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Madeline Elizabeth Celley  
*University of Denver*

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FLINGING THE APRON AND TEARING THE KERCHIEF: JANIE CRAWFORD'S  
GESTURES IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

Madeline E. Celley

June 2016

Advisor: Dr. Tayana L. Hardin

Author: Madeline E. Celley  
Title: FLINGING THE APRON AND TEARING THE KERCHIEF: JANIE  
CRAWFORD'S GESTURES IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE  
WATCHING GOD*  
Advisor: Dr. Tayana L. Hardin  
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### **Abstract**

In this thesis, I argue that in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston demonstrates protagonist Janie Crawford's development through her use of gesture. As the narrative moves throughout Janie's life, she becomes progressively able to communicate her feelings and desires through the use of her body's movements. By depicting Janie's subjectivity as fundamentally embodied, Hurston indicates an awareness of the cultural oppression Janie suffers, linking her body to those of women in the past that suffered as slaves. She draws attention to Janie's body by relying on her gestures in order to emphasize the challenges Janie faces and ultimately transcends in her journey towards greater self-awareness and understanding. In addition to her novel, I also rely on Hurston's essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in order to show how she employs gesture as a mode of communication that can communicate as clearly as spoken language within Janie's community.

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## Introduction

On the second page of her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston writes:

“The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance” (2).

These few sentences introduce readers to the protagonist of this coming-of-age novel, Janie Crawford, a middle-aged black woman. In this initial portrait, we see Janie as the accumulation of all the experiences Hurston will describe in the pages to come. Hurston’s narrative strategy counters the tendency in the coming-of-age genre to follow the development of the protagonist throughout her life. Although the passage portrays a mature, assertive person, she does not speak a word about herself, nor are we given insight into her thoughts. Despite her verbal silence here, Janie’s sense of autonomy, her confidence in her body and sexuality, and her willingness to ignore social convention and instead follow her own mind—as exemplified through her choice of clothing—are all clearly conveyed. Because of the confidence which emanates from her physical presence, in just a few sentences, readers understand that this middle-aged woman’s silences are by choice, not due to any kind of restriction.

Janie's verbal "silences" are significant here precisely because her actions suggest that she is not at all silenced: though she does not speak, Janie does communicate many aspects of her personality and subjectivity through her gestures. Not only does the opening scene portray her as fully developed, confident woman, it also draws attention to a technique Hurston frequently uses throughout her novel. Specifically, this passage demonstrates the way Hurston relies on gesture to communicate Janie's increasing maturity as the book progresses. I will focus on Janie's gestures in order to argue in my thesis that Hurston conceptualizes "voice" as a fundamentally corporeal act, and, moreover, as the primary means by which Janie achieves self-knowledge.

As a coming-of-age story, the novel presents successive events in Janie's life from her childhood until she becomes the middle-aged woman Hurston depicts in the opening pages. Part of my project in this thesis will be to show how Hurston progressively uses Janie's gestures, and more specifically her awareness of her body's capacity to convey meaning, as she matures. I make my argument through a concept I call "embodied subjectivity" that I believe emerges through close readings of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I will use "embodied subjectivity" throughout my paper to express the way Hurston carefully describes Janie's gestures and facial expressions in order to emphasize her agency. I have found that literary critics often rely on terms like "subjectivity" and/or "identity" to refer only to a character's consciousness in terms of their thoughts or feelings about what they experience. In creating this concept I want to highlight the fact that Hurston's portrayal of Janie encapsulates more than just her thoughts about an event, but that it also acknowledges her increasing self-consciousness

that her body, and therefore identity, are entangled in discourses of gender, race, and sexuality. In pairing the two words “embodied” and “subjectivity” to create one concept, I want to remind readers that in all of Janie’s scenes in the novel, the physical presence of her body and its actions are essential in order to understand how she functions as a person during her development. Moreover, “embodied subjectivity” also encompasses Janie’s awareness of her body and its ability to signal a variety of cultural characteristics, as well as her ability to act on the desires or will of her own consciousness.

In addition to *Their Eyes*, I will also rely on Hurston’s essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” to support my claim that Hurston uses gesture to communicate as clearly as spoken language. First published in 1934 in a book titled *Negro: An Anthology*, edited by Nancy Cunard, this essay arguably makes one of the first contributions to the field of black performance theory, a topic I will cover later in more detail. By way of organization, I will examine the way Janie’s physical awareness progresses throughout the novel as she experiences romantic relationships with four men: Jonny Taylor, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods. I have structured my analysis this way because I argue that after each relationship, Janie understands how that individual partner restricts her development, and incorporates that understanding to more fully embrace an embodied subjectivity.

In attending to the way Janie performs gestures, I hope to first counter a common critical claim that her silence indicates passivity or acquiescence. Though I agree that Hurston denies Janie the right to verbalize her thoughts and opinions through first person perspective in some crucial moments in the text, I am interested in investigating the

significance of those absences. On the one hand, I believe Janie's silence demonstrates that Hurston recognizes her oppression by her husbands, and more broadly, by society as a whole until the end of her chronological story. In this way, Janie's life story is not only about her achievement of self-knowledge, but speaks to larger themes and narrative modes present in African American (women's) literature. Despite Janie's "silence," the way Hurston describes the events of her life highlights the significance of a black woman finding and claiming subjective experience in a cultural climate that mostly ignores or marginalizes her. As one critic, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, explains, "In their works, black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of black women's relationship to power and discourse" (6). Part of Hurston's project, I argue, is to represent alternative ways that black women can and have asserted themselves within the dominant discourse.

Hurston explores Janie's relationship to her social context especially in regards to the dynamics in each of her marriages. Furthermore, in moments where Janie challenges patriarchal oppression, Hurston offers a representation of progressive maturity that resists the trope of a character finding his or her voice. As I will explore more fully in later sections, many critics fault Hurston for Janie's supposed "voicelessness." However, in casting this judgment, those critics unfairly assume that Hurston's criteria for portraying a fully developed character completely aligns with theirs. More often than not, this means they hold her to traditional (masculinist) notions of how the protagonist of a *bildungsroman* should appear at the end of a novel. Usually that criteria is determined by whether said character "achieves his or her voice," which privileges dialogue and speech

in a way that ignores other modes of self-expression. In this thesis, I will assert that rather than an oversight, these “silences” are a calculated decision by Hurston that expand our conception of what constitutes a character’s “speech.” I draw upon certain lines of critical thought regarding the importance of speech in this novel because Hurston’s use of dialect is one of the most commented-on aspects of this work. Taking my lead from critics who have written extensively on whether or not Janie attains her voice in the book, I aim to nuance and expand the definition of “speech” and “voice” to incorporate Janie’s gestures in addition to her verbal utterances.

Finally, I conclude that Hurston writes Janie’s subjectivity as fundamentally corporeal because of her proximity to slavery, as a counter-narrative to the way black female bodies were (and still are) frequently represented. Writing within a context where black female bodies are disempowered less than 100 years after emancipation, I also argue that part of Hurston’s project in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is to represent an empowered black female body. I argue that Hurston ‘silences’ Janie from literally voicing her thoughts or feelings, and instead depicts her using her body—specifically her gestures—to convey certain messages because of the way her body is and has been perceived in her larger cultural context. Hurston clearly gives Janie agency throughout the story; the mere act of writing a novel about a black woman’s coming-of-age in 1937 is already pioneering to begin with. Yet I think the way she chooses to write Janie’s story acknowledges and then modifies a tradition in black female literature of what DoVeanna S. Fulton calls “black feminist orality.” In her book *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery*, Fulton traces the tradition of oral history

through African American culture, and observes the way slave women and later free black female authors make “orality” foundational in their literature (2). She defines “Black feminist orality” as “a form of empowerment using vocal and oral means . . . the foundation of a literary tradition of African American women’s writing that is the progeny of a cultural tradition of verbally articulating the self and experience” (2). She ultimately argues that the orality of early slave narratives—typically dictated because their authors were usually illiterate—influenced the ensuing black female literary tradition. I believe Hurston draws on this pattern of orality common in black female self-representation in many moments of her book. For example, she establishes and acknowledges the prominence of oral literature in black history right from the book’s opening, framing the novel with Janie recounting her life story to her friend Phoeby.

In addition to locating orality in its logical origins, Fulton also argues that “the oral aspects of Black women’s narratives of slavery demand readers’ attention to the texts as performance narrative that more completely convey experiences in slavery than print-language descriptions un-informed by these aspects are able to do” (7). Essentially, another feature of orality is its inherently performative nature. I contend (as does Fulton) that Hurston’s novel employ this concept of orality in Janie’s gestures, which are themselves inherently performative. Hurston not only creates an empowered black female protagonist, she does so by drawing upon this existing tradition in black female literature. Ultimately, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she limits Janie’s verbal speech and instead depicts her using gesture to communicate in order to more fully represent a character who is the empowered agent of her body. Additionally, because of the

performative aspects involved in gestural communication, Hurston embraces the tradition of orality while also modifying it. Just as illiterate black women 'wrote' their own stories through speaking them, Janie 'speaks' her story through her physical movement. Hurston effectively appeals to the tradition of orality, and because of her use of gesture provides a methodology for reading the female body as empowered instead of objectified, active instead of passive.

Ultimately, I hope that my observations will counter critics who argue that Hurston's portrait of Janie is not one of increasing maturity and confidence, but instead criticize Hurston for rendering her protagonist increasingly silenced. I want to show how Hurston's depiction of Janie demonstrates her awareness of prevailing cultural notions of the black female body, and how she capitalizes on the performative nature of African American culture to show Janie claiming agency through the way she lives in her body.

## Literature Review

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is significant—to the African American literary canon and the broader American literary canon—for several reasons. As I mentioned above, Hurston’s attention to culture plays into her stylistic choices. Hurston is often praised for her use of authentic<sup>i</sup> rural southern black dialect, and her inclusion of multiple narrative perspectives has also been the subject of much critical work. Because of that unique style, narrative structure and dialogue are the most frequently commented on aspects of the novel, and have been even from the time of its publication in 1937. For example, one 1937 review of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* praised Hurston for her rendering of dialect: “No one has ever reported the speech of Negroes with a more accurate ear for its raciness, its rich invention and its music” (Stevens 3). This early review highlights what much of the subsequent critical conversation surrounding this work concerns—the speech patterns of the characters in the novel. Even those critics who focus on other aspects of the novel, like its religious or folk themes, ground their analysis in Hurston’s language. Since my thesis is ultimately concerned with the relationship between oral and gestural communication, and expanding the way we conceptualize “speech” in literature, I focus the following literature review on tracing those themes of speech and rhetoric through different critical approaches to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and to Hurston’s work more broadly. The next few pages offer

a representative sample of the major criticism surrounding Hurston and *Their Eyes*. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but this collection of criticism touches on similar patterns and aspects of the novel.

Though popular after its initial publication, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fell into relative obscurity until the late 1970s. Some of the credit for the book's more recent popularity belongs to the writer Alice Walker, whose essay collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), helped re-introduce Hurston's work into the critical and public consciousness. In two essays, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" and "Looking for Zora," Walker describes her personal connection to Hurston—how she happened upon Hurston's anthropological study *Mules and Men* while researching voodoo practices among rural blacks in the south, and then went on a journey to find Hurston's grave after learning about her biography, specifically the fact that she had died in poverty. Additionally, Walker provides some biography of Hurston, citing information from Robert Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977). The essays provide an honest and sympathetic view of Hurston, and emphasize the role that folk culture played in her life and work, a theme that later critics often discuss. Walker's praise of Hurston also relates to her (Hurston's) academic background in anthropology, since she relates the way Hurston's upbringing in an entirely African American community may have influenced her work.<sup>ii</sup>

In fact, many critics look at Hurston's nonfiction writing about African American culture as an access point to her fiction. For example, scholars cite Lynda Marion Hill's

1996 book *Social Rituals and The Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* as an important work in that regard. Hill closely observes Hurston's language, specifically the performative quality that it assumes in her works. She writes:

“Using performance as a bridge between the two forms of writing [ethnographic and fiction], Hurston created performative language to emphasize that ritualized behavior is preeminent in the black cultures she studied, which led her to conclude that drama is the ultimate quality of life” (Hill xx-xxi).

She analyzes Hurston's novels primarily as dramatic literature, a viewpoint that has informed several contemporary critics writing on Hurston's dramas (see below). Of *Their Eyes* specifically, Hill writes that it “contains the stuff of which folklore is made, while the storytelling situations in the book are representations of folklife” (181). Similar to the work of DoVeanna S. Fulton who I discussed above, Hill reads the novel as an example of Hurston's use of the oral tradition.

Hazel V. Carby's “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” printed in two different collected editions of critical essays on Hurston, aligns itself with Hill's concern of Hurston's use of folk culture in her writings. But unlike Hill, who is more or less laudatory of Hurston's literary achievements, Carby challenges the idea that Hurston successfully integrated “‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of cultural production” (Carby 120). She argues that Hurston's representation of “a black, rural consciousness” was a methodical response to the way black culture was changing in the early twentieth century as many African Americans moved from rural to urban areas. For example, she writes “The people [Hurston] wanted to represent she defined as a rural folk, and she measured them and their cultural forms against an urban, mass culture. She recognized . .

. that the cultural norms she was most interested in reproducing were not being maintained” (Carby 120-121). Carby argues that while she disapproved of the use of folk tradition for commercial purposes, “Hurston could not entirely escape the intellectual practice that she so despised, a practice that reinterpreted and redefined a folk consciousness in its own elitist terms” (Carby 121). She reads *Their Eyes* as a “text concerned with the tensions arising from Hurston’s position as writer in relation to the folk as community,” and she reads Janie’s antagonistic relationship to her community as a reproduction of that tension (Carby 127).

While both Hill and Carby examine the folk aspects of Hurston’s work, Hill is more concerned with the way the folk are expressed in language, while Carby observes the larger contextual framework for Hurston’s writing, and how she associated with or pushed back against the goals of other Harlem Renaissance writers. Similar to Hill, I am interested in the way Hurston relies on observed African American cultural phenomena to create her characters, and I adopt a methodology similar to Hill’s by also relying on Hurston’s “Characteristics of Negro Expression” as secondary evidence for claims I make about her novel. However, Hill’s book focuses exclusively on “the way words imply actions through metaphors” (xxii). I am essentially focusing on an opposite communicative method by examining the way physical actions convey meaning for Hurston’s characters, and the way that particular meaning can only be conveyed by the body. Carby attends to the elements of folk culture present in the novel, but reads Janie as at odds with her broader community in the way she chooses to express herself. While that

may be true at some points in the story, I do not read a clear opposition between Janie and the townspeople. Carby attends to their differences between the Janie and the town on the basis of spoken language, whereas I look at the way gesture is mutually understood by both parties.

As I previously discussed, my project will draw on existing critical work regarding the importance of speech and dialect in *Their Eyes* in order to nuance the meaning of a character's "voice." In doing so, I will follow in the tradition of several notable theorists. First, in the late 1980s two major literary scholars, John F. Callahan and Henry Louis Gates Jr., both wrote entire book-length works analyzing rhetoric and language in African American literature. Each of these books contains individual essays on Hurston and specifically on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. On the whole, in his book *In The African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction*, Callahan contends that "In twentieth-century African-American fiction the pursuit of narrative often becomes the pursuit of voice. And by voice I mean the writer's attempt to conjure the spoken word into symbolic existence on the page" (Callahan 14). The book contains essays about several notable African American works, like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*. His chapter on Hurston, entitled "'Mah Tongue Is in Mah Friend's Mouf': The Rhetoric of Intimacy and Immensity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," details the relationship between individual and communal narration and the adaptation of the traditional call-and-response storytelling format into the novel's structure. In his book overall, Callahan uses "call-and-response" to refer back to African

oral storytelling, in which the narrator or main storyteller is frequently interrupted by commentary by the audience. For *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, he adapts this model to argue that Janie and Hurston are the two voices responsible for telling the story, and ultimately states that Janie's interior consciousness fuses with Hurston's narrative style by the end of the novel. He analyzes the structure of the plot as a function of Hurston's writing patterned after oral stories to demonstrate Janie's progression through the novel. Like Callahan, I also focus on the "orality" of Hurston's novel, but nuance that description to connect it more specifically to the tradition of early black female literature.

While Callahan analyzes voice and speech as it pertains to the novel's structure, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s chapter "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text" from his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* focuses on the nature of the dialect itself. He calls *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "the first speakerly text . . . a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition" (Gates 72). He reads Janie's progression through the novel as her "quest to become a speaking black subject," (72), and engages in a detailed reading of the novel, observing Janie's use of metaphor and imagery when describing her thoughts and feelings. He also contrasts the narrative style of *Their Eyes* with other novels, a theoretical approach common in discussions of Hurston's novel.<sup>iii</sup> In this case, Gates compares *Their Eyes* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Finally, Gates discusses the way that Hurston's use of dialect carries over into portions of the novel that are not dialogic, the sections of free indirect discourse or third person

narration that re-create the consciousness of the entire community. Gates analyzes Hurston in her context in order to differentiate her from the other writers of the Harlem Renaissance and recognize her achievement in narrative style. Gates' work on dialect in Hurston's novel helped to elevate her writing in the American canon, but his intense focus on spoken language also limits his definition of the novel's purpose. I agree with his analysis that Janie's trajectory in the novel enables her to "become a speaking black subject," but I will expand the definition of "speech" to include physical action in addition to language.

Another critical method common in scholarship about *Their Eyes* focuses on the novel's religious and spiritual aspects. Building on Callahan and Gates, these critics base their observation of religious themes on a linguistic foundation. For example, Karla F. C. Holloway's book *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston* on the whole focuses on Hurston's language, but in one chapter, "The Spiritual Legacy in the Word," Holloway observes the influence of West African religions on Hurston's work. Her article "Holy Heat: Rituals of the Spirit in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" expands on her book, arguing that Janie's progression towards self-realization involves "a transformational shift that results in a dramatic change in her own form" (127). By telling her story, again, using the linguistic aspects of the novel as evidence, Holloway argues that Janie integrates her spiritual and physical selves, a moment which marks her maturity at the end of the book. I also make a similar claim about Janie's maturity by acknowledging moments where her body articulates her

conscious desires. Another critic, Dolan Hubbard, observes the way Hurston uses language in service of greater religious themes. His “...Ah said Ah’d save de text for you’: Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her) story in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” reads Janie’s life progression through the lens of Christian themes and modes of expression traditional in churches, like sermons. Ultimately, Hubbard concludes that Janie takes on the role of a prophet, encouraging the women in her town to articulate their own identities while simultaneously uniting her community. I mention these examples to demonstrate the way critics attend to Hurston’s manipulation of language while layering other methodologies on their analysis, but also because they underscore the common critical focus on how to discern whether or not Janie has fully matured by the end of the novel. For Holloway and Hubbard specifically, that moment is signified by either a unified sense of self or articulation of desire, a commonality with nearly all of this novel’s critics. In my analysis, I point out the ways that Janie’s sense of self, specifically her ownership of her body, allows her to articulate her desires through physical expression.

Nearly all of Hurston’s early critics, and especially those who write about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, center their analysis on her use of language. This could mean focusing on minute details in dialect, as Gates does, or examining the broader context of where Hurston’s language comes from, as Hill does. Since many critics emphasize Hurston’s representation of the rural African American voice, the relationship between most of the scholarly research on her work can be traced back to critics in the late 1980s

and early 1990s, as in the examples above. However, if there is a commonly observed fault in the novel it has to do with what critics perceive as Janie's lack of agency. As I mentioned earlier, because of the importance of speech and voice in Janie's eventual self-actualization, some argue, it is impossible to read this novel and not be skeptical of the moments in which she does not address her own life's climactic or transformational moments in the first person. As Gates notes, "Free indirect discourse in *Their Eyes* reflects both the text's theme of the doubling of Janie's self and that of the problematic relationship between Janie as a speaking subject and spoken language" (103). For Gates, the amount of third person narration and free indirect discourse overshadows the centrality of Janie's own account of her story.

In another example, Mary Helen Washington finds the notion of Janie as 'feminist hero' problematic, writing that the novel "represents women's exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech" and that Janie is "deprived of speech when she should be in command of language" (27, 28). Washington, like Gates, automatically associates female agency with articulating one's own experiences. Finally, Robert Stepto faults Hurston for what he perceives as Janie's lack of voice and autonomy by the end of the novel. He writes: "Hurston's curious insistence on having Janie's tale—her personal history in and as a literary form—told by an omniscient third person, rather than by a first-person narrator, implies that Janie has not really won her voice and self after all" (166). These critics all assume that in order for a (female) character to demonstrate her development, she must narrate her own story. Their analyses do not leave much room for

originality on the part of the author. While Gates and Stepto praise Hurston for her representation of dialect, they do not extend that generosity into other creative elements of her work.

## Performance Theory and Hurston

Regardless of this common objection, analysis of Hurston's work continues. More recently, critical attention to language and also anthropology has broadened to incorporate her lesser-known dramatic works, which in turn has inspired my own thinking about performative gestures in Hurston's novel. Elin Diamond's 2015 article "Folk Modernism: Zora Neale Hurston's Gestural Drama" shows how Hurston's anthropological interest in folklore influenced the content of her plays. She argues that Hurston adapted "performative" actions in folk culture, as identified in her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," such as storytelling, singing, and dancing for use in her plays. Diamond contends that "Long before performance studies made it a mantra, Hurston saw everyday life as drama, a condition of being that 'permeates' the Negro's 'entire self' (114). I find Diamond's methodology compelling, and so will also rely on Hurston's "Characteristics" in order to establish that according to Hurston, gesture is an important component of communication in African American culture, a concept which she then further explores in *Their Eyes*. Another critic, Jennifer A. Cayer, examines one concept from "Characteristics," which Hurston calls "angularity" in her recent essay "'Roll yo' hips—don't roll yo' eyes': Angularity and Embodied Spectatorship in Zora Neale Hurston's Play Cold Keener." Cayer explores the way "angularity" becomes a model for black aesthetic structure, and considers the way theater allowed Hurston to

explore the performative nature of race based on cultural expectation. These essays incorporate elements of performance theory—both from Hurston’s own essay and from other critics—into Hurston’s dramatic works.

My project draws upon similar ideas about performance and gesture that Diamond and Cayer do by also relying on “Characteristics,” but I read them against Hurston’s novel rather than her plays. Hurston’s dramatic work seems the natural place to apply performance theory, so I want to expand that conversation onto a different primary text. Especially since—as Diamond explains—Hurston drew from her anthropological study to create dramas, the presence of those same cultural elements in her novels would indicate a space for a similar performance-critical lens. Through the many critical avenues I have explored, performance theory—which I use as a blanket term to encompass any observation about the body and its movement in a work—seems like the natural next step in the trajectory of criticism about *Their Eyes*. With so many influential critics considering the cultural significance of the kind of speech employed by Hurston’s characters, it makes sense to also consider the cultural significance of the physical actions employed by those characters.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Hurston entered into the intellectual conversation about black performance with her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” Of the theory emerging at that time, Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez write in the introduction to their book *Black Performance Theory*:

authors of the Harlem Renaissance wondered at the efficacy and impact of black expression as they produced plays, visual arts works, dances, and musical

compositions. Their early theorizing established that black performance styles and sensibilities were not merely verbal or aural, but also included visual symbolic codes that communicated and commented in-group. These authors and artists began to question how black expression translated to outsider audiences (2).

Hurston's writing, both of this essay and many of her subsequent works, emerges from the context of the Harlem Renaissance. As DeFrantz and Gonzalez explain, black performance theory originated in this creative space because of the increase in African American cultural production during that time. It follows, then, that Hurston's own consideration of black expression would be a prominent element of her fictional works, especially given her experience in studying cultural groups. In the opening of the essay, she writes "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama" (Hurston "Characteristics" 294). It seems natural to apply Hurston's own theories about performance to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* since it emerged from a similar context to and was published just three years after "Characteristics." Additionally, considering that Hurston's portrayal of African American folk culture in the novel corresponds to observations she made in her anthropological, non-fiction writing, it follows that there would be evidence in her fictional works and not only in her plays which supports the application of performance theory.

Describing part of her argument in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," DeFrantz and Gonzalez observe that Hurston "proclaims Negro talk to be 'dramatic' and notes a characteristic willingness to use 'action words'—words that paint pictures—as a stabilizing point of entry to understanding the expressive aesthetics of black language and gesture" (3). Hurston's own interest in how African Americans of the early 20th century

acted and spoke makes sense given her academic background, but her commentary in this essay also has significance in terms of the way she portrays her fictional characters. DeFrantz and Gonzalez's note about her concern with "words that paint pictures" suggests that Hurston's conception of communication goes beyond just its practical verbal aspects. Speech and gesture become intricately connected, to the extent that

Hurston challenges us to understand gesture not as supplementary to language . . . but rather the inverse: language as a kind of gesture. Put another way: 'gesture [in] place of words' does not mean a rejection of the abstract properties of language, nor does it mean, or not only, the body's communicative movements. Rather Hurston folds both meanings into a different semantic register, one in which the performer's words and movements transmit characteristic rhythms, spoken, danced, and sung, of a specific cultural group, in this case rural African Americans in their everyday labor and leisure (Diamond 116).

By emphasizing the relationship between speech and gesture, Diamond also shows how Hurston's theory eschews any kind of definite barrier between the two modes of communication. It's not as if gesture and speech are two discreet categories; rather, as Diamond suggests, they are two manners of expression that are used fluidly, and are not given any kind of hierarchical order. For Hurston, the continuity between speech and gesture emerges as a distinguishing feature of African American culture—gesture and performance are both informed by and then in return performed by a discreet cultural entity. By way of example Hurston offers the following anecdote:

"Who has not observed a robust young Negro chap posing upon a street corner, possessed of nothing but his clothing, his strength, and his youth? Does he bear himself like a pauper? No, Louis XIV could be no more insolent in his assurance. . . His posture exults 'Ah, female, I am the eternal male, the giver of life . . . Salute me, I am strength.' All this with a languid posture, there is no mistaking his meaning. These little plays by strolling players are acted out daily in a dozen streets in a thousand cities, and no one ever mistakes the meaning" ("Characteristics" 294).

In this short section, Hurston illustrates an important component of my argument: gesture and body position communicate specific, ‘unmistakable’ meaning to others. The young man in her example demonstrates how gesture not only communicates clearly, but also how the meaning of a gesture is dependent on culture. While that might sound like it limits the ability of gesture to convey meaning, instead it liberates a gesture or set of gestures to communicate clearly within a given cultural context. Hurston’s observations assert that gesture holds the same societal significance as spoken language within the African American community, and that the production of culture depends on the embodied experiences of individuals in a collective group. These concepts are relevant to my analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because of the book’s detailed and specific setting in southern (Floridian) black rural communities. Since the cultural context stays relatively consistent throughout the novel, the above example of universally understood gestural communication is applicable to *Their Eyes* as well.

Additionally, towards the end of her essay, Hurston observes the way a mouth’s shape impacts the pronunciation of speech. Essentially, this section serves to further demonstrate the connection between verbal speech and gesture, in the sense that Hurston emphasizes linguistic communication as a fundamentally embodied act. In describing African American dialect, Hurston writes “I think the lip is responsible for this to a great extent. By experiment the reader will find that a sharp ‘i’ is very much easier with a thin taut lip than with a full soft lip” (Hurston “Characteristics” 307). For Hurston, verbal communication is inextricably linked with bodily movement, and therefore, one mode of

expression—verbal or gestural—cannot be elevated above the other. With Hurston’s perspective in mind, it becomes harder to contend, as some critics do, that because Janie does not always speak words she is kept from communicating and expressing her unique voice. As my paper will demonstrate with textual examples from *Their Eyes*, Hurston presents gestural communication as equally expressive as verbal speech in order to portray Janie’s increasing independence, and does not rely on her spoken words alone.

Finally, in order to contextualize black performance theory for the purposes of this thesis, it is also necessary to provide some general background on the historical perception of black female bodies. Recently, many critics have commented on the representation of the black female body, especially regarding the way it is portrayed in American literature. In general, Vanessa D. Dickerson sums up its prevailing depictions: “Historically relegated to the auction block instead of the pedestal, the black female body has been constructed as the ugly end of a wearisome Western dialectic: not sacred but profane, not angelic but demonic, not fair lady but ugly darky” (195-196). Similarly, in her book *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: the Black Female Body in American Culture*, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders observes that

“Black women have historically been represented as hyper sexual, ignorant, and violent female ‘Negro beasts,’ in addition to many other denigrating types including the long-suffering desexualized Mammy, the primitive Topsy, the exotic Jezebel, and the evil, emasculating Sapphire” (3).

These descriptions are alike in drawing attention to the way black female bodies have characteristics projected upon them, rather than subjectively authorizing any kind of physical description. Additionally, in order to render it ‘other,’ the black female body is

presented in opposition to the idealized white, angelic, sacred female body. The notions of the black female body which prevailed in Hurston's (and still in today's) culture strip that body of its agency, and relegate it to a set of stereotyped categories, whether an 'exotic Jezebel' or a 'primitive Topsy.' The characteristics that Wallace-Sanders and Dickerson have identified demonstrate that in many examples from American literature, rather than self-represented, black women's bodies are objectified. Action is prescribed *for* the black female body, rather than observed originating *from* it. Understanding Hurston's context—writing within a culture that held these views of black women's bodies—provides a foundation for my claim that she authorizes Janie's body specifically to challenge those prevailing cultural views.

### A Note on Terms

“Gesture” is an important and often-used term in my paper. I find Carrie Noland’s definition from her book *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* helpful in expanding on what I mean here. For Noland and myself, gesture is a

‘technique of the body’ . . . a way of sleeping, standing, running, dancing, or even grimacing that involves small or large muscle movements, consciously or unconsciously executed. Although too broad, perhaps, the term has the advantage of allowing us to name any use of the body that can become a source of kinesthetic feedback, and thus agency (17).

I like Noland’s definition because it is generous—it applies to many kinds of movements, not just those we would think of as inherently communicative. I also think it aligns closely with Hurston’s idea of performativity as outlined in “Characteristics,” since there are many ways a person can express him/herself through his/her body. Additionally, Noland’s concept that gesture is a ‘technique of the body’ also suggests a kind of skill, which is important in my consideration of the way that Janie progressively understands her ability to present different identities or selves through her gestures. Finally, I’ll use the term “verbal speech” to denote moments when a character (usually Janie) says something audible to another person, in order to differentiate further between communicative gesture and communicative language. The following passage from the novel provides an example of the kind of nuances in communication I observe. This section comes in the middle of the novel, soon after Janie’s second husband Joe Starks

has died and she subsequently marries “Tea Cake” Woods. Hurston presents the direct dialogue of the townspeople, whose opinions vary from dismissive criticism to awed disbelief at her audacity. She then describes Janie’s friend Phoeby’s response as Phoeby travels to talk with Janie:

The next morning Phoeby picked her way over to Janie’s house like a hen to a neighbor’s garden. Stopped and talked a little with everyone she met, turned aside momentarily to pause at a porch or two—going straight by walking crooked. So her firm intention looked like an accident and she didn’t have to give her opinion to folks along the way (Hurston 112).

The narrator describes how Phoeby uses gesture to convey a different message than the one she is thinking. Hurston emphasizes that her action of pausing by the neighbors’ porches reinforces the purpose of their conversation. She contrasts Phoeby to the other neighbors who are quick to speak their opinions about Janie aloud by specifically mentioning that her movements deliberately serve her goal of keeping her opinion about Janie’s relationship between herself and her friend. As I move into the textual support for my argument, I will explore the ways in which Hurston relies on Janie’s gestures (like she does with Phoeby’s in the example above) in order to demonstrate her progressive maturity and self-awareness.

### **Janie in Adolescence**

While I am not the first to examine Janie's physical presence in the novel, critical work in this regard has focused on how her body relates to changes in the novel's setting, which then relegates her agency to the background. For example, Gates observes that

Janie comes to occupy progressively larger physical spaces—Nanny's cabin in the backyard of the Washburn's place, Logan Killick's 'often-mentioned' sixty acres, and, finally, Joe Starks's big white wooden house . . . With each successive move to a larger physical space, however, her housemate seeks to confine Janie's consciousness inversely, seemingly, by just as much ("Zora" 77).

His observation asserts that the decreased individual freedoms Janie experiences inversely relate to the physical land spaces occupied by her successive husbands. While true, his reading does not allow for a nuanced interpretation of Janie's "consciousness." Though Janie indeed "[occupies] progressively larger physical spaces," the physicality of her actions suggest a much more complex relationship between her "consciousness" and the nature of the setting than Gates admits. Rather than acknowledging Janie's ability to withstand Nanny, Logan, and Joe's efforts to "confine" her, Gates instead focuses on the setting, and offers that the negative effects of property on Janie's life suggest a moral of forgoing material wealth, for it is only with Tea Cake living on 'the muck' that Janie finds fulfillment.

While I agree with Gates's analysis, and will use some of the same textual evidence that he does, my project from this point will be to provide a more nuanced reading of the

way Janie's consciousness is expressed through her embodied subjectivity. I will demonstrate how Hurston renders Janie as increasingly aware of her physical body and its ability to perform gender, sexuality, and race, and also as increasingly able to effectively communicate through gesture. It is through an emphasis on Janie's embodied subjectivity rather than merely her conscious thoughts or audible speech that Hurston depicts Janie resisting her racially and patriarchally oppressive cultural context and history. In this conclusion, I find DoVeanna S. Fulton's summary of Janie's progression through the novel an effective summary:

“Janie must contend with the culturally inscribed representations of women from African American culture that are influenced by the dominant white culture. She then rejects these representations, discovers a self in opposition to the cultural prescriptions, and proceeds on a quest of self-fulfillment” (83).

At the beginning of my introduction, I briefly discussed the opening scene of Hurston's novel where Janie confronts the reaction of the community to her return. After a few pages describing Janie's walk through the town, Hurston reveals that Janie's purpose in doing so is to return to her house. When she makes it there, her friend Phoeby comes to visit, and Janie recounts the story of her life beginning with her childhood.<sup>iv</sup> In detailing her upbringing, Hurston establishes the way Janie's narrative, specifically regarding her relationship to her body, deviates from those of African American women before her. As DoVeanna S. Fulton notes in the introduction to her book on black feminist orality, “Aside from the aural structures Hurston's text presents, one of the central themes of the text is Janie Crawford's self-definition in response to the oral history of Nanny, her grandmother” (10). In order to position Janie's embodied

subjectivity as a response to/reclamation of cultural notions of the black female body from the very beginning of the novel, Hurston shows how Janie's adolescent experiences of romance and sexuality are inextricably linked to and therefore shaped by Nanny and Leafy's (Janie's mother's) suffering and exploitation. Again, I agree with Fulton's analysis, in which she states that "For freeborn descendants of slaves [like Janie] this locus of knowledge [i.e. the experiences that come with living as a slave] is much more complicated than merely being within or without the circle of slavery" (82). Janie, and specifically her black female body, occupy a precarious position: not owned by an individual per se, but still understood through the lens of subjugation, by white and certain black men.

The fluidity of Janie's position as a subjugated-yet-free person is more fully elaborated in her recollections of adolescence and her first romantic relationship. More importantly, Nanny's critique of that relationship points to the cultural subjection Janie could face because of her body. There are many contrasts between the way the two women grow up: Janie is afforded the luxury of not realizing she's "colored" until she's six years old (Hurston 9), whereas Nanny, born into slavery, understands the consequences of having a black body immediately, and is repeatedly reminded of her status, a fact which we find out through her recounting of her life story. Not only is she impregnated by her white owner, she also has to endure the assault of her "free" daughter, Leafy, who is raped by her own teacher. Having survived so many tragedies, most of them at the hands of men, Nanny's reaction to Janie's teenaged romance with

Jonny Taylor—as well as her subsequent desire to marry Janie off to the respectable, but boring, Logan Killicks because he can provide for her economically— is understandable.

Janie’s story begins with a few brief anecdotes from her childhood, and then moves on to scene from her teenage years. In this moment, Hurston describes her first romance with Jonny Taylor. While Nanny is sleeping, Janie and Jonny are together in the yard. The text does not tell us exactly what they are doing, but through Nanny’s perspective the narrator says, “In the last stages of Nanny’s sleep, she dreamed of voices . . . Janie talking in whispery snatches with a male voice she couldn’t quite place . . . She bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Jonny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss” (Hurston 12). Though this is written in the third person, Nanny’s voice clearly comes through since she regards Jonny’s kiss as a violent ‘laceration.’ Nanny, of course, interrupts the romantic proceedings, and calls Janie into the house. Despite Janie’s protests of innocence, Nanny tells her: “Whut Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey, Ah don’t want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’ body to wipe his foots on” (13). In Nanny’s view, men will take advantage of women’s bodies, and her deep love for Janie ultimately leads her to arrange a marriage with Logan Killicks, who she deems a safe, respectable choice.

Without undermining the reasons for Nanny’s perspective, it is interesting to consider that her prevailing view of Janie’s body is that it lacks agency, and is fated to be the victim of abuse. As the book progresses—and even in some of these scenes from Janie’s adolescence—Hurston’s portrayal of Janie counters that presumption. Yet to

Nanny, a teenage romance will inevitably result in Janie being used for her body, an understanding which then effectively de-authorizes Janie in Nanny's eyes. Embedded within Nanny's statement is a two-pronged criticism from Hurston regarding the way black female bodies are treated: first, and most obviously, is the recognition of the horror of physical and sexual abuse, and its repetition over generations. But less obvious is her critique of the way that abuse can become cyclical, and then even expected, without accounting for an individual or society's ability to transcend that cycle. Despite Nanny's understandable fears of what could happen to Janie, Hurston provides us with another image of Janie, specifically in regards to her embodied subjectivity, that contrasts Nanny's recollections of her own and Leafy's bodies in the past. Just a few pages before the talking-to from Nanny, Hurston describes a scene in which Janie has a sexual awakening. While its unclear exactly what happens—there is no unequivocal mention of Jonny's presence, for example—Hurston's imagery of flowers blooming and bees pollinating signifies that Janie has a sexual experience of some kind. Regardless of what action actually occurs, the section is significant because Janie positively experiences her body and its sexuality. In addition to the sexual aspects of the scene, Janie also realizes that her dreams are unattainable if she continues living in the same way. Hurston writes, "She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her" (11). As Ines Casas Maroto argues in her essay about natural imagery in *Their Eyes*,

“Janie’s dream is of a sexuality without hierarchies or domination, a relationship of reciprocity and mutual consent . . . From this moment of epiphany on, Janie’s existence will become a continuous struggle to bring her own experience into harmony with her initial vision of the pear tree” (72).

From her experiences thus far, Janie’s dream of an equal relationship seems possible, at least to her. Unlike Nanny, whose sexual experiences have been marked by abuse, pain, and loss, Janie establishes that her body is a sexual entity in and of itself for herself, rather than another person (violently) dictating that for her. By presenting this aspect of Janie’s embodied subjectivity, and uniting her physical sexual experience with her conscious thoughts and ambitions, Hurston succeeds in offering a view of what reclaiming sexuality can look like for a black female body. However, she also recognizes the sexual abuse that has been inflicted upon black female bodies by having Nanny recount her story afterwards. Janie’s awakening appears first in the novel, giving it priority for how Hurston would like us to view black female sexuality and allowing her to transcend the cycles of sexual violence that have afflicted the women in her family before her. In terms of Janie’s embodied subjectivity at this stage in the novel, we see her starting point on the trajectory toward fuller self-understanding. Here she has identified that she has dreams and aspirations as a result of a sexual experience of her body. However, she does not know how to articulate those desires, either through gesture or spoken language, which we will see her learn to do as the novel progresses.

### **Janie and Logan Killicks**

Soon after her dalliance with Jonny Taylor, at Nanny's insistence Janie marries Logan Killicks, a man who values her primarily for her domestic ability and not much else. Their relationship is not passionate and leaves Janie wanting more. They have been married less than a year when a "cityfied, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle" comes walking down the road" towards their house while Janie rests in the yard (27). She realizes that he has not noticed her reclining under a tree, and so Hurston describes that "Janie ran to the [water] pump and jerked the handle hard while she pumped. It made a loud noise and also made her heavy hair fall down. So he stopped and look hard" (27). Hurston's humor comes through here, as she clearly insinuates that Janie decides to pump water to get attention from the man, and then almost as an afterthought adds that Janie allows her beautiful hair to come down. This scene is reminiscent of the "little plays by strolling players" that Hurston describes in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression" which I quoted earlier, where a man demonstrates his interest in a woman only through his body position and gesturing. Here Hurston indicates Janie's awareness of the power of her body, specifically in her ability to employ gesture to get attention from men. Considering this scene within the same criteria as Janie's passionate awakening in the garden, Hurston shows again that Janie is a proactive agent of her sexuality, rather than only the passive object of the man's affections. Hurston also continues adding to her

larger motif of performance as a cultural way of being in the text, this time emphasizing the performative nature of gender in Janie's community because of the way Janie's hair movement is attractive to the man.

The water pump incident is the first of many meetings with this stylish man, whose name we learn is Joe Starks. Consequently, a life beyond Logan entices Janie, and they soon get in another fight which ultimately ends with her leaving him. Three months after marrying Logan and having realized she is in a passionless marriage, the narrator says of Janie "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurstun 25). Though Janie has "become a woman" and matured somewhat from her teenage self, she does not yet seem to have that elusive "self-revelation" sought from the beginning of her story. As an embodied subject, she knows about the passion possible from a sexual experience, and because that is lacking in her marriage to Logan, expresses dissatisfaction. Ultimately her boredom leads her to spend more and more time away from the house and the domestic space (kitchen) to which Logan wants to confine her. Though he denies this fact in their ultimate exchange of words, telling her "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (Hurstun 31), Janie clearly desires more freedom and excitement than Logan has provided her within their short time together.

Janie's departure from Logan marks one of the first instances where Hurstun uses silence strategically to illustrate Janie's oppression by her husbands, and to further emphasize the ability of gesture to be communicative. In her writing about the history of

black female narratives, Fulton argues that this kind of “strategic silence” is a component of the concept of orality, a premise which necessitates an expansion of the traditional view of feminist critics, who “have not generally regarded silence as a weapon for empowerment [but instead] a condition of the powerless, the unidentified, the objectified” (66). As I’ll show in this next section, Hurston does not give Janie any dialogue in order to emphasize the gestural nature of her rebellion against Logan, and thus to further establish gesture as an effective mode of communication in the novel.

Logan abruptly and harshly silences Janie during one of their last altercations. When he tries to get her to move quickly with her chores, Janie confronts Logan with the true source of his anger: “Youse mad ‘cause Ah don’t fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain’t done me no favor by marryin’ me . . . Youse mad ‘cause Ah’m tellin’ yuh whut you already knowed” (Hurston 31). Logan replies with “Don’t you change too many words wid me dis mawnin’, Janie, do Ah’ll take and change ends wid yuh!” (31). He forbids Janie from speaking, and then ultimately threatens her with death if she dares speak any further. Yet Janie will not be denied her agency, even if denied her voice. Hurston emphasizes the oppressive state of their relationship by empowering Janie through her physical response to Logan’s threats. Although forbidden from speaking, Janie still communicates a specific message to Logan. In her immediate, verbally silent response to him, Hurston highlights Janie’s burgeoning independence from her husband and her decision to chart a new course for her life. She writes:

Janie turned from the door without answering, and stood still in the middle of the floor without knowing it. She turned wrongside out just standing there and feeling.

. . . When she had finished with that she dumped the dough on the skillet and smoothed it over with her hand. She wasn't even angry. . . . The sow-belly in the pan needed turning. She flipped it over and shoved it back. A little cold water in the coffee pot to settle it. Turned the hoe-cake with a plate and then made a little laugh. What was she losing so much time for? A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her (32).

From the beginning of her reaction, Janie clearly acknowledges her own physical response to Logan, as she remains “standing there and feeling ” (32). Though in her thoughts she does not precisely connect feelings of pain or sadness to what has just happened, her recognition of her body's response to his attack suggests that Janie has begun to link non-verbal physical action to an expression of her thoughts, more fully integrating her body with her identity.

In the next part of the passage, it might seem odd that after Logan has verbally abused and threatened her, Janie continues to prepare his food. However, Janie's gesture of cooking in this moment can be read as communicative in its own right. Alternating with a record of her emotional state, we see Janie continue to obey Logan's orders, remaining in the domestic space he has confined her to by choice, and laughing as she cooks his food. Though she does not say a word, Janie clearly communicates her unflinching reaction to Logan's oppression, signaling with her laughter that she does not take Logan's threats seriously so that her cooking becomes an act of ridiculing Logan to make him insignificant. Additionally, by gesturing in this somewhat flippant way in the heart of the confining domestic space, Janie further denies Logan his dominant position in their relationship. While he may have ordered her to be there, she does not perform her

domestic duties in the way he would like, and so Janie succeeds in destabilizing the structure of power within their marriage through gesture rather than speaking verbally.

An important shift has taken place in the connection between Janie's conscious thought and her subsequent action for the trajectory of her life overall. She's continuing to perform actions that would identify her as Logan's subservient wife, like continuing to cook his breakfast and obeying his command to stay silent. However, her performance of these actions is paired with an emergent self-awareness that suggests her newfound agency, specifically in her ability to communicate to and ultimately dismiss Logan as inconsequential. Drawing from Butler's conception of gender performativity, Janie's actions suggest a "resignification" of the gendered act of cooking. Regarding this kind of rebellion, Butler writes, "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (*Gender* 148; italics in original). On the surface Janie continuing to cook for Logan reinforces gender stereotypes, and subsequently their hierarchical marital relationship. However, when paired with Butler's observation, attending to the *way* that Janie cooks for Logan highlights her agency, demonstrating her increasingly embodied subjectivity and her awareness of what she desires for her life.

When she leaves the house and the marriage soon after the breakfast incident, Janie's gestures signify another act of rebellion against Logan's restraint. As she goes outside, the narrator notes that "The morning road air was like a new dress. That made her feel the apron tied around her waist. She untied it and flung it on a low bush beside

the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet” (Hurston 32). In this action, of ‘flinging’ away her apron, Janie casts off the remnants of her relationship with Logan, removing the thing that symbolically confined her to the domestic realm of the kitchen. This gesture also shows Hurston contesting the notion of what it means to perform womanhood. Janie’s rejection of domesticity symbolized by ridding herself of the apron establishes Hurston’s examination of the other ways in which Janie’s body will or will not perform femininity. Though Logan may have prevented her from speaking to him and against him, Janie still employs several gestures which clearly communicate her resistance to his dominance and narrow view of her worth because she’s a woman. Additionally, these scenes indicate that Janie’s understanding of herself as an embodied subject is increasing, and that she desires a different kind of romantic relationship and life than what Logan can provide.

### **Janie and Joe Starks**

To escape her conventional, limited life with Logan Killicks, Janie accepts Joe “Jody” Starks’s offer of marriage and they leave immediately, ending up in Eatonville where Joe becomes mayor. Though at first things appear to be improving for Janie, Maria J. Racine notes that with this change, Janie “trades a physical prison for an emotional one . . . [Starks] wants a wife who stays at home and helps him in his store, so Janie is kept on the fringes of Eatonville society—allowed only to associate and communicate with the community members at a superficial level” (285-6). Like Gates, Racine also focuses on the idea of Janie’s relationship to space. In this case, she contrasts Janie’s physical containment within the limited domestic space of the kitchen on Logan’s property with the emotional distancing she experiences as Joe’s trophy wife. Hurston’s description of Joe’s attitude after they move to Eatonville exemplifies Racine’s analysis: Joe “didn’t mean for nobody else’s wife to rank with [Janie]. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (41).

While it is unclear whether Joe actually persuades Janie to think better of herself than she does of the other women, she at least performs superiority by putting on a flashy red silk dress, whose “ruffles rustled and muttered about her” as she moved (41). While this moment could be construed as Janie merely obeying Joe’s directive, she still continues to demonstrate her embodied subjectivity here. She’s aware that a certain kind

of self-presentation will have the effect of expressing her (class) supremacy to the other women, and it does. That Hurston chooses to use a metaphor about speech when describing Janie's dress is also notable. The 'muttering' ruffles on Janie's dress provide another suggestion of Hurston's expanded view of speech—namely that self-expression takes many different forms in addition to spoken language. In one section of her "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Hurston discusses the cultural importance of metaphor in the African American community. She specifically notes that the African American's "very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures" (Hurston "Characteristics" 293). In both her essay's theory and in the composition of her fiction, Hurston demonstrates the fluidity between speech and action. Finally, Janie's use of clothing in this scene to convey a message is reminiscent of when she tears off her apron after leaving Logan, connecting this moment to her increasing ability to express herself through the novel.

We become acutely aware of the kind of husband Joe really is soon after he is elected mayor. Like Logan, he is eager to keep his wife from speaking and frequently belittles her opinions or desires. In a scene that occurs early in their marriage, one of the townspeople, Tony, announces that Janie will make a speech. But before she can do so, Joe cuts in and says "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 43). Joe's comments set the tone for their relationship early on, and it is quickly revealed that he will deliberately control how Janie looks and

when she speaks.<sup>v</sup> In the moment right after he prevents her from speaking, Janie is taken aback. The narrator describes her reaction: “Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn’t too easy. She had never thought of making a speech, and didn’t know if she cared to make one at all” (Hurston 43). Her reaction demonstrates her relative immaturity; at this point, she’s still discovering who she is. She might have wanted to make a speech, but she also might not have wanted to. However, regardless of her feeling on the matter, she does know how to perform the role that Joe has asked of her. There are signs that she is beginning to realize her dissatisfaction with this kind of relationship, specifically when she has to force herself to laugh. As she progresses through her life with Joe, his restrictions continue to become more oppressive, but Janie becomes increasingly capable of communicating her desires and feelings, especially when employing gestures. This scene establishes for the reader an important baseline for her future interactions with Joe—it clearly illustrates the wifely ideal he expects her to attain, and it also hints at Janie’s growing realization that she desires a more fulfilling life.

Many critics have commented on a later scene when Janie humiliates Joe in front of his friends, namely that it marks a turning point in her development of a voice. Gates, for example, writes that “Janie gains her voice and becomes a speaking subject inside her husband’s store. . . . the gaining of her own voice is a sign of her authority” (96-97). The observation is astute, and the scene can be read through comedic and anthropological lenses as well. Yet there are other passages in which Janie demonstrates her increasing self-awareness and subjectivity just as completely, if not more so. I will now focus on

two particular moments when Hurston shows Janie protesting Joe's restrictions while also realizing and expressing her embodied subjectivity. One such instance occurs after Janie doesn't cook dinner right, and subsequently Joe "slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store" (Hurston 72). Her reaction is observed by Hurston's narrator:

Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. . . . She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (72).

In this section, Janie acknowledges her interior, subjective personhood. But beyond that, she is selective in her decision about what she will and will not reveal to Joe about that subjectivity. Rather than criticizing Hurston for rendering Janie voiceless in her relationship to Joe and then in the novel at large, it is integral to recognize her nuanced portrayal of Janie in this scene. Her reasons for not speaking are more complex than just signaling her submissiveness to Joe. Instead, this moment should more accurately be described as Janie choosing to keep parts of her identity private, a choice that belies her agency and sense of empowerment rather than weakness. More specifically, Janie is planning for her future here, and without speaking she still clearly articulates her desire for a different kind of relationship when she thinks about "some man she had never seen." Furthermore, her decision not to speak is a strategic one, since Janie knows that to allow Joe access to her emotions and thoughts would be a waste. Though she does not

stand up to Joe by arguing with him (which he certainly deserves at the very least), Hurston still presents Janie as conscious of her own agency and authority.

Katharine Torrey has argued that Hurston's own autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* demonstrates her awareness of the performativity of identity, and also points out similarities between that work and *Their Eyes*. Specifically describing the aforementioned scene, she writes:

Janie recognizes that 'she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them.' In this way, Janie becomes an active performative agent within her marriage and within the community . . . Janie learns that there are benefits to be gained in fashioning different performances of identity. For Janie, this performativity is a survival skill that allows her to keep what she sees as her 'inside' self protected from the worst of Joe's blustering and belittling behavior. Her relationship with Joe is fundamentally altered as she divests her emotional life from him and instead packs it away for 'some man she had never seen.' Her conscious creation of an 'outside' self through which to navigate the community does not render her inside self false. Instead, Janie's nascent performative skill allows her to keep part of herself safe from harm without alienating or (at least initially) leaving the community altogether (Torrey 196-7).

Though Janie's actions suggest she's aware that employing certain gestures or changing her appearance can lead to a certain outcome (i.e. by getting Joe's attention at the water pump, or wearing an extravagant dress), before this moment we don't see her capitalizing on that knowledge in quite the same way. Even when she tears the apron from her waist after leaving Logan, it's only because the wind blows and reminds her to take it off.

While symbolic for the reader, that moment with the apron does not show us as much about Janie's growth as it does about Hurston's establishing gesture as integral to understanding Janie's decisions. As Torrey argues, her action in this scene with Joe is performance marked by an awareness of agency, and of a dawning realization of the

inherent performative power of identity. Ultimately as Torrey points out, Janie does not yet make use of this newfound ability to the extent that she decides to leave Joe, at least for now.

Janie achieves a fuller understanding of herself as independent from Joe, and perhaps all men, immediately after his death. She returns to her own room after witnessing his passing, and Hurston writes: “She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there” (87). Janie’s act in ‘tearing off of the kerchief’ is reminiscent of her ‘flinging off her apron’ into the bushes after leaving Logan. In both cases, she forcefully casts off the clothing which symbolized her oppression by each of her husbands, and subsequently moves along to the next stage of her life with greater independence. But Janie’s loose hair symbolizes more than just her liberation from Joe. For example, Margaret Marquis observes that in this moment, “Janie has reached a level of self-discovery, recognizing that she has a physical presence of which to be proud; there is a weight and a heft to her hair, longing to be seen by others and that will indeed be seen by others” (84). Essentially, Janie begins to embrace her beauty and sexuality, aspects of her identity which Joe frequently de-emphasized—for a number of reasons motivated by his own self-interest—in the later years of their marriage. Considered in conjunction with the narrator’s comment that Janie knows how not to mix her inside and outside, letting down her hair points to how successful Janie had been to this point at

keeping parts of her identity secret. Now that Joe has died, she accesses this part of herself in full view of the reader, acknowledging that her appearance is an important part of her identity during a private moment, and thereby recognizing her subjective personhood as embodied.

However, not everyone views this scene as a positive portrayal of Janie's agency.

Regarding this passage, Mary Helen Washington disagrees with my analysis, writing

“In her first moment of independence, Janie is not seen as autonomous subject but again as visual object . . . when she turns to the mirror, it is not to experience her own sensual pleasure in her hair. She does not tell us how her hair felt to her . . . she takes stock of herself, makes an assessment of herself” (31).

Washington, in my opinion, seems to misread Janie's inaudible self-observation as acquiescence to cultural standards. Washington ignores the fact that before she looks in the mirror, the narrator observes that Janie “thought about herself” and describes her reflecting on her life so far, from “young girl” to “handsome woman” (87). After she recognizes her beauty, Janie makes the decision from a place of empowerment to keep it to herself: Hurston writes that having acknowledged the ‘weight, length, and glory’ of her hair, Janie ties it back up again, and “Then she starched and ironed her face, forming into just what people wanted to see” (87). Even though she does not write her any dialogue in this important scene, Hurston communicates Janie's increasing self-knowledge and autonomy through the simple gesture of Janie removing her kerchief, and her subsequent use of facial expressions in order to keep her real feelings about Joe's death private. By letting down her hair and enjoying her appearance, she's rebelling against Joe's control and symbolically moving past him. This moment also provides an interesting contrast to

the first mention of Janie's hair in conjunction with Joe. In that scene, Janie is flirtatious and determines (or seals) her fate by summoning Joe with her beauty. Here, she lets down her hair in preparation for a more liberated life and a fuller demonstration of her true self to others.

Janie seems even more aware of her embodied agency when Hurston writes "Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (89). When considered alongside Joe's possessive command from earlier in their marriage that Janie "tie up her hair around the store," Janie's action here is significant. Joe has died, and this final rejection of his subjugation demonstrates Janie's self-awareness, and the ways in which she has developed from her teenage years. She recognizes that her hairstyle can be performative and symbolic, and therefore demonstrates the incorporation of her body into her personhood. Especially after her realization about having an 'inside' and 'outside' self, the timing of Janie's new hairdo cannot be overlooked. She has developed from an immature teenager, unsure of what her desires are let alone how to attain them, to a shrewd woman aware of her agency and power. Displaying her hair so unabashedly communicates Janie's understanding not only of her sexuality and independence, but also of the fact that her body can and does signify those aspects of her identity to others. The portrait of Janie immediately after Joe's death, therefore, is one of freedom rather than restriction, agency rather than passivity.

### **Janie and Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods**

After Joe Starks, Janie meets and eventually marries Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods. In contrast to her previous marriages to Logan and Joe, Janie’s marriage to Tea Cake is one in which she “flourishes in love and experiences the respect of an equal that she so desired in her earlier marriages” (Racine 288). Because this relationship is fundamentally more equitable than her previous two, Janie’s gestural expression towards the end of the novel is not necessarily based on asserting her independence from Tea Cake, as it was with Logan and Joe. Instead, the moments where Janie’s lack of speech would seem most troubling have to do with the couple’s physical relationship, specifically the violence that Tea Cake inflicts upon her. Indeed, critics struggle to reconcile Janie’s emerging self-reliance and self-discovery up to this point with her marriage to Tea Cake. It seems contrary to Janie’s trajectory so far in the novel, in which she has increasingly demonstrated her self-awareness and independence, that she would allow herself to be subjected to her husband’s abuse.

Understandably, many see the instances of abuse as problematic at best in terms of Janie’s development. Perhaps more troubling than the actual beatings are the moments in which Janie does not speak out about her own abuse. I will argue that her ‘silences’ in these instances are again a strategic move on Hurston’s part. Rather than indicating Janie’s weaknesses, her silent response places the focus on Tea Cake and emphasizes that

he is at fault. In doing so, Hurston acknowledges the oppression Janie still suffers under Tea Cake, the man by whom she is arguably most respected and loved. Furthermore, even if Hurston does not write Janie verbally speaking about the violence, she still depicts Janie's body communicating her experience of abuse. Additionally, there are moments when Janie eschews speech in favor of physical action because it more effectively gets Tea Cake's attention. She may not always choose to speak in the latter part of the novel when we would like or expect her to, but in those moments, Janie has discovered a better method to make her desires known. Furthermore, given the greater historical context of physical and sexual abuse of black female bodies, Hurston empowering Janie's body, rather than only her words, to testify to the violence provides a method of acknowledging that history while not allowing it to dictate the terms of Janie's response.

I discussed previously how Hurston's other writing, namely "Characteristics of Negro Expression," demonstrates her perception of the ubiquity of gesture in African American culture. In one section, she describes a "Negro drama" that occurs in everyday life, in which a "robust young Negro chap [poses] upon a street corner . . . His eyes say plainly, 'Female, halt!' His posture exalts 'Ah, female, I am the eternal male the giver of life' . . . there is no mistaking his meaning" (Hurston "Characteristics" 294). She adds "These little plays by strolling players are acted out daily in a dozen streets in a thousand cities, and no one ever mistakes the meaning" (294). Not only pervasive, gesture and performative expression according to Hurston are also universally understood in her

observations here. Her depiction of Janie and other characters up to this point echoes these concepts, and has also indicated Hurston's awareness of the performative ability of the body. Especially given Janie's familial history which we are made aware of in the novel's opening section, the violence inflicted on Janie's body in the latter portion of the story must also be considered in conjunction with her ancestral legacy. No one really witnesses the violence Nanny suffers—after all, she tells Janie early in her upbringing “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me . . . Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie” (16). Without an audience with which to share her own life, Nanny's story is in danger of disappearing. Janie's abuse at the hands of Tea Cake has the potential to go unnoticed like Nanny's, but instead as I'll demonstrate, Hurston rewrites the narrative by relying on Janie's embodied subjectivity to reveal the violence.

The first instance of violence Hurston narrates in their relationship occurs after Janie and Tea Cake have moved south to “the muck.” However, I want to look first at the after-effects of that violence on the people of the community before studying the event itself. After we read of Tea Cake beating Janie, Hurston gives us a description of his thoughts and motivations in the next chapter. We learn that Tea Cake became jealous when he and Janie were introduced to a neighbor's brother, and so felt he needed to make a point by abusing Janie. Hurston writes:

“Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show her he was a boss” (147).

Tea Cake's insights are certainly troubling, not only because of the violent actions which he follows them with, but because of what they reveal about the expectations of his marriage. Their relationship has been better than her previous two in many ways, but Tea Cake's possessive attitude towards Janie indicates the oppressive state of their relationship. While he does not silence her with a verbal command or threat like Logan and Joe did, but with an act of physical violence, Tea Cake still subjugates Janie's voice and identity to some extent. Yet despite his violent attitude, Janie also blossoms more fully into her identity during their marriage than in any of her previous relationships. In the paragraphs that follow, I want to explore the context for Tea Cake's abuse—not to pardon him, but to provide more nuance for his actions and Janie's reactions. While hard to justify, Tea Cake's abuse does reveal a lot about the community the pair live in, and also seems to incite Janie to further physical action and, subsequently, maturity.

Regarding the source of Tea Cake's behavior, Fulton argues that "the violence Janie experiences results, in part, from the residuum of patriarchal slave institutions," and as such indicates that Janie "must still recognize and face the legacy of slavery that informs her life" (88). Alternatively, Racine reads this moment as having "an erotic tone to it for those within Tea Cake and Janie's community, who seem to perceive the slap as a socially acceptable expression of possessive love and authority" (289). Another critic, Donald Marks, takes a similar view, arguing that "Throughout the novel Hurston links sexuality with the threat of violence," and so Tea Cake is another figuration of a pattern that Marks extends even to Hurston's own biography (156). Taking either reading into

account, it is through these acts of violence that Janie's body becomes a site of pleasure or pain, hearkening back to the experiences of her mother and grandmother. Aligning Janie's understanding of living in a black female body with those of Nanny and Leafy supports my argument that Hurston's portrayal of these moments of violence suggests a re-writing of the experience of women in the past. Janie's suffering echoes the experiences of her mother and grandmother, perhaps to a less shocking degree for the reader, and with less traumatic aftermath for Janie. By bringing Janie's body, rather than her dialogue, to the forefront of these scenes, Hurston evokes the bodies of other black women, whether Nanny and Leafy specifically or unnamed black women of the past more broadly, who were subjected to severe trauma. In doing so, Hurston acknowledges the trauma without requiring Janie to be inextricably linked to victimhood because we get to see Janie react to this abusive situation.

Despite his mistreatment, Hurston describes Janie challenging Tea Cake's behavior in interesting ways. Though her speaking voice is silenced in the narrative immediately after the abusive incident, Janie's body literally bears witness to Tea Cake's beatings. Observing her bruised body, another worker, Sop-de-Bottom, tells Tea Cake, "you sho is a lucky man . . . Uh person can see every place you hit her" (Hurston 147). Understandably, critics find this portion of the text problematic in terms of Janie's development. For example, Mary Helen Washington writes, "the beating is seen entirely through the eyes of the male community, while Janie's reaction is never given. Tea Cake becomes the envy of the other men for having a woman whose flesh is so tender that one

can see every place she's been hit" (32). Uncomfortable and gruesome as it certainly is, Hurston still presents Janie as attesting to Tea Cake's physical abuse through the marks on her body. The "male community" Washington mentions, and not Janie, are the ones to be criticized for mis-interpreting the message her body communicates. The evidence of Tea Cake's abuse should evoke pity or anger, not envy or awe. Janie may not speak about the abuse, but her body still displays a record of what she has suffered. Furthermore, because the men in the town name Tea Cake as the abuser based on the physical evidence, Hurston successfully indicts him in the eyes of the reader. Whether or not Janie says anything, her body and the way it is read by the other characters clearly convict Tea Cake. Again, Hurston capitalizes on the performative ability of Janie's body; it testifies to Tea Cake's abuse, and so enacts a kind of accusation. Additionally, this moment emphasizes the relational aspect of identity. Tea Cake's abuse fundamentally changes Janie's subjectivity in complicated ways, forcing her to physically embody the identity of a victim, at least in the eyes of their community. In addition to blaming Tea Cake, this scene highlights Janie's embodied subjectivity because her body both determines the way other people view her and comes to represent this aspect of her relationship to Tea Cake.

Regarding the performative aspects of this abuse, it's also interesting to consider the setting where the domestic violence occurs. Tea Cake only abuses Janie when they are "on the muck," which suggests as much about the lower socioeconomic culture the two are embedded in as it does about Tea Cake himself. It seems that Tea Cake beats up Janie in order to perform a kind of masculinity that is expected to be adhered to in that

setting. Barbara Monroe, who analyzes the novel for its comedic or theatrical aspects, sees Tea Cake's abuse and Janie's reaction as a show for an audience. She writes,

“Tea Cake slaps Janie around for the purpose of showing the community who is boss. Tea Cake and Janie perform their dominant and submissive roles after the beating; the stage effect of Tea Cake's pampering and Janie's hanging-on is not lost on the communal audience (176).

It's possible, then, that Janie's 'silent' reaction—which Monroe reads as submissive—is equally motivated by the setting and people on the muck. Hurston's depiction of her here is perhaps also meant to describe the way abuse is tolerated, therefore serving as a criticism of the cultural acceptance of domestic abuse rather than acting as a proponent of it. “The muck” asks us to consider the role of the body more than any of the other settings in the novel because it exists to be labored upon by bodies. That labor, performed by Janie, Tea Cake, and the others, occurs on a huge expanse of land that they do not own, so perhaps this space instigates Tea Cake's desire to demonstrate his possession of Janie. The construction of Janie's subjectivity, then, is also tied to her geographic location here, providing another instance in which Hurston affirms that the body's meaning is informed by and understood by its surroundings.

As I mentioned earlier, the record of Janie's trauma serves as a narrative reclamation of the abuse suffered by Nanny. Hurston is in a sense ‘signifyin’—to borrow a literary term from Gates—on the violence done to Nanny's body by making Janie's body the literal and only witness to her abuse. Following Fulton's lead in tracing the quality of ‘orality’ within black female literature, perhaps it is through early female slave narratives that Hurston draws the inspiration for empowering Janie's body to testify to

the violence. Fulton writes about this phenomena:

The slave body as a text that reveals an alternative version of the master narrative is an intriguing concept. If we think of the body as a cultural text, the outside displays the smooth, untainted skin—a text that is appealing to the eye—but the inside exposes the corporeal blood and veins beneath the skin, the ugliness that undergirds the appealing outside. The inside of the cultural text revealed by slave women shows the brutal, de-humanizing nature of the institution of slavery advocates endeavored to mask (41).

I would argue that Hurston writing Janie's body to reveal the abuse mirrors the compositions of early slave women, whose narration of the horrors of slavery exposed its gruesome reality. It is through the marks on her flesh that this disappointing aspect of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is brought to light. Like the slave women who wrote autobiographical narratives to depict the truth of slavery, Janie's bruised body exposes Tea Cake's restriction of her, and also instigates a conversation about gender violence in the community as a whole. Contrary to many critics' opinions, in her "silence" Hurston brings a discussion of violence against women into the forefront of the novel because of her descriptions of Janie's body. Rather than presenting Janie's verbal disavowal of abuse, Hurston instead amplifies the significance of the moment by both linking it to the lives of black women from the past and more fully indicting the cultural practice of domestic abuse.

Hurston does describe an instance of physical violence between the two in addition to just narrating it after the fact, like in the previous example. When they have moved to "the muck," Janie becomes jealous of Nunkie, a woman who works with the couple in the fields. She finds Tea Cake and Nunkie "struggling" in the fields, goofing around and

teasing one another. She confronts Tea Cake, asking him “Whut’s de matter heah?” in, as Hurston puts it “a cold rage” (137). He tries to explain himself, but Janie decides to leave and go back home. When Tea Cake arrives, Hurston writes “It wasn’t long before Tea Cake found her there and tried to talk. She cut him short with a blow and they fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him, and Tea Cake kept holding her wrists and wherever he could to keep her from going too far” (137). Hurston depicts Tea Cake as willing to let Janie speak, which might suggest an improvement from the silencing actions of Logan and Joe, but we still see him physically restraining her from expressing her anger. However, despite being given the chance, Janie refuses to speak and chooses to show her anger with her body. I read Janie’s decision here as indicative of her sense of self—specifically her sense of her own equality with Tea Cake. The fact that she challenges him in this fashion also demonstrates her embodied subjectivity in a more complete way: she’s using gesture as her primary mode of expression, and her anger at him is clear despite the lack of words.

As the scene continues, Janie eventually does speak, challenging Tea Cake on the nature of his relationship with Nunkie. They persist in arguing with one another, both physically fighting and verbally yelling. Hurston writes “They fought on. ‘You done hurt mah heart, now you come wid uh lie tuh bruise mah ears! Turn go mah hands!’ Janie seethed. But Tea Cake never let go” (137). Janie’s development reaches an important point here as she integrates physical action with speech. Hurston clearly demonstrates Janie incorporating the two modes of communication, especially when Janie tells Tea

Cake that his lie will 'bruise her ears.' Janie's metaphor is an example of the kind of speech patterns Hurston writes about in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression." Describing the speech of an African American individual, she writes "His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. . . It is easier [for the speaker] to illustrate than it is to explain because action came before speech" ("Characteristics" 293). Spoken language for Hurston is performative because it is active. Depicting Janie and Tea Cake literally 'bruising' one another's bodies while also 'bruising' each other with hurtful words demonstrates that gesture and movement are intimately connected to and are a part of the broad category of 'speech.' Hurston's theoretical writing highlights the close link between speech and action, and Janie's use of a metaphor which integrates the two so specifically further connects Hurston's portrayal of Janie to broader African American performative culture.

Up to this point in the novel, Janie primarily defended herself or protested unfair treatment through silent, yet still communicative gesture. However, here we see her uniting her words with her actions. In depicting Janie this way, Hurston continues to show the power of non-verbal self-definition, while also illustrating that Janie has taken ownership of her voice in another way, expanding her portrayal of embodied subjectivity to include not only her gestures but also her words. Yet in the final moments of the scene, Hurston still demonstrates the limitations of language. When Janie and Tea Cake's fight transforms into an erotic moment, Hurston writes that the two were "doing things with

their bodies to express the inexpressible” (137). It would seem that definitely in this scene, and through her portrayal of Janie over the course of the novel, Hurston does not privilege verbal speech as a mode of articulation. Her use of multiple modes of expression further underscores that she can and does establish Janie’s increasing ability to know her desires and articulate them, even while limiting her first-person verbal speech.

### **Ending at the Beginning: Janie's Return**

Finally, to examine Janie's embodied subjectivity at the end of the story, I will return to the novel's opening pages. Chronologically, Janie has just returned to her home in Eatonville after Tea Cake's death in the Everglades. Our first introduction to Janie also establishes her identity at the end of the novel, and comes from the third-person narrator. Hurston writes that after walking through town,

“When [Janie] got to where [the townspeople] were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy ‘good evenin’ and left their mouths setting open . . . Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking” (2).

In this paragraph and the one immediately preceding, Hurston includes the direct discourse of the townspeople, who are instantly critical of Janie upon her return. Though the narrator tells us that Janie speaks, Hurston does not record the words that she has spoken, so initially she appears silent towards or perhaps ignorant of the townspeople's judgments.

Though it opens the story, this moment in the novel's frame occurs after Janie has met and married Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake, and because of her silence, critics like Washington and Stepto would point to this moment as evidence that Janie has not, in fact, become a fully-developed, self-knowing woman. Since there is no record in the text of what her “pleasant speech” contained, surely, some would argue, she has not achieved a true sense of her self. However, as I have established, this perspective limits the

definition of speech to verbal utterance, and ignores the ways Hurston communicates Janie's ultimate self-actualization through her body and gestures. In the next paragraph, we read the townspeople's observations through the voice of the narrator:

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

From the book's opening, Hurston allows, or even challenges us to judge Janie along with the townspeople. We are immediately invited to decide whether she has achieved authority, independence, and self-understanding even before seeing the previous events of her life unfold.

The townspeople's judgments reveal at least part of the answer to that question. In this opening depiction, Janie's body represents her self-confidence and freedom from cultural expectations. Through Janie's physical presence, especially in the gesture of her clothing choices, Hurston also shows Janie's body as marked by her previous relationships, and therefore demonstrates the way her subjectivity is informed by her past experiences. Her hair flies out behind her, liberated from the kerchief she had to hide it in during her restrictive marriage to Joe. Her clothing also speaks to her past, and in addition to representing her time spent working on the plantation with Tea Cake, the "faded shirt and muddy overalls" demonstrate her apathy toward dressing to meet anyone else's standards. Her breasts are "pugnacious," suggesting that Janie realizes her clothing

and overall self-presentation contradict the norm, in addition to indicating her unapologetic awareness of her sexuality. Finally, it is apparent from the jealous reaction of the women in the town that the clearest message Janie's body sends is one of empowered assurance, since their goal is to try and diminish her importance by remembering her dirty clothing, using that memory as a "weapon against her strength" (Hurston 2) In her article on body image in *Their Eyes*, Margaret Marquis observes that to the women in this scene, "Janie is a giant with the power of a king and ten times the strength of any man watching her. As Janie's breasts and buttocks protrude, her body is forcing itself upon the world whether it likes it or not" (83). Marquis also points out that clearly, "Janie's body is an asset to her power as a woman," demonstrating that in this point in her development, her body is also an integral part of Hurston's representation of her as a character. It's clear that Janie's beauty and her general assertiveness make the citizens jealous, and her verbal silence at the end of her story speaks to her body's power to initiate these kind of responses. By opening her novel with this final portrait, Hurston establishes the body's performative ability, as well as the kinds of performance present in the novel more broadly. We are meant to understand Janie's assertiveness through her choice of dress and her ability to keep moving and ignore the stares and whispers that follow her down the street.

Additionally, she exists as a sexual(ized) woman, evidenced by the men's stares at her buttocks, breasts, and free-flowing hair. Yet while Janie's body performs power, this introductory scene also questions how effectively she performs "woman." As Judith

Butler has famously pointed out, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler *Gender* 33). Furthermore, she also argued that “Gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler “Performative” 161). Perhaps part of the confusion and anger of the townspeople has to do with Janie’s simultaneous signaling of “power,” as denoted by her carefree attitude and “woman” as denoted by her breasts and flowing hair. Combined with her “faded shirt and muddy overalls,” Janie’s body further complicates the town’s and maybe even the reader’s expectations of a black woman in the 1930s. From the book’s start, Hurston introduces this way of expressing her protagonist’s self-awareness and self-knowledge without giving her dialogue, and complicates the assumptions her readers make about how a black female body will look and move. Additionally, this scene also illustrates some of Hurston’s theories about “Negro expression,” specifically in the way the subtlety of Janie’s movements so clearly demonstrate her assertiveness and incite jealousy in the town.

Ultimately, though Janie’s body and attitude provoke these awed yet judgmental reactions, she does not change her response. Without saying anything, Janie has plainly transmitted her fully realized, independent self, which begs us to reconsider whether her lack of verbal speech at several moments throughout the novel is truly an oversight by Hurston, or rather her strategic move to expand the idea of female voice and subjective experience. Janie’s ability to make choices—like wearing old overalls for a walk through

the town—that contradict social expectation without feeling the need to explain them cements the way her lived experience has informed this depiction of her as an adult. Her experiences with Nanny, Jonny, Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake have all influenced her and shaped her into the person Hurston depicts in this final portrait. At this point in her life, Janie’s subjectivity is most fully embodied. She says almost nothing, yet completely communicates her strength, sexuality, and life experiences.

## Conclusion

Though critics are quick to condemn Hurston for her supposed oversight in Janie's character development, it's clear that throughout the novel she (Hurston) does not want to confine Janie to only using speech as a mode of self-expression. More broadly, on the whole *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates Hurston's awareness of prevailing cultural notions of what the black female body represents, and her capitalization on the performative nature of African American culture to show Janie claiming agency through the way she lives in her body. Hurston's decision to open the novel with the end of Janie's story establishes these concepts. As the initial scene indicates through the portrait of a silent, yet self-aware Janie, gesture is communicative and the body is performative. Then as the story progresses, our impression of Janie's innocent and joyful adolescence is darkened by the recollection of Nanny's history. Through Nanny's autobiography, and her reaction to Janie's relationship with Jonny, Hurston begins to raise our awareness of the greater cultural and societal implications of living in a black female body. In writing Janie's adolescence, Hurston establishes that Janie desires more from her life after having an embodied sexual experience, thereby beginning her trajectory toward an increasingly embodied subjectivity.

As the novel continues, Hurston writes Janie as progressively demonstrating evidence of her self-knowledge in a variety of ways other than speaking. For example, in

her first marriage to Logan, Hurston uses strategic silence in order to emphasize Janie's use of gesture to communicate her independence. She is portrayed as the agent of her sexuality when she uses her hair to get Joe's attention. Next she performs stereotypical female gestures, but with subtle differences, to illustrate her increasing knowledge of her embodied subjectivity, challenge Logan's domination, and push back on cultural expectations of femininity. When she ultimately leaves Logan, she takes off her apron, symbolically ridding herself of the life of domestic servitude he imagined for her and performing a new kind of freedom with her body.

At the start of her marriage to Joe, Hurston demonstrates Janie's embodied subjectivity again when she describes her careful choice of dress to enable her superiority over the other women in the town. She also marks a milestone in Janie's development where Janie comes to a fuller recognition of her performative identity, realizing that she can conceal parts of herself from Joe. When Joe dies, Janie acknowledges her beauty and sexuality—a part of her identity that she had concealed—by refusing to cover up her hair. When she marries Tea Cake, Janie's sense of identity is further connected to her body. Though he abuses Janie, her body reveals the truth of his abuse to witnesses, an instance where Hurston also explores the way that Janie's identity is formed by other people's understanding of her body. Hurston links speech and gesture again through Janie's use of a metaphor, calling Tea Cake's words "uh lie tuh bruise mah ears," and then ultimately depicts Janie choosing to use gestures instead of speaking (Hurston 137). By depicting Janie's arrival at this point of maturity, Hurston closes part of her story by again

highlighting her empowered relationship to her body, despite suffering abuse. With the opening pages of the novel, Hurston depicts Janie as defined by her embodied subjectivity since we only learn about her through the observations of the townspeople about her appearance.

Throughout this thesis, I have identified many instances where we observe Janie employing gestures instead of speaking aloud. When collected together, these instances cohere to demonstrate Hurston's awareness of her place in the existing black female literary tradition. If we read those moments where Janie communicates without verbally speaking in the context of that tradition, it becomes clear that Hurston is "Signifying" (to borrow a term from Gates) upon the works of the authors that precede her. As Gates explains in his work on African American literature, "To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify" (*Signifying* xxiii). By tracing Janie's increasing embodied subjectivity within *Their Eyes*, I have demonstrated how Hurston modifies/Signifies upon the performativity of the "orality" present in black female slave narratives to emphasize the performativity of the body in her own novel. By doing so, Hurston calls attention to Janie's body in order to establish her awareness of the cultural oppression Janie suffers, especially by the men she encounters throughout the novel. In rendering her verbally silent during moments where she is subjected to cruelty by her husbands, Hurston emphasizes the challenges Janie must overcome in her quest for growth and self-knowledge. Rather than restricting Janie to passively accepting these challenges to her

independent identity, she instead demonstrates Janie's active, physical response to Nanny, Jonny, Logan, Joe, and Tea Cake when they attempt to hold her back. Her novel overall serves as a unique coming-of-age story that presents its protagonist's increasingly embodied subjectivity, rather than just her maturing consciousness. Most importantly, Hurston demonstrates Janie's subjugation as a black woman living in the southern United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because of the way she relies on Janie's physical movements to indicate her development. While those around Janie are dismissive of her because of her black, female body, Hurston empowers her to communicate with that same body, the very site of her oppression. In choosing to portray Janie's gestures as the primary mode of her self-expression, Hurston capitalizes on the performative ability of her body and allows Janie to transcend her circumstances.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Depicting an ‘authentic’ black voice was a contentious issue in early 20th century African American literature, and while I do not have the space to fully detail that debate, Hazel V. Carby’s “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk” explores the issue in depth. To summarize, she writes: “The desire of the Harlem intellectuals to establish and re-present African American cultural authenticity to a predominantly white audience was a mark of change from, and confrontation with, what were seen by them to be externally imposed cultural representations of black people produced within, and supported by, a radicalized social order. However, what was authentic was a debate that was not easily resolved and involved confrontation among black intellectuals themselves. Alain Locke, for example . . . assumed that the work of African American intellectuals would be to raise the culture of the folk to the level of art” (Carby 120). Additionally, Lynda Marion Hill’s chapter “The Authenticity Debate” explores this issue as it relates to Hurston’s works in depth. Depicting an ‘authentic’ black voice was a contentious issue in early 20th century African American literature, and while I do not have the space to fully detail that debate, Hazel V. Carby’s “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk” explores the issue in depth. To summarize, she writes: “The desire of the Harlem intellectuals to establish and re-present African American cultural authenticity to a predominantly white audience was a mark of change from, and confrontation with, what were seen by them to be externally imposed cultural representations of black people produced within, and supported by, a radicalized social order. However, what was authentic was a debate that was not easily resolved and involved confrontation among black intellectuals themselves. Alain Locke, for example . . . assumed that the work of African American intellectuals would be to raise the culture of the folk to the level of art” (Carby 120). Additionally, Lynda Marion Hill’s chapter “The Authenticity Debate” explores this issue as it relates to Hurston’s works in depth.

<sup>ii</sup> Hurston graduated from Barnard College with a degree in anthropology. In addition to her fiction, she wrote several works detailing African American culture.

<sup>iii</sup> See Jon Woodson’s “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Influence of Jens Peter Jacobsen’s *Marie Grubbe*”; Megan Obourn’s “Early Civil Rights ‘Voice Work’ in Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston”; Lillie P. Howard’s *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*

<sup>iviv</sup> In a small aside before she begins talking, Phoeby tells Janie “Gal you sho looks *good* . . . Even wid den overalls on, you shows yo’ womanhood” (Hurston 4). Here we see Hurston emphasizing (at the chronological end of the novel) a celebration of the female body, and she also shows Janie’s body as sexualized from a place of her own empowerment. Furthermore, the moment serves as a nice contrast between the town women who are dismayed by Janie’s clothing, and Phoeby, a good friend who truly knows her.

<sup>v</sup> Coming from the man who tells Janie one chapter previously, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self,” this should not come as a complete surprise (Hurston 29).

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