her subconscious or memory is asserting itself—the

white man is the devil. To Tweet, though, the only possibility is truth. The Devil may be attempting to trick her, draw her in to him in some way. Or, knowing her fear of white men, he may choose to terrify her in this manner. Regardless, before Tweet even learns to hate white men through experiences with them she learns to fear men via their presence, real and supernatural.

As an adult, Tweet continues to struggle with trusting men—with good reason. She is clear that Nig's marriage to her does not stop the womanizing for which he is renowned before their nuptials (59). Whether or not Nig cheats with many other women or just one, about whom Tweet tells Cornelia in detail, is unclear. What is clear is that Tweet suffers both from the knowledge of Nig's affair and the brazenly public nature of it (204). But she can bear no more when she discovers a portion of her cash inheritance from Grandpa missing one afternoon; she immediately realizes that Nig intends to run away with Puddin, and Tweet goes to confront them. Discovering that Nig has bought a car with Puddin (claiming that he only used his own wages), Tweet reveals the pistol she has brought. Nig insists that he will not return, and Tweet shoots him in the arm and then the thigh. Puddin runs away, and Nig, sobbing that he has earned his escape with Puddin, chases after his mistress. Tweet returns to Puddin's house, where she attempts to exact her revenge via Drano (204-9).

But Tweet is accustomed to disappointment from men, even those who should be reliable, and she welcomes Nig back. Flabbergasted, Cornelia questions how she could ever take him back. Similar to the mutually violent equality reached in Janie's and Tea Cake's relationship, Tweet considers herself "even" with Nig: he cheated on her, and she shot him—no more retribution necessary. She explains in her own words and lyrics, "Lord, even now, to think about him, it still makes me….Ummmm. So, all I can say, is, Well I can't quit you, baby. Just now and then put you down awhile […] Love you baby, but I sure do hate your ways, I say, I love you, darlin, but I hate your treacherous low-down ways" (210). This clarifies the mood of her physical draw to him; her relationship with her husband is no fairy tale, nor does she expect it to be. If she has stored away the core of herself, waiting for a better man, she never reveals so in the novel. Rather, Tweet appears to frankly accept and desire Nig, flaws and all.

Tweet's interaction with other women, both black and white, plays more prominently in her tale than does Janie's in *Their Eyes*. Though her mother does not raise Tweet as a child, the older woman and Tweet's grandmother are present in her life, occasionally visiting and lending a helping hand to Grandpa. After his death, Tweet's mother comes to help her daughter, eventually moving to the area and becoming friends with her. Tweet values this relationship and notes that her mother teaches her, even as a married teenager, to value simple things like planting (100). But her first relationship of admiration for a woman was brief and with Claree, her stepmother. When she and Julius arrive, Grandpa directs Tweet to be quiet and not be "dazzled." Tweet recalls, "If [Grandpa] hadn't said that right then, hadn't warn me, things might have gone different. Even with the warning, I was dazzle. I want a dress like hers, and shiny shoes. And her skin, her hair! Eyes like diamonds. Teeth that shine like snow. She was a light-skin woman, browny-red hair, all soft and wavy" (22). Tweet has "bad" hair, she believes, even though she occasionally has it straightened; comically, Claree's hair is eventually revealed to be a wig. Considering the conclusion to her dealings with her stepmother, Tweet's inherent mistrust of most women is hardly surprising.

At age fourteen, when Tweet marries Nig, she becomes stepmother to two children, the eldest—Cynthia— just ten years old. She notes to Cornelia, "[…] she and I already got to liking one another well enough […] I reckon it was hard on the girls after their mama died, Nig bringing home one woman or another. They're glad he got married to me" (116). Perhaps because of their mutual dislike for Nig's extramarital activities or because of their close ages, Tweet and her stepdaughters have a friendly relationship, not a traditional parent/child one. As Tweet's own mother was rarely present during her daughter's childhood and, though friendly, never filled the parental role, Tweet is not trained to see women as a superior, which will lead to some dissention in her relationships with white women, discussed in more detail in the next section.

Ultimately, though, Tweet must rely on women when her stroke incapacitates her. Rosa, Tweet's mother, laughs that Nig seems to believe he can "catch death" (234), and therefore she avoids the small house in which Tweet is nursed. At the end, when Tweet bluntly tells Cornelia how she feels about her,

she and Cornelia cuss one another in an rare moment of extreme truth. The theme of a woman's voice plays a significant role in *Can't Quit*, as Broughton and Williams argue. They explain that "Douglas works out the powerful ending of this book not just by Cornelia's belief in Tweet's voice, but by Tweet's belief in Cornelia's voice. Both women finally have harsh, even profane, but restorative words for each other" (66). Because "woman's voice" especially refers to the relationship between Tweet and her white employer, Tweet progresses in her battles with both race and same-gender relations to a small extent (certainly not overcoming either) but not at all in inter-gender relations. Nig is unable to bear the final, candid scene between the women when he interrupts them by accident. He stutters, refers to them both as ladies as he excuses himself, and leaves (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 255). By considering his hasty retreat at the moment of truth in the novel and the stories which Tweet shares, one knows that Tweet ultimately fails in surmounting the hurtle of gender. The fundamental conclusion of *Can't Quit* lies in the fact that Tweet cannot truly share her voice continually with any one person and, her words choked back by rage, perhaps not even herself. Thus, at the close of Douglas' novel, Tweet reaches a brief bittersweet candor with Cornelia, despite the additional racial obstacle, but her husband is still separated from her, emotionally and now physically.

CHAPTER V

JUSTIFYING OUTCOMES PART II: RACE

In comparison with gender obstacles, Janie's encounters with racial prejudice are extremely limited. In fact, the issue of race is muddled throughout the book as Janie struggles to find any racial identity in her setting, a world Nanny imagines perhaps only in Africa, where the white man does not exist. In reality, a racially uniform world does not exist in the United States and especially not in the South.

As a very young child, Janie's racial identity is undetermined, at least for her. Whether or not she is treated as different from the other children, who are white, is uncertain; regardless, she does not notice any differentiation. Only when a chance traveler takes a photograph of the children and they begin identifying themselves does Janie realize that the only remaining child is African American. Her response to the knowledge indicates some level of disappointment: "'Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!'" (8-9). This is one of the few times Janie acknowledges any kind of disadvantage to being black in a racist world, largely because her world is rarely integrated. She is mocked not only for being dressed nicer than other African American children and for her parents' past but also because she and Nanny live behind a white family. Nanny and Janie move to a new house to alleviate the ridicule she faces daily (10).

Nanny's explanation of life indicates that all abuses of the world originate with white men; this and her subsequent description of slavery is the only direct speech the reader sees from the elderly woman regarding race, despite the fact that she is clearly a domestic worker for whites. In Levecq's essay she discusses Barbara Johnson's views on the black woman's place in a racist, sexist society as presented in "Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." At first Johnson's arguments are akin to Nanny's "mule of the world" statement; Johnson posits that, graphing race and gender to determine the black woman's placement, she finds that such a woman "has no 'separate, distinct category'" but is "'both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by others for their own ends'" (Levecq 91). But she goes on to question her own findings and, in the later

essay "Thresholds of Difference," argues that Hurston understood clearly the relative nature of one's placement in society; it cannot be graphed as in Johnson's attempt. Rather, it is dependent upon myriad factors including race and gender but also religion, nationality, class, and profession. Ultimately, she concludes that there is no specific placement for black women but that each woman's place is a "'matter of strategy rather than truth'" (91).[9]

Indeed, Janie's experience proves that her choices significantly alter her future. As a girl, she finds that, even when married to what Nanny considers a respectable black man, she may endure the kind of abuse Nanny describes for single black women. Her experience cannot be determined based on matrimonial status or even a man, for she must play a key part in her own happiness. Possibly because of Nanny's speech, Janie refuses to perform hard physical labor; Logan takes this and her lack of regard for him as a great insult. He rages, "'Ah thought you would 'preciate good treatment. Thought Ad'd take and make somethin' outa yuh. You think youse white folks by de way you act'" (30). Essentially, Logan indicates that only a white woman can reveal confidence in her own self worth without suffering abuse for it. He also believes that Janie can only be "something" through him. Clearly, Nanny is incorrect in thinking that she can shield Janie from the abuses of a world with whites simply through marriage; perhaps Logan passes along the abuse he endures in his interactions with whites as Nanny describes, but Janie still endures maltreatment at the hands of an African American husband even in Eatonville, where whites have no place. Critic James R. Giles argues that Nanny is entrenched in whiteness, the power that enables her to control Janie; Missy Dehn Kubitschek, in her article "'Tuh De Horizon and Back:' The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," uses this point to later bolster her own that Nanny is indeed a part of what keeps Janie from accepting her adventure of life in order to achieve her own "vision." Nanny, unable to see beyond her own experience and that of Janie's mother, aims to secure Janie's future (Kubitschek 109, 113). Though Janie may not totally understand the implications of

[9] Janie's journey and resulting understanding of life reiterates this point as she will later comment on the uniqueness of her own situation considering the experience she has gained that others have not (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 192). Levecq notes that "Hurston, through use of humor and of the carnivalesque element in her culture, helps underscore the complexity of the black woman's subjectivity in American culture" (92).

Nanny's "mule of the world" speech, she seems to intuitively understand Nanny's unspoken hope of a world run by African Americans. In light of Giles' and Kubitschek's comments, Nanny's speech may seriously hinder Janie's ability to find self-fulfillment; Janie's later bitterness certainly would support that point. But the path that Janie chooses with Joe Starks leads her to a world without interracial strife, which provides the opportunity for her to combat gender obstacles. Nanny's speech may have inadvertently led Janie to the only method for her, as an African American woman in the early twentieth century, to reach self-fulfillment.

Truly, the unique setting of Eatonville provides Janie an unprecedented opportunity to defeat sexism. But, as previously noted, it also presents the unusual dynamic of an African American community dividing itself into classes and, without the bias of the outside South and whites, assigning the top economic sector of the town (Joe and Janie) the role held elsewhere by white people. Soon after the couple arrives in town Joe is described as "Kind of portly like rich white folks" (34). This is not unfounded since Joe enters the town saying that the scene is "just like [he] thought. A whole heap uh talk and nobody doin' nothin'" (34). Since he is aware that the entire town is black and, presumably, he does not enter every town assuming it will be in chaos, Joe holds a demeaning opinion of the abilities of his fellow African Americans. He assumes that the citizens will need *someone* to tell them what to do, some substitute boss-man in the absence of a white man or an appointed foreman. With resentment, the existing townsfolk respond that they, as adults, need no boss (35). Tellingly, one of Joe's favorite sayings is "I god," all the more interesting as he becomes the "master" of the town. While others buy land from him (like Mr. Lord of *Can't Quit*), he controls the entire town and builds himself a "'big house'" surrounded by pseudo sharecropper's houses or, at worst, servants' quarters (47). The narrator describes that the townspeople "murmured hotly about slavery being over, but every man filled his assignment" (47). Like Nanny in the place of Janie's birth, Jody of Eatonville represents white values; ironically, by doing so, as Kubitschek points out, Jody enslaves himself and is "judged more harshly." She also notes that Janie's passive response to Jody's treatment and insistence on placing her on a pedestal, despite her verbal

rejection of him in the shop, makes her culpable of promoting "white values" in Eatonville (Kubitschek 113).

In contrast, because of his own need for Janie, Tea Cake truly involves Janie in his world, inviting her onto the muck. This action allows Janie more fellowship with other African Americans than she has ever had. As part of her embracing of Tea Cake, Janie discards the image Nanny has created in railing against slavery times; Janie rejects the pedestal position Nanny would have created for her (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 114). It is important to note, however, that her desire and pursuing of a deeper self realization is possible only because she has not been oppressed by race her entire life; the pedestal position, for her, is easy to dismiss only because she has experienced it.

Her decision is questioned somewhat by the endeavors of the lighter-skinned Mrs. Turner. On the muck, she represents racial prejudice, though it is far less potent from her position of a fellow African American than it would be from an established white class. After Janie explains her regard for Tea Cake, Mrs. Turner comments, "'Ah jus' couldn't see mahself married to no black man. It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race'" (140). Obviously Mrs. Turner considers neither herself nor Janie "black." Later in the conversation, as Janie refuses to waiver in her lack of derision for African Americans, Mrs. Turner continues and expounds on her previous sentiments:

> 'You'se different from me. Ah can't stand black[s]. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself. 'Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off' […] [They're] always cuttin' de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones is holdin' us back' (141).

Here, Mrs. Turner becomes an apologizer for African American culture, blaming blacks for white oppression. She also gives Janie yet another opportunity to reject the identity of folk, but Janie refuses and asserts her distaste for being isolated via the veneration of others, solidifying her identity as folk hero. Because of Janie's physical appearance she expects Janie to agree, even if only in response to Mrs. Turner's near-worship of Janie's mulatto skin and remarkable hair. The narrator notes that, for Mrs. Turner, anyone who looks more white than she must be a better person. The veneration of all things

white is tragic in this character because of her hope that by promoting her ideas she can improve her own standing in society, a belief borne of unmitigated racism in which she has learned to survive. But her comments and beliefs are ludicrous in her position; not only is she an African American woman, she is surrounded almost exclusively by black people and an African American culture thriving free of white domination. As if to prove how innocuous such a person is in this setting, Tea Cake resolves to rid the muck of Mrs. Turner, planning and executing a brawl in her restaurant that drives her out of the area permanently (150-2).

Janie's brief encounters—as an adult—with whites in *Their Eyes* reveal the necessity for their absence in a world in which Janie can succeed. First, she and Tea Cake come across whites while escaping the hurricane on the muck. The whites have taken the only high ground position in the immediate area and have forced the African Americans to continue walking (164). Later, in the Palm Beach hurricane clean-up, white men force Tea Cake to help bury the dead at gun point. Ludicrously, the whites insist that he and other African American men examine the bloated bodies to determine which are white—they will be buried in coffins (170-1). Janie implores Tea Cake to take them back to the muck, adamant that even if whites there are insisting similar burials, they will be safer with whites that know them. She reasons that, to white people, any unknown African American is bad (172).

At Janie's trial, the black people in the courtroom pit themselves against her. The narrator explains that "they were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks" (186). For the first time, the narrator comments on race in the presence of the oppressors. African Americans in Eatonville never necessitate such commentary. Here, in mixed company, the blacks are immediately silenced by custom. In such a setting, Janie immediately seeks the commonality of the white women, who cry with her after the trial and visit with her (188). After being found not guilty of Tea Cake's murder, some African Americans blame the verdict on her looks, which Mrs. Turner has established as more white than many others. Thus, even though Janie has chosen to associate with them—through which Hurston has posed her as a folk hero—some in her society seem to have rejected her. Cruelly, the men say that "'uh

white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth'" (189). Obviously, this comment directly contradicts Nanny's statement and, ironically, proves it to some extent. As African American men make this comment, they acknowledge Nanny's opinion of white men, noting that they are free to unload their troubles on black people. But the speakers ignore their tendency, which Nanny laments, to lay their concerns on the shoulders of African American women. Interestingly, however, the men seem to contradict themselves as they indicate in this conversation both that (1) Janie only escaped punishment by not being truly "black" and (2) she is a black woman. Just as they have ignored that they impose and oppress these women, they ignore that Janie has had the option of rejecting her identity as an African American and has, instead, embraced it.

Tweet's experiences with whites are somewhat similar to Janie's but with the added quality of its personal nature; whites know Tweet, and she encounters them daily. Despite this, because of Tweet's lack of experience in seeing women in an authoritative position as a child, she has franker conversations with Cornelia as an adult than one might expect between a white employer and domestic worker. The narrator addresses the nature of their relationship, trying to determine how to discuss it without focusing on race and finding, ultimately, that (as previously noted regarding Tweet's challenges in life) there is no effective way of separating it from the rest of her life. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator says,

> There is no getting around in these stories of two lives that the black woman is the white woman's servant. There would have been no way in that time and place […] for them to get acquainted, except across the kitchen table […] But—servant? Mistress? They would be uneasy with these words, and so am I. […] So, let's settle for housekeeper and employer. Yes, that's better. And try for now to be absentminded about race and class, place and time, even about poverty and wealth, security and deprivation. […] They weren't absentminded about these ludicrous and dreadful matters. To them race sounded the endlessly repeated ground bass above and entwined with which they danced the passacaglia (or as it may sometimes appear, the boogie) of their lives (4-5).

Tweet and Cornelia are undoubtedly conscious of the racial aspect of their relationship, at least partly because they have known each other for years and (in other circumstances and in another time) might have been true friends. But, as seems to have been accurate for bonds such as these, the white employer is less aware of the tension than the black employee, often considering the employee "like family."

Two examples demonstrate this sentiment compellingly in *Telling Memories.* The collection contains a conversation with a white woman who feels bitter and defensive about the reputation southerners have attained regarding black domestic workers. She says, "'it makes me so mad that I want to talk, because we did know so many of them and they did love us, too. And we loved them. We were always together'" (Tucker 48). She goes on to explain how the same African American domestic workers and their children came to work for her and her family when she was a child and an adult. She is convinced that the women helped primarily out of love, citing that her Mammy's grown daughter would show up to help her, "'and she did it just because she loved me. She was just a member of the family and, you know, she wouldn't let me pay her'" (49). She denies any feelings of animosity on the parts of the African American women, insisting: "'I mean it was just a way of life and there was no hard feelings, no hate […] they were black and we were white, but that made no difference. They loved us and we loved them, and I can say that very sincerely that I know they loved us, too.'" But she never met her domestic's oft-discussed son, the same age as the white woman's child. Too, she notes that she resented the Northerner's insistence on the servants eating at the same table, absurdly citing as an example that the president does not eat with his white or black servants. "'They're there in the capacity to serve,'" she explains, not seeming to notice the contradictions in her sentiments and examples (49-50). Certainly, her point that the white employers never "hated" the blacks is perhaps true, but that is to ignore the injustice of the existing system. The sentiment is also shockingly oblivious to factors that might mitigate the expressed feelings of the domestics for their white employers.

Another white woman interviewed in Tucker's study describes the experience of her new stepmother firing the family's African American domestic woman, saying, "'That hurt all of us, because it was like telling a member of the family to get out and don't come back. We were all pretty hostile […] because Rachel [our domestic] had been with us all our lives and then Daddy remarried and whammo, she's out. And that didn't seem fair. […] Of course, there's two sides to every story.'" Note the focus on the emotions of the white family members rather than the clear difficulties placed on the newly unemployed Rachel. The woman goes on to explain that Rachel's bitterness caused the family to have to

"'keep in touch with her'" because she had no family, no children or "'husband that [they] knew.'" The fact that the interviewee is not certain if Rachel was unmarried reveals that, though she may have considered the woman family, Rachel certainly could not or did not share that cozy sentiment (63).

Because Cornelia falls into this same pattern, she calls for Tweet in a moment of crisis and despair as her husband John dies. Tweet helps plan the funeral and then, at the funeral, "mourned John for Cornelia with peacock cries" while the white people attending shy away as if ashamed of her unabashed feeling (161). Tweet grumbles that Cornelia, unable to plan the funeral in her state of mourning, needs someone to ensure that the event is a proper affair. Too, Cornelia relies on the memories of Tweet's stories, perhaps more inspired and reliant on them than Pheoby on Janie's. Following the death of her husband, Cornelia nearly loses her mind but retains a tenuous hold on reality via her memories of Tweet's voice and stories. After Tweet's stroke, Cornelia returns to their hometown and tells Tweet how important her memories have been, begging her to recover; thoughtlessly, she relates her former employee's worth to her usefulness to Cornelia and sees hate in Tweet's eyes (238).

Though Cornelia is aware of a difference in situation between them, the novel notes several times that she places herself in the position of assumed friend. For example, on the day of Martin Luther King's death, the narrator details Cornelia's attempt to apologize to Tweet: "Cornelia doesn't think: She's not going to ask me in. She speaks. It's awful, Julia, she says. Awful. I came to tell you… […] Tweet cannot nod. She turns away and shakes her head, as if to say, What do you know about it? I'm sorry, Cornelia says again. But she dares not reach out, dares not cross the two paces that separate them" (98-99). The narrator is clearly more aware of the discomfort in this scene than Cornelia, who attempts not only to apologize but to pretend to understand and explain the horror of King's death to a black woman. Tweet's anger and hatred are kept silent in this scene, but Cornelia knows that, at this moment, the metaphorical space between them is wider than it ever has been.

Tweet, of course, feels resentment for Cornelia that the white woman could never anticipate. Early in the novel she begins to reveal it in subtle ways. For example, she compares Cornelia to another white woman, Mrs. Lord, that Tweet knew years earlier: "She's like you, Tweet said. Always polite.

Likes to cook. Makes an excuse if she ax you to wait on her" (102); she resents Mrs. Lord, which becomes obvious in the story she tells of her taking Mr. Lord's goose in return for his late sharecropping payment. Tweet's animosity, generally hidden but later voiced, reveals a spirit unwilling to bend to the customs surrounding her and a mind unwilling to accept the status quo as acceptable, as "just the way things are." In *Telling Memories*, several women, black and white, note that, though they silently questioned aspects of the social and racial makeup of their worlds from time to time, they rarely if ever voiced those concerns (Tucker 21-2, 49, 53-4).

Tweet's resentment and fear of whites begins at a young age. She reveals her sentiment in the telling comment that "girl-children need to be afraid—afraid of white men, white women, white kids…" (Douglas, *Can't Quit* 17). As soon as her grandfather and protector dies, Mr. Lord conspires with Julius to steal her land, involving a white attorney and other figures in the court house. Infuriatingly, Mr. Lord lectures Tweet about her attempt to outbid him for her own inheritance after his nefarious plan succeeds: "I had in my mind, he says, to look after your interest in that sale. Maybe get Julius to put up some of his money for you. But you and Nig mess around here, run the price up, and that makes me feel bad. You ain't done right in this whole thing, Tweet, he says" (120). Even after being wronged so severely, Tweet and Nig take a job sharecropping on Mr. Lord's land, for they have few options for work—none if they choose not to move away. Following Tweet's confrontation of Mr. Lord regarding his failure to pay their wages, she and Nig move to town, where they find work nearly immediately (despite Mr. Lord's predictions). After this confessional to her white employer, Tweet waits for Cornelia's response; it never comes, and the narrator compares Cornelia to Mrs. Lord, both quietly cooking while the injustices of the world continue. Tweet claims that she has not changed and, some day, may take her retribution further than killing a goose for dinner (106). Her anger is not only realized, it is simmering just beneath the surface of her somewhat obedient façade. Throughout her employ, Tweet "gives" stories of injustice to Cornelia, holds them up to the white woman's review to gauge her reactions, which are thoughtful or ignoring, but never demonstrate the degree of outrage deserved; Cornelia's role as a white woman is to

be maddeningly obtuse, never directly inflicting the worst of the racial bias but nevertheless culpable in her silence.

Tellingly, Tweet's communications after her stroke come after a long struggle and even then only in the form of song. Like so many African Americans who sang in code to circumvent the silence imposed by whites, Tweet learns to tell her true sentiments to Cornelia in this way as she learns to communicate again and, perhaps, more effectively this time. She is infuriated about the treatment of Nig and her and likens the gold watch he has received after decades of work to her cheap Mardi Gras jewelry, which was a gift from Nig while he cheated. The narrator relates Tweet's anger: "Look, Tweet says. Look—at Nig's watch. […] What you think about that? Ain't that *fine*? she says in a furious voice. I'd put it in with them other—other jewels—if he'd give it to me. […] Might buy him a watch myself, she says, get him a watch for—for—for Christmas, throw that one against the wall" (253).

Certainly anger towards whites in general is rampant in Tweet's African American community. Her mother Rosa, for example, is livid at the doctors' suggestion to do brain surgery on Tweet after her stroke. She rants, "Them doctors looking for somebody to cut on like they cut on dogs—only it's people. Find out what's in there, how it works. They always done [blacks] that way, Don't need no bubble in there for them to want to cut on her head" (233). Nig seems to agree many times, but his daughter mocks those ideas as "superstitious" since she has grown up in different times, a nurse by profession (235). But Tweet's anger is directed at Cornelia largely because her white employer is representative of all white women she has encountered, as previously noted in the section regarding Tweet's outspoken nature. Essentially, she seems to expect more from white women than from men, black or white, because of the shared challenge they face of combating gender prejudice.

But Cornelia falls back on the customs she has been raised to practice, justifying Rosa's anger. Cornelia is more telling than she means to be in her comments after Tweet's stroke: "She's like a baby. She's going to have to learn to talk again" (244). Blacks are often seen in this way in *Can't Quit*'s society, as large children in need of care. In fact, one of Mr. Lord's justifications for his behavior is his belief that black people are like women and children, who must be lied to "for their own good" (112).

Even Cornelia's step-grandchild suggests that Tweet would enjoy the new show *Sesame Street* (245). Her incapacity puts into physical reality the stereotypes and treatment she has endured for half a century. As if her belongings are not really hers, Cornelia's step-grandchildren take the colorful beads at Tweet's house as playthings, only returning them when Tweet mentions their absence (253). After Cornelia's and Tweet's confrontation, in which both women angrily curse at one another (and, one might assume, at the system that has divided them), Cornelia continues to "take" from Tweet, claiming the stories Tweet has given as things that no longer belong only to Tweet: "You can't take back what you've told me. It's here. It's mine. Mine, mine, mine. Not just yours" (255).

In the end, addressing Cornelia, Tweet speaks of Nig after he cheats on her, laughing and singing through the same lyrics: "I love you darlin, but I hate your treacherous low down ways" (256). Tweet seems to view racial issues as she does her troubles with Nig. Certainly, as she is angered by his unfaithfulness, she is angered by the injustice of racial prejudice, but, ultimately, she can only fruitlessly rail against the system that surrounds her and, exhausted, accept Cornelia on whatever terms she can as a woman. As a comparison, Cornelia is essential to the novel. Broughton and Williams note that the two characters reveal much in juxtaposition. Cornelia, needy and nearly helpless as a woman, falls into a crazed depression when her husband dies, ultimately emerging by relying on the borrowed strength of Tweet's stories. Tweet, a strong African American woman, suffers from the added stress of race until she has an aneurysm and stroke that nearly kills her. Yet, despite the benefit of her considerable strength of character, Tweet "remains disadvantaged" in the novel (65).

CHAPTER VI

JANIE'S SUCCESS

In reviewing scholarship on *Their Eyes*, particularly from the latter half of the twentieth century, one must note the proliferation that discusses Janie's ultimate success(es). Levecq states that such attempts to define Janie's quest are largely inadequate as the "text itself is resisting" (90). But she offers, perhaps, the best explanation of what is dissected in the various critiques of this aspect, stating that this "most emphasized theme […] consists in how Janie, through a series of changes or shifts, makes her way to a final state [of] self-fulfillment, independence, autonomy, wholeness, selfhood, self-reliance, self-realization—a state supposed to represent a material, physical, psychological, and spiritual freedom" (89). This working definition is important in its concise collection of the various terms given to Janie's triumph, which is also defined differently by scholars of various schools of thought.

At the beginning of *Their Eyes*, the narrator introduces what will comprise Janie's voice. The opening explains that for women, the world is presented as a juxtaposition of the lives and philosophies of men and women: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, […] That is the life of men. Now women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth" (1). In this quotation, the novel's context is presented in terms of a woman's approach to life and the resulting possibilities within it contrasting with the stark realities in the life of a man. Hurston's later autobiography *Dust Tracks*, written after *Their Eyes*, mirrors these comments and Janie's style of story; the autobiography was "designed […] to be [a] quest for, as well as proof of, the writer's identity" (MacKethan 42). In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston's organization does not follow strict patterns of chronology or subject matter; rather, it meanders to achieve a complete view of the author/subject. In effect, Janie achieves this same feat with the story of her life she relates to Pheoby. At first glance, it seems to follow a chronological pattern, but with the continual self-realizations and growth Janie experiences as she "drapes" herself with her own memories, the book ultimately achieves a complex

portrait of a woman or a "poetically imaged quest for self" (MacKethan 43), unrestrained by a masculine concept of truth, time, or traditional theme.

Some critics disagree altogether with the notion that Janie achieves any sort of "wholeness" in the novel, even in the final scenes. Jordan notes that, for feminists in particular, her experience does not meet muster for realizing self, especially in the context of sixties and post-sixties reformist literature. She further explains that Janie "does not meet the black feminist demand that a heroine achieve both self-definition and social commitment" (108). Essentially, this critic contends that feminists require not only contentment within oneself and/or an individualized voice but also meeting one's duty to one's community, in this case that of African Americans and, more specifically, African American women. As Janie's friendship and communication seems limited to a single African American woman throughout the novel (for she rejects her own maternal parentage and dismisses the porch-lookers), she cannot be said to have embraced any sort of collective responsibility. Jordan adds that Janie does not achieve true freedom from gender oppression because "she never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements. […] As the novel ends, Janie chooses isolation and contemplation" (108). Though this essay in its analysis of Janie's journey in terms of gender suggests many instances in which Janie has demonstrated growth leading to self-fulfillment, Jordan argues that Janie never achieves any freedom from gender oppression. She asserts that the character's journey "ultimately belittles the suffering of the majority of black women whose working-class existences are dominated by hard labor and financial instability." Specifically, she views Janie's bond with the white women in the courtroom as opportunistic. In conjunction with Janie's perceived failure to bond with African American women or the community, Jordan sees a complete failure in the "struggle for identity and self-direction" (108). But it is important to remember that the introduction to the novel clearly sets Janie's story and voice outside such rigorous definitions of what can qualify as happiness/achievement; it is highly relative.

Those critics who credit Janie with achieving wholeness point to many scenes within *Their Eyes* as proof of Janie's growth. Many of these scenes have been discussed in the section on overcoming gender. In addition, discussing strictly same-race relations, some Janie-defenders see development in the

character that ties her to her community and extends her selfhood to her race. But Jordan disputes these arguments, such as one by noted Hurston scholar Mary Helen Washington, that Janie reconciles to the black community while she works on the muck. Jordan notes Tea Cake's pride that Janie, a woman with money, works alongside him on in the Everglades; he brags to others about it, and they are duly impressed (113). Indeed, the text reveals that everyone on the muck is well aware that Janie is not integrated in the community but resides there because of her love for Tea Cake. This is reiterated as she chooses to leave the area after his death because "the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn't there. So it was just a great expanse of black mud" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 191). Notably, without her husband, the area is "black." This speaks, perhaps, to the literal appearance of the area, Janie's true grief (which is so deep that she cannot bear to wear mourning clothes), and the presence of *groups* of African Americans, to which she has never fully united herself.

MacKethan adds the dimension of Hurston's autobiographical comments in *Dust Tracks* to her assessment of Janie's voice in relationship to Jody's store. Hurston discusses the store she visited as a child owned by the historical Joe Clarke, and MacKethan notes,

> she connects this center with the heart of her community, the store porch of Eatonville where the men gathered to tell stories. Of course, 'I was not allowed to sit there' ([*Dust Tracks*] 62), Hurston says. Nonetheless her autobiography testifies to her successful appropriation of this man's place, source of a traditionally male power—the power of language itself. Hurston, even as a child, grasped the nature of this power in a way that set her apart from her community. […] she gave herself permission to sit where stories were made and to surprise the world with her own talk (MacKethan 41-2).

Janie shows the same affinity for the front porch stories and interaction while working at the store in Eatonville. She fulfills the storytelling action for herself when she talks with Pheoby, even rejecting the male placement of her story-telling, opting instead to share inside the home, traditionally the female domain (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 84). She offers Pheoby the power to tell her life story/journey, surpassing the mundane power of the porch storytellers to such a degree that she does not even *have* to retell her story to maintain her power. Relating it once to one friend is enough. Indeed, "Janie, not the porchsitters, is designated as the master of words, theirs as well as hers, which she will blend as the teller of the tale that encloses them all" (78). Only now that Janie has returned from her life with Tea Cake, MacKethan

argues, does she have what a storyteller needs: "self, self-knowledge, and a new, knowledgeable narrator" (78-9). The role and presence of an audience are reflected in not only Janie's storytelling (to Pheoby) but the overall novel itself, evidenced by Hurston establishing the "rules" for woman's storytelling in the novel's opening lines so that the reader might have a deeper understanding. But part of Janie's discovered sense of "self" is her power of selecting her audience and even having the power to decline the identity of storyteller altogether; for her, the story exists within and for herself, as shown by her reflecting on and reveling in her memories in the novel's final scene.

If Janie's achievement of a self-defined voice constitutes some sort of realization, then, one can analyze exactly how and when she succeeds in the novel. Janie's struggles with the challenge of gender bias have been documented in this essay and elsewhere. Her confrontation with Jody in the store, first as she defends womankind in general and later as she defends herself and attacks his manhood, constitute the beginnings of Janie's voice. She follows with recognition of her bitterness towards Nanny and relationship with Tea Cake. The courtroom scene has invited a great deal of scrutiny as critics like Robert Stepto of Yale have argued that Janie's silence denotes a failure to achieve her voice, to which Alice Walker responds that "'women d[o] not have to speak when men th[ink] they should, that they w[ill] choose when and where they wish to speak'" (quoted by Washington xiii-v). Indeed, Janie *chooses* to voice her story to Pheoby, her female companion, not the "gentlemen" in a jury. Even readily recognizing Janie's evolution in these scenes, Levecq argues that the general store showdown with Jody in Chapter 7 of *Their Eyes* "contains a complex pattern of moves forward and moves backward, which undermine any romantic assessment of Janie's growth" (97). Levecq asserts that Janie's development is hard-won, not the magical and sporadic opening of the flower of sexuality so frequently symbolized in the novel. Citing the never-ending critical argument for the achievement of voice, Levecq contends that the novel refuses to allow Janie any simplistic or "well-defined" status—be it voice or no voice or blooming sexuality—through what she terms "subversive shifts," or destabilizing elements within the text. Such unresolved conflicts undermine any clear definition of the extent of Janie's achieved personhood (Levecq 90). While Levecq points to relative examples for her points, they can also prove the narrator's telling

sentiment in the introduction to Janie's story: to attempt to define it by rigid, possibly masculine standards will necessarily fail; her tale is relative not only to women, or even only to African American women, but specifically to Janie. As noted in the opening section of this essay, a cultural hero's journey should, in some way, reflect the values of a society as a whole and should be able to be duplicated; the highly relative nature of Janie's story prohibits her from achieving cultural heroism.

Janie's experiences, or lack thereof, confronting inter-race racism further solidify not only her unique journey but the failure to achieve cultural heroism, although some critics argue differently, extending Janie's wholeness to a racial identity in the midst of an interracial world. Kubitschek contends that Janie's success extends beyond gender to confront inter-race relations, as well. The critic defines Janie's overcoming the obstacle of race in three stages: "Leaving in silk and returning in overalls is the first step; telling Pheoby her story, the second; living in her community, the third. Janie will continue to speak and act as a black woman artist in Eatonville, a position which places her in a unique position in regard to the Afro-American literary tradition" (113). In the sense that Janie's acceptance and inclusion of her history reconciles her to the African American women of Eatonville, Kubitschek classifies her journey as a success, directly contradicting the African American feminist opinion as defined by Jordan. But Kubitschek's points are founded on her prior assumption that Janie is "always sufficiently knowledgeable of white culture to ensure her survival" (109). Certainly Janie successfully avoids white culture for the majority of *Their Eyes*. But to say that she has some innate knowledge ensuring her success is to ignore the prevalence of whites in the South during Janie's time; Janie reveals a desire to avoid whites in at least two situations (in her voyage to Eatonville and when she convinces Tea Cake to return to the muck and familiar whites.) Her longing may be predicated on Nanny's speeches, but her understanding is not unusual, for many if not all African Americans at the time might have preferred avoidance. For Janie to actually succeed in avoiding whites based on knowledge unique to her would impart to her extraordinary expertise that is simply not supported by the text. In fact, even in the real town of Eatonville, which was a place of security for Hurston, total avoidance of whites was impossible. Hurston speaks of whites often passing through from nearby towns or as tourists (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 6,

20), and Eatonville's citizens often sought jobs outside town, working for whites. The racial and racist implications of this are touched briefly but pointedly in *Their Eyes* in a description of the townsfolk sitting on porches at sundown: "These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long [at work]. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human" (1). Knowing the reality of the situation, had Hurston sought to present a pragmatic triumph on Janie's part in regards to race, she might have placed more emphasis on Janie's racial interactions. In her essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston even writes that "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. […] Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again." In this, she differentiates between the "self" she became in Eatonville as a child and the "self" she discovered in Jacksonville amongst whites (827-8). Hurston does not present Janie trouncing racism in the face of whiteness because she has purposefully placed the character where she will be free to discover herself, not be "overswept by a creamy sea."[10]

Moreover, had Janie not lived relatively free of whites, Hurston could never have created a character "without self-pity," as she discusses in her essay "Negroes Without Self-Pity." In Hurston's opinion, African Americans, by becoming mired in the injustices of slavery and racism, miss out on the opportunities available to them. The grievance of her fellow African Americans "was one of self-pity without a sense of belonging to America and what went on here" (933). Janie, divorced from that reality in which Nanny lives, easily resists that temptation, embracing herself and her history rather than being hampered by it. In a work that detailed the arts of Florida, Hurston's self-review cites a comment on an

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[10] In *From Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto notes that *Their Eyes* resembles a "narrative of ascent," in which an African American character would escape the repressive South to a less repressive North; in this case, of course, the escape is to Southern locations removed from almost all contact with whites. In this environment, Stepto argues, the character can succeed in some manner (usually in an "articulated," literary manner) that he/she could not at home but pays for this success through isolation. He also sees *Their Eyes* as a "narrative of immersion" in which the articulate character moves from a less repressive location to a more repressive location and learns "tribal literacy" and "reintegration with the original community" (Kubitschek 113-4). Kubitschek extends this argument, noting that the novel involves "group ascent," in which the community that becomes articulate removes the isolation of the sole, articulate character (114).

early novel that praises the lack of whites, which allows blacks to interact as people and not as a race. She notes that the characters are said to "'live and move'" and that the book is the "'first time that a Negro story has been offered without special pleading'" ("Works in Progress for *The Florida Negro*" 910).

As to what Janie can reasonably be said to have succeeded against, a litmus test from Levecq is appropriate; she notes the importance of Janie's understanding of what she confronts. Her essay questions what qualifies as Janie's final self-realization by asking "First, what does Janie know at any point about herself, her world, her relationship with other and with the world around her, the nature of her oppression, and what does she know about what she knows about those things? Second, what does the narrator (hence potentially the reader) know that Janie does not?" (92). Though her own analysis of these questions deals with the contested issue of Janie's voice, the questions can be equally applied to the extent of Janie's self-realization in terms of specific types of challenges. Essentially, in the first question, one must ask what Janie understands that she confronts. Certainly, as she takes up the sword of womankind against Jody in his general store in Eatonville, one may assume that Janie perceives the struggle of gender. But Janie's actions reveal no such knowledge of whites or willingness to confront them, despite a desire to avoid them or limit exposure to white people with whom she is familiar. Commentary regarding whites in the novel is most often made by others—Nanny or men in particular. As to Levecq's second query, the reader knows the following that Janie does not: she is not operating within a realistic racial context. Placed in a typical Southern town rife with the bigotry of the time like the one where Tweet and Cornelia live, Janie would likely have fared no better or only slightly better than Tweet. Truly, as Levecq quotes from S. Jay Walker's comments, Janie's transformation "'deals far more extensively with sexism, the struggle of a woman to be regarded as a person in a male-dominated society, than racism, the struggle of blacks to be regarded as persons in a white-dominated society'" (89).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the two characters reveal that the idea behind the cultural hero as one who changes the world around her through "invention or discovery" is a myth in that it is conditional on time, place, and circumstance rather than on composition of character traits; specifically, both Janie and Tweet confront the obstacle of gender throughout their respective tales, but their stories are vastly different largely due to the added challenge of interracial relations that Janie improbably avoids.

Tweet's tale is also "true" in that it was once told by a real figure, Douglas' African American acquaintance Mathelde. But even then, as Douglas notes and this essay highlights, the story is filtered by numerous factors: Mathelde interpreting and perhaps inadvertently altering the stories in retelling based on the accuracy of her memories (as does any storyteller); Mathelde perhaps editing her stories for her audience of a white woman (Douglas, in this case); Douglas' memory containing human fallacies and being subject to error in retelling; Douglas' retelling being from the perspective and understanding of a white woman; and Douglas perhaps also editing parts of the stories in her role as author. Combined, these factors leave considerable potential for error in *Can't Quit*. But Douglas has acknowledged these possibilities and even tried to reveal them in the text itself, for similar filters are in place between Tweet and the reader as between Mathelde and the text; in the novel, they are represented by the narrator and a white woman with a hearing problem that may be a physical manifestation of figurative "selective" hearing.

Therefore, Douglas' novel is oddly accurate for a white female author of a Mississippian generation that was raised amidst racism and (for some that belong to that age) fought to preserve it. Her Cornelia is not Douglas herself, for there are far more differences than similarities between the two, but some of the character's traits touch on Douglas' own beliefs. This is necessary for Cornelia to function as an appropriate listening audience, filter for the novel, and one of two protagonists. Cornelia believes, at the start of *Can't Quit*, that she has a perfect family and has lived a happy life, untouched by the ugliness

she refuses to contemplate (largely by turning down her hearing aid so she literally cannot face it). Her vision of reality is shattered by the messy truths of her children's lives and the secrecy her husband has employed to hide the truth from her; in the discovery of these truths, Cornelia loses the self she has known and understood, and in her husband's death, she is forced to face the reality of the past and present sans any sort of shield.

But in many ways she faced it all along. Tweet continually batters against Cornelia's preferred ignorance via storytelling. Further, Cornelia's attempts to commiserate with Tweet in the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, though perhaps inappropriate, reveal a liberal mindset (or at least a propensity towards one) in a rigid environment. After the death of her husband, Cornelia travels to New York, where she eventually "finds" herself again, though she has changed. Her journey is fraught with self-analysis, and in the retelling of her own life, Tweet's stories play in her mind. She has listened but simply not understood until her personal exploration. Through this largely Jungian self-analysis (which dissects the roles that she and those around her have played in what she hoped to be the fairy tale of her life), Cornelia suddenly comprehends, in a new way, not only Tweet's stories but the many books she has read.

Part of the stark reality of Douglas' tale is that between her two protagonists, only Cornelia journeys elsewhere to "find" herself. Tweet has already experienced the kind of loss that Cornelia faces in her husband's death and in her journey to New York. She has a more "fully realized" personality early in life, developed by facing and enduring the loss of her grandfather, the betrayal of her father, racial injustices, gender prejudices, and Nig's disloyalty. Her understanding and contentment in her identity allows her to defend herself, standing up to the men and even whites around her (especially in the final scene with Cornelia). Had she been isolated as Janie was, her strength of character might well have resulted in a fulfilling existence that would have satisfied many critical interpretations of heroism. But her "finding" of self comes with a heavy price in *Can't Quit*'s world—requiring that she endure those hardships or, perhaps, even her physical scarring. More, Tweet never revels in the joy of her self-realization as Cornelia (and even Janie) does. She has no ability or opportunity to do so; only Cornelia's

identity as a privileged white woman and Janie's identity as a wealthy African American woman in Eatonville allow them to do so. So while Tweet may have a firm sense of self, her self-realization is no landmark moment that separates her from other African Americans as a cultural or folk hero. Ironically, she is too mired in the realities of *being* an African American in a repressive society (certainly "belonging" to a group of people, as the definitions of cultural hero note) to be marked as one who *transcends* those realities into heroism.

Hurston, who studied with noted (and first) anti-racist cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, would have been acquainted with the concepts of Jungian paths to self-realization. Janie's path to self-realization means that she must endure objectification from men as well as the confrontation of the abject in the hurricane and Tea Cake's death. Whatever "self" Janie finds, which she encounters in the dreamlike final scene of *Their Eyes,* is as a result of these experiences; Cornelia's experience is anthropologically and perhaps even culturally similar to these. But neither woman can be considered a cultural hero because of the unusual nature of their transformations, for it marks them as "other" in their respective societal groupings.

Indeed, few critics argue that Janie ultimately achieves overall oneness with either the female or the African American community(ies). Though her total lack of embodiment of any "culture" in which she lives also helps negate any characterization of Janie as a cultural hero, she nevertheless can function as a folk hero because she *chooses* to identify with African Americans and/or women at various points throughout the narrative. This, too, speaks to the conditional nature of the identity of cultural hero. Even Kubitschek, who sees a far more extensive triumph for Janie than has been detailed in this essay, notes that Janie "realizes the personal nature of the quest" (113). In fact, the quest can be defined *only* through its individualization, a fact highlighted by the experiences of Janie, Tweet, and even Cornelia.

Janie's journey is not to be duplicated for numerous reasons, its absence of realistic obstacles not the least. Hurston was criticized by contemporary critics for the atmosphere in her novels falling short of reality but was undaunted by the commentary; she achieved her desired result in *Their Eyes*. But for the purposes of comparison, it should certainly be noted that reality factoring in the female African American

character's fictional life is a stymieing aspect. This fact is underscored by two factors discussed in this essay: (1) within the same setting, Tweet recognizes and embraces "self" early in life but ultimately lacks contentment in self-realization, and Cornelia retains a naïve belief in a fairy-tale existence well into middle age but, after jarring self-realization experiences, finds contentment; (2) Tweet also realizes self earlier than Janie, but Janie finds contentment on her meandering path to discovering herself. Yet Hurston's writings show that she most likely never intended for Janie to be a cultural hero, representative of her race, or even journeying along a believable path in life. Instead, Janie fulfills a different passion in Hurston's life, one she spent years documenting and championing. Janie is a folklore heroine, one who encounters, remembers, and recounts—but only to those she chooses; perhaps more importantly, she creates her own stories, her memory hemmed in by neither temporal guidelines nor hardnosed reality.

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