

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Revolution of Black Women

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It did not pay to be a woman during the Harlem Renaissance. Women's work was seen as inferior and the women themselves were often under-valued and deemed worthless, meant only to be controlled by the patriarchal society. To be a black woman meant that this societal suffocation and subjugation were doubled, for not only did a black woman have to overcome the inequalities faced by all women, she also had to fight the stereotypes that have been thrust upon her since slavery. Many authors of the Harlem Renaissance, especially Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, wrote about black women in order to defy stereotypes that were commonly held as truth. Through their writings, these authors explored how the institutions of race and gender interact with each other to create a unique experience for black women of the Harlem Renaissance.

It seems natural that the literature of the Harlem Renaissance is supposed to explore and solve the race problem. In fact, W.E.B. DuBois, one of the deans of the Harlem Renaissance, said, "Whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (103). Some authors, such as Jesse Redmon Fauset, cleaved to this idea and made it the main purpose of their work. Fauset's novel *There is Confusion* portrays Joanna and Maggie as pushing the boundaries set for them by racial discrimination and gender inequity.

Joanna Marshall always took pride in her natural beauty and she never let racial hatred hinder her in her quest to find greatness. Though Joanna must take separate dance classes because the white students refuse to practice with a black girl, Joanna is not discouraged. She is determined to achieve her dream of being a dancer even with the 'race problem' working against her because it only "meant to her that some special and separate way would be arranged whereby she would become a dancer on the stage" (Fauset 164). This is significant because, in a way of

thinking rarely seen before, a black woman is presented as perceiving her heritage not as a drawback but as something that makes her extraordinary, though she does realize that society will try to hold her down because of it. Still, Joanna is adamant that race should not play a role in the jobs she is allowed to take: “I am colored, of course, but American first” (Fauset 76). In this way, Fauset states that while Joanna is not ashamed of being black, she also does not want to only be defined by that one trait. Her identity is made up of many interconnecting features. While her ‘blackness’ is certainly an important part of her, it is not the only part. “American” can also easily be replaced with “woman,” again showing that one’s identity is not comprised of an either-or aspect but rather a holistic model.

Fauset “does not envision separate struggles against racism and sexism, for she concludes that racism accounts for the inequitable treatment of African-American women” (Davis xix). African American women must live with the white majority’s belief that the color of one’s skin is an indicator of intelligence and civility. On top of this is the layer of masculine power that also claims that one’s sex is indicative of one’s ability to speak, to be self-sufficient and to survive. As Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Gregg Lee Carter note, “Although white women’s status was clearly inferior to that of white men, they were treated with deference...African American women were not considered ‘weak’ females, but were treated more like beasts of burden. Thus these women of color suffered a double oppression of sexism and racism” (418). Maggie Ellersley, Joanna’s friend, understands better than anyone in the novel what it means to be marginalized not only on the basis of one’s skin color, but also because of one’s gender.

Maggie envies the Marshall family for they do not have to suffer over wash bins to make enough money to put food on the table, as Maggie’s mother does. Joanna goes to school and takes dance classes. Joanna is free to dream of becoming famous. Maggie, on the other hand,

looks to her mother and Mis' Sparrow and sees what society is capable of doing to black women, especially black women with no husband. "She was poor, she was weak, she was ignorant. Add to that the fact that she was black in a country where color is a crime and you have her 'complex'" (Fauset 55). Maggie does not want to end up cast aside by society. She understands that "some w'ite folks has it most as bad as us poor colored people. On'y thing is they has more opportunities" (Fauset 56). Being black, Maggie is disregarded by the white population. Being a poor black woman, with seemingly no chance for advancement in life even gets her ostracized by Joanna for the majority of the novel. Yet, Maggie refuses to fall into the trap of white, male supremacy. By the end, readers see how Maggie, as a single, black woman, has overcome society's expectations and obstacles in order to accumulate power, wealth, and, more importantly, self-purpose. Though Fauset portrays Maggie as a strong black woman who fights against all opposition in order to achieve her goals, and as she portrays Joanna as making tremendous strides despite the color of her skin, Fauset did not shy away from delving into and picking apart many of the sexist values held during the Harlem Renaissance.

Many readers may admonish Joanna for falling into the trap of a repressive marriage but Joanna is the first to admit that "for a woman love usually means a household of children, the getting of a thousand meals, picking up laundry, no time to herself" (Fauset 95). Joanna is not under the impression that marriage is a liberating force for women but it would be wrong to say that feminists cannot be activists and married at the same time. The idea of feminism is that it allows women the right to choose what is true for them at any given moment. It can be said that Joanna makes two choices throughout *There Is Confusion*. Her first choice is to not marry Peter and instead to focus on her career. This is seen as the 'mainstream' feminist attitude—foregoing marriage and children (which are usually attributed to a woman's fulfillment in life). By the end

of the novel, however, Joanna changes her mind, a right that is often denied women. It is popularly believed that once a woman makes a choice that she should suffer the consequences, as if society was more than generous in giving her the right to choose in the first place. Joanna, again going against society's expectations, decides to leave the stage, marry Peter and have children.

Maggie chooses marriage "as a means of escaping what she perceives as a bleak future working in her family's boarding house" (Jones 27). Though ultimately her marriage fails because her husband is a gambler, Maggie is portrayed as a strong female character as she realizes that a future for an unmarried black woman is not to be desired (Jones 27). She knows that the only way for a black woman to get out of poverty is to marry. More so, Maggie's impressionable teenage mind thinks that she needs a husband in order to feel complete because of the popular myth that a woman is nothing without a man. However, Maggie is smart, economical, and works her way up in the business world where she realizes that she is satisfied with being by herself, as long as she can be an independent woman (Jones 32). In the end of the novel, Maggie breaks every tradition of womanhood and offers to be her lover's mistress (Fauset 268) thus showing that love should transcend social mores.

In contrast to Joanna and Maggie are their respective mothers who, seemingly, are not given vital roles to play in the novel. Joanna is much closer to her father, Joel, who has always aspired towards greatness. In Joel's and Joanna's eyes, Mrs. Marshall is "kind and sweet, but fundamentally unambitious" (Fauset 11). Her purpose is to show Joanna what married life is like, as she takes care of the children and makes sure that the household runs smoothly. Similarly, Ms. Ellersley is meant to show Maggie what working life is like. She "was a laundress, a spare hard-working woman to whom life had meant nothing but poverty and confusion" (Fauset 55).

Though both mothers can be viewed as having insignificant parts in the novel, it is important to note that these women provide the motivation for their daughters to push forward against all impossibility, which molds Joanna and Maggie into the great women that they are by the end of the novel. More so, Fauset empowered both Joanna and Maggie by writing their characters as ones who evolve throughout the course of the novel, giving them human and dynamic (as opposed to stereotypical and static) qualities.

Jean Toomer's depiction of women in *Cane* is not as emboldening as he chose to represent the truth of a black woman's life after the abolishment of slavery. Through his stories, he said that no shame should come from being a black woman. In fact, Toomer fostered the idea that black women are gorgeous. Karintha, Carma, Fern, Louisa and Avey are all portrayed as women that "men had always wanted" (Toomer 5) and whose "skin was the color of oak leaves on young trees in the fall. Her breasts, firm and up-pointed like ripe acorns. And her singing had the low murmur of winds in fig trees" (Toomer 31). Though it can be argued that Toomer only exploits the beauty of these women, and reinforces the notion that women are only meant to be seen, the fact that women play a substantial role in his stories leads one to think otherwise. Clearly, Toomer believes that black women had an important story to tell—one of persecution. Toomer validates women, especially black women, by writing their stories of what it is to live with discrimination. "Throughout most of *Cane*, black women are damaged by men whose often unregenerate nature is partly derivative of their devaluation by a system that has shown the benefits of democracy only to a white elect" (Grant 23). As the reader sees in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, black women are beaten down by black men because black men are denied basic human rights by institutions that value only the white man.

“Blood-Burning Moon” is one example of the lasting effects of slavery on black women. Louisa, a black woman, is stuck between the love of Tom Burwell, a Negro who works as a sharecropper, and Bob Stone, the white son of a former-slave owner for whom both Louisa and Tom work. This story is the epitome of domination. Bob Stone thinks that “by the way the world reckons things, he had won her...He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her” (Toomer 31, 34). Bob Stone still has the mentalities of a slave master embedded in his mind. He thinks that he still owns Louisa and that her body should be meant only for his pleasure. This harkens back to the exoticism of the black woman, as she is viewed as filling the white male’s sexual appetite more fully than a white woman. More so, Bob does not care to get to know Louisa nor does he care about her feelings. Her only purpose is to gratify his desire. Bob “fetishizes her racially, has his pleasure of her with a leisure born of dominance” (Grant 45). Not only does Toomer comment on the relationship between man and woman, he also deals with the relationship between races.

As Bob thinks Louisa belongs to him, so too does he think that he controls Tom Burwell. Tom must work on the Stone estate and in this state of servitude the old framework of slavery is not so distant. Even during the climatic fight between Bob and Tom, Tom, as a black man, is hesitant to defend himself against Bob. “Bob lunged at him. Tom side-stepped, caught him by the shoulder, and flung him to the ground” (Toomer 36). Tom even calls Bob ‘sir’ and asks him what he is doing. Tom still resides in the mindset of slavery, as did every other African American, knowing that if he does not show respect to Bob, he will be punished twofold. In the end, the white townsfolk lynch Tom. “Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air” (Toomer 37). Toomer shows that the status quo that was put in place during slavery, where the white man is deemed

superior to the black man, has not been eradicated with the abolishment of slavery. Yet, Toomer gives Tom a dignified death, one in which he does not surrender, one in which his murderers can see the eyes of the man they killed.

Interestingly, though Louisa is one of the main characters, her role is 'object.' Both men love her and both men want her for themselves despite Louisa's desires. Though the reader can infer that Bob forces himself on her, Louisa says that "to meet Bob in the canebrake...was nothing new" (Toomer 31), perhaps implying that it is something done willingly. Is it not possible that Tom forced himself on her as well? He does not give her a chance to speak when he confesses his love to her, nor is she allowed to take part in the men's fight over her. She is merely a pawn, a symbol of beauty and status. More so, it can be argued that she loved neither Bob nor Tom: "A strange stir was in her...she tried to fix upon Bob or Tom as the cause of it...there was no unusual significance to either one" (Toomer 31). Is this stir that she feels within her one of a longing for freedom, both from the stifling male dominated society as well as from white supremacy?

Toomer also draws a portrait of black women in "Kabnis." His portrayal of Stella, Cora and Carrie could be viewed as Toomer playing into the stereotypes commonly held of black women, as Stella and Cora are hyper-sexualized and 'looking for a good time,' while Carrie is shown to be, at first, docile in her work. Stella and Cora, assumed to be 'loose' women, are described as "beautifully proportioned" and "restless" (Toomer 105). Yet, Toomer writes these women with respect, sure to point out that there is more to them than beauty and sex. This is important because for one of the first times, black women are shown to have depth to their characters while still maintaining their sexual power and femininity. "Except for the twisted line of her mouth when she smiles or laughs, there is about her no suggestion of the life she's been



through” (Toomer 105). Though it can be inferred that Stella and Cora are there for the purpose of sex, Stella especially knows how to wield her sexuality in order to gain power. She says, “‘Dont get it in y head I’m some sentimental Susie askin for yo sop’ ...She shoves him off, roughly, and in a mood swings her body to the steps” (Toomer 107). Toomer shows that women are not just caricatures. Against the popularly held belief of the time, women have a certain profundity to them.

Carrie Kate, Fred Halsey’s sister, is portrayed as the young, sometimes awkward, girl who is seemingly nothing special. She is used to hard work and Kabnis, looking into the future, can see “her spiritbloom, even now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading” (Toomer 101). Like black women who are treated as beasts meant only to work, she will one day become haggard and tired. Yet, she is looked upon by Kabnis and Lewis as someone who needs to be taken care of and protected from the harsh realities. These men believe Carrie to be fragile. More so, she is looked upon as an object to be won as both Kabnis and Lewis wonder what the other could possibly provide her. Yet, Carrie is stronger than any other character in “Kabnis” as she embodies spiritual strength. At the end, it is Carrie who helps Kabnis after he breaks down in front of Father John. She has power over Kabnis, silencing him so that Father John may continue to speak. Finally, “she turns him to her and takes his hot cheeks in her firm cool hands. Her palms draw the fever out” (Toomer 115). In this way, Stella, Cora and Carrie represent the strength of the everyday black woman.

Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* depicts women very differently from Toomer’s romanticized notions. It is a grittier depiction, where the women are not all beautiful: “Miss Curdy was a putty-skinned mulattress with purple streaks on her face. Two of her upper front teeth had been knocked out and her lower lip slanted pathetically leftward” (McKay 127). Most

importantly, McKay does not present each woman as one standard stereotype, instead showing the different dimensions of women's life in Harlem. Susy and Miss Curdy represent the women who look down upon Harlem with its rowdy nightlife. McKay does not 'sugar-coat' them and so the reader feels no sympathy for them. These women are in the business of keeping men, meaning that they pay for all the bills. This plays into the stereotype, posited by Marlon Riggs in *Ethnic Notions*, that the black woman is in control of her house which is a complete reversal of the white and 'proper' way. There are two ways of looking at this stereotype. On the one hand, it gives women the power. But on the other, it gives them power only because white society sees black men as insignificant beings.

Another woman that is portrayed in *Home to Harlem* is Congo Rose who wants to 'keep' Jake. It is a paradox because while she wants the power of wealth, she also wants Jake "to be brutal and beat her up a little" (McKay 147). Jake does not condone hitting women and when he does hit Rose he despises himself and leaves her. Yet, she takes pride in it. "It's the first time I ever felt his real strength...I almost thought he was getting sissy. But he's a *ma-an* all right" (McKay 149). This defines masculinity in rigid terms, whereby a man is only a man if he shows violence against women.

Agatha, Ray's girlfriend, represents the gentle woman who does her duty as a wife would be expected. At Ray's request, she comes to check on a sick Jake, whose definition of the love between Ray and Agatha is like the love between his parents: "Jest lak how mah mammy useter love pa and do everything fo him" (McKay 186). This visit from Agatha sparks in Jake the need to find Felice, an escort who gave him back his money and with whom he fell in love. Though it may seem as though McKay is condoning the sexual abuse of women, as Felice is a prostitute, in a way her profession can be interpreted as giving her a great amount of control over her own

sexuality. “I kain’t go with a fellah ef I don’t like him some” (McKay 223). While Jake does feel that he possesses Felice, as he says to Zeddy to let her loose because “she’s mah woman” (McKay 231), it cannot be overlooked how much Felice thinks and acts on her own volition. When Zeddy forgives Jake after their fight, Felice is upset because Zeddy did not respect her enough to let her speak for herself (Robinson). Furthermore, she leaves Jake without telling him in order to return to Zeddy’s place to get her good-luck pendant. She says, “So I jest made up mah mind to slip off and git it” (McKay 237). Felice is a thinking woman who chooses to love Jake. Furthermore, instead of letting Jake decide where they will end up, Felice decides *with* Jake to catch the train to Chicago. She is not afraid to speak her mind and do what she thinks is best, defying the norms associated with the female gender.

Two poems of the Harlem Renaissance that comment on the strict gender and racial boundaries are Langston Hughes’ “Red Silk Stockings” and “Ruby Brown.” “Red Silk Stockings” shows that black women were looked upon as property, as something to gawk at like animals in a zoo. The poem continues on to say that black women are only good for being prostitutes and that their main desire in life should be to have a light-skinned baby with a white man.

You’s too pretty.

Put on yo red silk stockings gal,

An’ tomorrow’s chile’ll

Be a high yaller (Hughes, “Stockings” 264).

This inherently places the white man at the top of the ladder in society, saying that he has the right to control the black woman. In turn, the black woman, as in the days of slavery, only exists as an object to please the white man.

“Ruby Brown” posits the same message, that a black woman, even a light-skinned woman like Ruby Brown, has no place in her town because of the racial discrimination and subjugation. If she does not want to work as a servant for a white lady then her only other choice is as a prostitute to the white men.

“But the white men,  
Habitué of the high shuttered houses,  
Pay more money to her now  
Than they ever did before,  
When she worked in their kitchens (Hughes, “Ruby” 265).

Both poems present the idea that black women had two options in life—live in servitude to a white family or become a prostitute under the control of white men’s money.

Perhaps most famous for his poetry, Langston Hughes also wrote a number of short stories dealing with what it meant to be black. One of these stories, “Luani of the Jungles,” tells of a European white man who fell in love with and married an African woman, “dark and wild, exotic and strange....A child of sophistication and simplicity” (Hughes, “Luani” 588). This European man falls for this African woman adorned in ball gowns and diamond rings, a false persona that only masks her true self. Luani hates Europe, despises ‘whiteness’ and tells this man ““You are coming with me back to my people... You with your whiteness coming to me and my dark land”” (Hughes, “Luani” 589). Luani is powerful and does not desire to ‘whiten’ herself, instead choosing to live with her own people, in her own simple way. As many white Westerners look down upon the culture of Africa, Hughes instead holds Luani and her culture with high regard: “Beautiful brown-black people whose perfect bodies glistened in the sunlight, bodies that

shamed me and the weakness under my European clothing” (Hughes, “Luani” 590). He celebrates the African culture, body and rituals, raising them even above European culture.

Luani, in and of herself, is the epitome of power and self-confidence. Sexually, she has ‘taken’ two men, the European protagonist and Awa Unabo, the chief’s young son. This is something that the white European finds incomprehensible. If a white woman would have done the same thing, she would have been deemed ‘loose’ and most likely ostracized. But the definition of love in Luani’s African tribe is different from the European ideal, showing, rather splendidly, the difference between the two cultures. Western readers might be surprised to realize that what they have grown up knowing to be true, that love is only between two people, may not be held as truth everywhere else. With this, Hughes shows that white culture does not have a monopoly on all ways of thought, and that given the space and time, other ideas and values will flourish.

The European laments that Unabo “possessed the woman I loved” (Hughes, “Luani” 591) but the reader never sees Unabo place any limits or restrictions on Luani in her love of the protagonist. In a complete break with the gendered norms of the European, where a woman is supposed to rely solely on, and be defined by, her husband, Luani explains that “a woman can have two lovers and love them both” (Hughes, “Luani” 591). With this story, Hughes not only praises the African culture, telling his African American readers to take pride in their heritage, but he also testifies to women’s power. He also begins a dialogue on the different, and perhaps more constricting, expectations that are placed upon women in Western cultures, as opposed to the freedom and simplicity of Africa.

Langston Hughes differed from DuBois in his opinions on what an artist should create. He realized that a black author should not be held to the expectation of writing for all black men

and women: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either” (Hughes 95). Zora Neale Hurston wrote by this creed, freeing herself from the constraints that have long bound black authors. Her work is not solely focused on casting the Negro in an angelic light. She writes honestly, like McKay, showing the black man or woman in everyday life. Her writing is not pretentious. “What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 153). However, it is hard to overlook the fact that race plays a vital role in how one sees the world and in how one holds the self.

In Hurston’s play, *Color Struck*, internal racism is rooted so deeply in Emmaline, a black woman, that she refuses to see how John, a light-skinned African American man, could ever love her. Their relationship ends because she is always suspicious that he is dating other women—women that she views as prettier than herself, women that any African American man should want to marry in order to gain more privilege and power—light-skinned women. John finds Emmaline seventeen years later to tell her that he never stopped loving her, preferring her dark skin to any light-skinned woman. Yet, she has been so deceived by society, told so many times that no one will want her, that she doesn’t believe him. Nor does she trust him enough to leave him alone with her sick, ‘near-white’ daughter while she runs for the doctor because she thinks that John will want her daughter. Emmaline’s daughter dies and the truth of what so many black woman feel is brought to the forefront: “She so despises her own skin that she can’t believe any

one else could love it” (Hurston, *Color Struck* 718). All her life, Emmaline has been at the mercy of masculine and white domination. She was most likely raped by a white man (as her daughter is light-skinned and Emmaline makes a point to say that she was never married [Hurston, *Color Struck* 716]), showing that the white man only thought of her as a tool to prove his control and supremacy. More so, Emmaline holds herself to the beauty standards of the white ladies. When Emmaline inevitably fails to live up to these standards, she not only fails in being white, but she also fails at being a woman as she is unable (or so she has been told) to hold onto a man.

Emmaline realizes that men use women to gain status, and, more importantly, she realizes that whiteness is associated with power. Therefore, if a black man wants to increase his dominance, he must marry a light-skinned woman, though the woman herself may have no hope of increased respect.

While Emmaline’s story is one of being overwhelmed, and ultimately overpowered, by the status quo, Janie Crawford’s story is one of breaking it. Similarly, to ignore the fact that Janie is black would be to ignore a vital part of her identity as well as a fundamental part of Hurston’s novel. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel about how a light-skinned African American woman navigates her life, through breaking away from oppression to gaining her own freedom.

First and foremost, Hurston writes a novel about a black woman that does not play into any stereotypes such as the Mammy who is docile and obedient (*Ethnic Notions*). As Elise McDougald writes, the black woman knows that “the ideals of beauty...have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas...proclaim only an ability to serve” (69). Hurston does not demean Janie, instead fleshing out her character with feelings and desires. Presenting her as such makes the reader view her (and treat her) as an equal with a story to be told. “Taking Black women seriously in the novel means for one thing that Janie’s life is seen as

inherently valuable. There is the assumption that she has the right to search for happiness and freedom, however she may define them” (Smith 33). For Janie, this freedom is simply defined, though not so easily found. Grounded in images of nature, Janie presents the reader with a majestic and powerful union between two parties. “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 11). This is a bold statement of desire for any woman as women are prohibited from feeling sexual yearnings, let alone making them known to the world. Men attempt to control women’s sexuality by holding them to unattainable standards—a woman must simultaneously be pure and seductive. When the women fail (which is inevitable with such expectations), it is used as proof that women are inferior and the women are then silenced. This is even a more daring statement for a black woman because historically she has been de-sexualized, especially in the face of the Mammy stereotype in which she was stripped of her sexuality so as not to be a threat to the white mistress of the house (*Ethnic Notions*). Janie’s dream of love presents a model of a healthy connection, yet this dream begins to deteriorate when Nanny warns her that “Dat’s de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat’s just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 23). Janie soon finds out that love for a black woman can be more oppressive than empowering.

Janie only becomes aware of her race when she is six years old and even at this young age she knows that she will be looked down upon. Growing up with the white children that Nanny raised, Janie did not realize that she was any different. After a photograph is taken of all the children, Janie can’t recognize herself because the only child that hasn’t been pointed out is a



“real dark little girl” (Hurstons, *Their Eyes* 9). When everyone tells her that this dark child is herself, she exclaims, “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored! Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest” (Hurstons, *Their Eyes* 9). Nanny also knows the drawbacks that being a black woman inherently brings with it. Yet, it is important to note that like Joanna from *There is Confusion*, Janie never wishes to have pale skin, blue eyes and blonde hair. Even in her early age, she has some notion of pride in her ‘blackness,’ though Nanny essentially pushes Janie to live a ‘white’ lifestyle. Janie feels that Nanny “pinched” the horizon so “that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her” (Hurstons, *Their Eyes* 89). Nanny believes that she is protecting Janie from the remaining clutches of slavery. Nanny was raped by her master because that was the status quo of the time, as Bob Stone feels it is his right to force himself upon Louisa. Leafy, Janie’s mother, was raped by a black schoolteacher only proving that sexual violence and discriminations against women is not particular to any one race but is common in all cultures.

In the eyes of Nanny, no woman is safe unless she is married to a respectable man who can take care of her. “De white man is de ruler of everything...so de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurstons, *Their Eyes* 14). Though white women seemingly have no place in the world, no purpose in life other than to be a pretty counterpart to their husbands, black women are meant only to work. As mules are property, so too are black women, valued only as much as they can labor. In order to protect Janie from the harmful effects stemming from slavery, in which a white man will take away her power, Nanny arranges for Janie to marry Logan Killicks, not realizing that marriage will make a slave out of Janie just as much as if Janie were born into slavery herself.

Janie hopes that her vision of love will follow naturally after marriage. This image is “one between active equals...of sexual fulfillment and ‘delight’ [and] as the metaphor of pollination implies, one of creativity and fecundity” (Meisenhelder 64) not necessarily in relation to children, but with regards to ideas and energy, an excitement about life. Janie does not find this with Logan. He makes her work just as a master made his slave labor in the kitchen or in the cotton fields. This relationship is stagnant, nothing like the marriage that Janie wanted. “Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 25). With this definition, a woman is different from a man because a woman will have her dreams denied. Gender equity can never be reached if a woman must put her needs and wants below that of a male partner, supporting him in achieving his aspirations. A woman will never have the same opportunities as a man if society says that a woman’s role is to refuse herself possibilities for advancement in the life she may choose.

Janie realizes this. In her first act of feminism, she leaves Logan because she knows that she is only defined by him and his presence. Logan says to her, “You ain’t got no particular place. It’s wherever Ah need yuh” (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 31). With Logan, Janie is not even defined as having a traditional woman’s place. With him, she is forced to do manual labor as he requires her to work in the field like a mule. She has no place except for when she is with her husband. So she leaves Logan and marries Jody Starks who represents “change and chance” (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 29). She hopes for a different life with Jody but she finds out soon enough that this marriage is not much better. Jody isolates her from the townsfolk, and from herself, by sticking her in the store. She is not even allowed to converse and partake in the camaraderie of the men on the porch.

One reason for Jody's oppression of Janie is because he built his life around the white man's model (Meisenhelder 65). Instead of making Eatonville a black town, he makes it into one where the black community must imitate the white folk in order to achieve greatness. In essence, Jody lives by the code that black is wrong and white is right. This also plays into how he treats Janie, for part of white society is the formation and maintenance of a patriarchy in which the man is superior. "Janie soon discovers that she is merely one of his possessions, a beautiful status symbol" (Smith 35). It can be said that Janie has achieved Nanny's wish for her: "She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 114). Both Nanny and Jody think that Janie should want to sit on the porch with not a thought in the world.

It does not take long to realize that though she may have escaped the clutches of servitude to white men, she is still objectified and controlled by Jody. Janie even admits to herself that "he wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it. So gradually, she...learned to hush" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 71). Jody has not only taken away her free will, he has also tried to break her spirit. On the physical sphere, he makes her keep her hair up under a kerchief and he slaps her if the food is not to his liking. On the psychological sphere, he degrades her by calling attention to her looks, humiliating her in front of the customers at the store, making her believe that she is not anything special. Historically, a woman's power has stemmed from her beauty. The more aesthetically pleasing a woman's features are (and in American culture, aesthetically pleasing is equal to Caucasian) the more reverence and respect she will receive. By attacking Janie's beauty, Jody is knocking her down in her power. More so, by making Janie hide her hair (which is a symbol of sexuality in many cultures [Davis-Floyd 438]),

he desexualizes her. She has no say over her own sexuality, her own speech, her own physical person. For example, when the townsfolk ask if Janie can say a few words to acknowledge Jody's new position as mayor, Jody takes to the floor himself 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" (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 43). For all intents and purposes, she is a slave to Jody's idea of what a black woman should be, namely that she should want to emulate the white woman who is forced to sit silently in the background.

Janie has lived her whole life under another person, going from Nanny to Logan to Jody. In both of her first two marriages, Janie realizes that married life, that what is constituted as 'love' in her society, is equal to Joanna Marshall's feelings on love—one of entrapment. When Jody passes away, Janie realizes that she no longer has to live by anyone's rules but her own. "She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 87). This can be seen as a reversal of Nanny's experience in which her master made her take down her hair so he could wrap his hand in it (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 17). Janie is stepping away from the legacy that slavery has left behind into a realm of self-possession as she enjoys her hair for herself and not for anyone else. Like Maggie Ellersley in *There is Confusion*, "she liked being lonesome for a change. This freedom feeling was fine" (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 90). Though she gets many offers of courtship, she turns them all down despite the town's scrutiny. She does what she wants, defiant against the social mores of the town that says that she should still be grieving for Jody. She wants to live her life for herself.

Yet this plan does not play itself out as Janie had intended because she meets the ever charming and sweet Tea Cake "who recognizes who she is and does not infringe upon her sense of self" (Smith 34). With Tea Cake everything seems to be alive again, especially her. She gives

herself over to be loved by Tea Cake, letting him comb her hair, the symbol for herself and her sexuality. With Tea Cake, she learns what it is to be an equal partner. He teaches her to play chess and to shoot a gun, both of which are largely reserved for men. In this, it can be said that Tea Cake believes that women are just as capable as men and that women should be self-sufficient. More importantly, Tea Cake shows Janie that she is beautiful and that it is not wrong for Janie to take pride in it, to live naturally and to celebrate herself. As Carla Kaplan posits, “reduced to its basic narrative components, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of a young women in search of an orgasm” (99). The reader can infer that she finds this pleasure in Tea Cake, taking back control over her own sexuality.

It is at this point in the novel that Janie is portrayed as an emerging feminist. Her marriage to Tea Cake is her third marriage, still considered distasteful in present-day American society. More so, Tea Cake is twelve years younger than Janie (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 105). Their relationship goes against what society deems as proper and acceptable, but they do not let society dictate what is right for them. The absence of children, as well, is an indicator of a woman taking possession over her reproductive rights. Janie does not bear children in any of her three marriages. For one, this is a commentary on the societal belief that values children as the pinnacle of a woman’s life. Society claims that a woman can only be fulfilled through her children (Simon 41), yet Janie is proof that one can be satisfied within the self. In fact, children may actually be considered a burden rather than a joy. Janie’s position as mother would only tie her down more than her position as wife. Secondly, black women, especially during the time of slavery, were treated as property. Part of their duties to the white master was to birth more children, more slaves. Janie’s refusal to have children rejects the status quo of white supremacy as well as the male-centered society.

Tea Cake is the literal and figurative antithesis to Jody. “Tea Cake breaks down the rigid gender definitions Joe sought to impose, bringing Janie into the cultural life of the black community and building a relationship with her grounded in reciprocity rather than hierarchy” (Meisenhelder 68-9). Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake is one of equality and she comes to love him. As Hurston was dedicated to writing about real people, Tea Cake, for as sweet and progressively thinking as he is, also has a downside. He gets jealous when other men pay attention to Janie, he like to party a little too much and sometimes he flirts with other women. But, as in any relationship, Janie loves the entirety of Tea Cake, the whole person. When he takes her money to gamble, she is more upset not that he took it and went to party, but that he did not take her along with him. “So you aims to partake wid everything, hunh?” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 124). Janie’s resounding “yes” sets the record straight—she, as wife, wants an equal place in the relationship. Her place is not worrying about her husband at home but to be with him in the field.

Janie gets her wish when she steps out of the kitchen and into the bean fields after she and Tea Cake move to the Muck, “a setting Hurston depicts as a black Eden free of outside cultural influence and the deadly insipidity of the dominant white world” (Meisenhelder 70). This is in direct contrast to a black woman, such as Irene from Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, who finds her sense of self in throwing and attending parties that would awe a white woman. This speaks more to class differences than it does race differences and shows that many works of the Harlem Renaissance are more expansive than only dealing with the ‘race problem.’ It is also important to note that this again is a testament to the choices of women—this time, Janie *chooses* the fields (unlike when she was forced to work in them with Logan) while Irene chooses glamorous parties, yet both can feel equally empowered by their choices. However, Hurston strongly

believed that black women “attained personal identity not by transcending the culture but by embracing it” (Wall 77). Hurston shows this in the failure of Jody’s life that he so perfectly modeled around the white world, ignoring everything about the black community and culture. In some sense, the fields are an equalizing force in regards to race and gender. Whoever lives in the Muck, whether black or white, is a member of the Muck and is considered as part of the community. Further, men and women do the same exact work for the same exact wages in the fields. What’s better is that Tea Cake breaks down the man’s place in the house, shattering normal masculine thought, when he “would help get supper afterwards” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 133). Janie finds joy not in sitting on a porch all day but by sweating and toiling with Tea Cake.

While Janie feels “a self-crushing love” for Tea Cake (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 128), there is a question of Janie’s true identity as an emerging feminist. Janie is gaining some form of self-awareness, realizing that she has the right to fight for what she wants. For example, Janie fights not only Nunkie, but also stands up to Tea Cake when Janie thinks that he is cheating on her. However, Janie still validates herself through her male partner which also brings to light another downside of Tea Cake. She wears what he wants her to and she hangs on his every word. Of course there is a fine line between willingly doing something for love and changing oneself for her partner. Still, Janie is so consumed by Tea Cake that “even her interior consciousness reveals more about him than it does her” (Washington 107). This relationship begins to show its vicious head when Tea Cake slaps Janie around, not because she did anything wrong (not that that would condone his behavior), but because “being able to whip her reassured him in possession” against Mrs. Turner’s brother (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 147). This harkens back to slavery when the master would whip his slaves to show that they were owned by him. More disturbing is that this

whipping, in the vein of Congo Rose in McKay's *Home to Harlem*, seems to endear Tea Cake more to Janie.

Not only does this instance speak to the status of women, it also gives commentary on what it is to be black. There is evidence of internalized racism and self-hatred in the responses of many of the men when they congratulate Tea Cake on finding a woman such as Janie, a light-skinned African American. "Take some uh dese ol'rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 147). The men go on to say that dark-skinned black woman would go around telling everybody, not to mention that she would hit the man right back. Just in this small encounter it is posited that black men desire light-skinned women and that light-skinned women are more fragile and act more like proper ladies (like white women) than darker-skinned women do.

Internalized racism is especially present in Mrs. Turner as she makes Janie's acquaintance because Janie is light-skinned and therefore a favorable friend to have. Mrs. Turner even tries to get Janie to leave Tea Cake so that Mrs. Turner's brother can marry Janie and "lighten up de race" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 140). She goes onto say, "Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 141). Yet Janie never agrees with Mrs. Turner, staying true to Tea Cake and, ultimately, to her African American heritage. She never tries to pass as white. Hurston is undoubtedly advocating for racial pride because the reader comes to see Mrs. Turner as the enemy, trying to break apart Tea Cake and Janie. Furthermore, she is made to look foolish when Tea Cake and his friends trash her diner and she leaves town.

Janie's true sense of freedom does not come until she shoots Tea Cake in self-defense a few months after he is bitten by a rabid dog. As the hurricane, "labeled as 'she'" destroys the



“white men’s creation,” Janie parallels this “black, female power” when she breaks through the last constraint holding her back from true self-hood—Tea Cake (Meisenhelder 75). However, she is not yet her own woman for she is sent to jail and is at the mercy of the court, with a jury made up of twelve white men. People come, black and white, to watch this spectacle of a black woman on trial for the murder of her husband. “And there was Mr. Prescott that she knew right well and he was going to tell the twelve men to kill her for shooting Tea Cake. And a strange man from Palm Beach who was going to ask them not to kill her, and none of them knew” (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 185). She is not even able to fight for her own life. Instead, she must let two white men barter for her right to live. Even though this is Janie’s time to hear her own voice tell her own story, she is “silent throughout most of the trial, merely looking on as a series of white men tell her story for her” (Kaplan 113). This scene can be compared to human history, as the stories of conquered groups are often told by the conquerors, thus perpetuating and authenticating the power of the ruling group.

When Janie does take the stand, she knows that the white men won’t understand the love between her and Tea Cake. They won’t understand what it is to be black. She acknowledges the rich white women that came to see her and wishes that “she could make *them* know how it was instead of those menfolks” (Hurstun, *Their Eyes* 185) perhaps caring more if the women understand her than if the men do, for the men will never know what it is like to have to stay silent and have someone else speak for them. Yet, the white women will also never fully understand because they do not have the double oppression of being female and black.

The courtroom also shows the power dynamic between the white and black communities. The black men from the Muck are relegated to the back of the courtroom and they are denied the right to speak, as it was in slavery and in the decades after slavery was abolished. The gap

between the races still exists, even in present day America. Once Janie is acquitted, there is conjecture among the black folk that the white men only exonerated her because of her looks, again giving commentary on the white man's fetishizing of the black woman because she is exotic and animalistic, something to be conquered. Yet, with Tea Cake's death, Hurston does away with the male hero that will save the day and in his stead, allows Janie to forge her own path, eventually becoming the novel's heroine (Washington 105). Janie now has the horizon at her fingertips and she can move as she pleases, with no one telling her otherwise. More so, Janie becomes representative of her and Tea Cake's life together and of their love. This cements Janie, a black woman, as the central character of the story. "Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 193). Janie now embodies Tea Cake's spirit, everything that she has learned and realized about herself through loving him. She is now free to be in and of herself.

Janie leaves the Muck because it reminds her too much of Tea Cake. It can be read as Janie having no real place to go now that her husband has died, playing into the theory that a woman's place is with her husband. She is "left without a man" and "exists in a position of stasis" (Washington 106). However, Janie rejects the destiny that was set out for her by Nanny and she "neither dies at her lover's hands nor withers away after his death" (Meisenhelder 88). As evidence of her unlimited opportunities, she takes seeds that Tea Cake intended to plant as a symbol "of her own unfinished life and future growth" (Meisenhelder 79). Janie's story ends where it began, back in Eatonville with Pheoby. When she arrives, she bypasses all the townsfolk, wearing her overalls and letting her hair flow in long braids. Hurston has changed what femininity means to Janie and to black women. Janie can now stand alone without a man by

her side. She has power, traditionally associated with masculinity (symbolized in the overalls) yet she revels in her sexuality, seen in her letting her hair flow. In Janie, power is now equated with femininity and she does not have to be ashamed.

This is a woman vastly different from the young girl the readers first met whose dreams had died. This is a woman who does not care what is said about her, who has survived her dreams withering away, and is walking back to live the rest of her life. Through Janie's storytelling to Pheoby, Janie finally achieves lasting and true liberation. "Janie wants to narrate her own story, exercise her voice" (Kaplan 101). Through telling her own story, Janie now validates herself as "she called in her soul to come and see" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 193). She is free to unapologetically live her life as a black woman.

In looking at Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and other literary works from the period of the Harlem Renaissance, it is implied that there was neither racial equality nor gender equity. This means, on a base level, that the black race will not be granted the same opportunities to participate in society (Kranich). The white man will be the most advantaged, thus gaining access to formulate the rules and keep the power dynamic that has been in place since before slavery, with the belief that 'black' is inherently beneath 'white.' Similarly, gender equity will never be achieved because of the long history of women's subjugation. Women have historically been denied access to opportunities because it was believed that the physical differences between men and women relegated women to the bottom and that they needed to have a man in power. Gender equity will only be achieved when there are policies put in place to ensure not only equality of access but also equality of outcomes (Kranich). More so, it can be concluded that a society will never be able to achieve one (racial equality) without the other (gender equity), for one kind of oppression lends itself to all kinds of oppression. This did not stop the authors

discussed from writing in order to advocate for equality and to fight the stereotypes that had been popularized in the media of the time. These works of literature represent the reality of life for so many black women.

Of course, these works can be read in the frame of Womanist scholarship, which shines light on what it means to be a woman who is black. According to Alice Walker, a Womanist is “a black feminist” who “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility...and women’s strength” and who is “committed to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (Walker, *Womanist Prose* xi). A black woman does not live the same life as a white woman. Black women do not enjoy the same privileges or advantages, so the black woman must forge her own way of survival. She “loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*” (Walker, *Womanist Prose* xii). This love, indeed this suffering, is something that the white feminist, no matter how devoted to equity and equality, can never understand. The white woman does not know how black women “stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (Walker, *Gardens* 232). Yet, black women survive, pushing onward even as the world tells them that they will fail. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker testifies to this strength of the black woman. “My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in” (Walker, *Gardens* 241). As her ancestors worked in the fields, their hands in the soil, she too plants flowers, expresses herself, her history, her suffering and joy in the roots that entwine themselves in the soil. Despite society’s attempt to keep black women marginalized, to slander them and trick the black woman into believing that she is not beautiful and not capable of being a mother

to beauty, Walker's mother nurtured life in hostile ground, created art, and was liberated, with her flowers. Alice Walker writes:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye...Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty...She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them....This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time. (Walker, *Gardens* 241-2).

Black women have been born of this blood and they continue to exist, to resist, and to create.

It is important to note here that no black woman, let alone a person of any race, religion or creed, will have the same experiences as everyone else. This is one of the beauties of what it means to be human—everyone is unique. Though there will always be labels to overcome, the fight to surmount these obstacles is worth it. With Janie's story "of survival and self-affirming autonomy" (Meisenhelder 91), as testimony "that there is nothing innately wrong with being a Black woman" (Smith 33) it can be inferred that many of the authors of the Harlem Renaissance advocated for racial dignity as well as feeling a sense of security in one's gender. More so, these works are a collective call to fight against racial oppression and gender subjection.

Yet, as Hurston was tired of the prevailing race problem, it can be said that Hurston just wanted to tell the story of a young woman becoming aware of her right to speak and her right to control her own sexuality. A person's identity should not be made up of one or two dominant traits that society casts stereotypes upon, such as race or gender. A person should be characterized by their thoughts and actions, especially in the face of adversity, when they are most challenged. Janie became stronger, born as a girl who dared to dream and grew into a

woman who lives for that dream, for what she desires and not what society tells her to desire.

Throughout the Harlem Renaissance and into today, race and gender play vital roles in forming a person's life experiences but, in the end, a person should be secure in who she is and take pride in her story, blossoming into a free being.

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### The Research Process

As with most papers, my first step was to pick a topic to write about. I had a few different ideas that I could run with, but I didn't know which I felt more passionate about. From previous research, I knew that our library had a wealth of resources on women of color, especially in relation to the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. After a few hours of looking on the library catalogue, I found some interesting books that focused specifically on Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* and others that delved into the thought patterns of racism and sexism that are placed on women of color.

The second big step in my research process was to read through the sources that I had found, picking out the ones that would be most helpful and writing down quotations that would support my thesis. In doing this, the library resources further directed my research by bringing to the forefront details that I had not thought of adding to my paper. These new details also led me to essays that I had previously read for other classes, adding to my research paper a connection to the larger outside world. Furthermore, throughout my research process, I learned that in order to have a well-rounded paper, I needed to present both sides of the argument. My research at the library pointed me to these resources, such as Mary Helen Washington's "'I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands': Emergent Female Hero" that offered a different perspective on *Their Eyes*.

I would say that the most important thing that I learned about the research process is to always keep an open mind and be willing to go on a journey. For example, in the editing process, I knew I wanted to add something about Womanist scholarship but I had no idea where to begin. So I began researching in the catalogue and stumbled upon Alice Walker, which allowed me to open up a whole new level in my paper.