

“The Kiss of Memory”: The Problem of Love in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

It is well known that there must be a body of waived matter, let us say, things accepted and taken for granted by all in a community before there can be that commonality of feeling. The usual phrase is having things in common. Until this is thoroughly established in respect to Negroes in America, as well as of other minorities, it will remain impossible for the majority to conceive of a Negro experiencing a deep and abiding love and not just the passion of sex. . . . [T]hey can and do experience discovery of the numerous subtle faces as a foundation for a great and selfless love, and the diverse nuances that go to destroy that love. . . . —Zora Neale Hurston, “What White Publishers Won’t Print”

Zora Neale Hurston’s 1950 essay on the lack of published representations of African American love speaks to the concerns of her best-known novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published thirteen years earlier. Hurston’s piece suggests that despite her skepticism about protest fiction, she was deeply engaged with the political landscape of the early to mid-twentieth century in America as an author and intellectual. As Joel Pfister notes in an article designed to highlight Hurston’s political efficacy, her racial politics were relational, not deterministic: “She depicted [African American] life and culture in relation to but not as decisively scripted by racially and economically motivated oppression.” “What White Publishers Won’t Print” confirms Hurston’s interest in the connection between racist assumptions about black people and fictional representations of African American love. She argues that publishing complex and subtle stories about heterosexual relationships between black people promotes interracial “commonality of feeling.” Crucially, Hurston specifies that such stories should also include how and why love relationships are destroyed. This essay proposes to investigate *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on these terms. What “diverse nuances . . . go to destroy” the “great and selfless love” between Janie Crawford and Tea Cake Woods (621)?

It is difficult to talk about *Their Eyes* without talking about Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship. Though Hurston’s heroine, Janie Crawford, is fully realized, masterfully characterized, and deliciously complicated, the plot and the problem of the novel revolve around her finding, losing, and eulogizing this great love of her life. Critics who read the novel as a narrative about Janie’s quest for selfhood or her progressive acquisition of voice tend to cast Tea Cake as a utopian alternative to the paradigm of masculinist domination identified by Janie’s grandmother and typified by her second husband, Joe Starks.¹ Scholars responding to this characterization of Tea Cake tend to overcorrect these optimistic readings and attack the efficacy and authenticity of the relationship as a whole, arguing that Tea Cake is slightly more palatable, but largely of a piece with the other imperfect men in the novel.² What both of these readings often downplay, though, is the novel’s deliberate and profound ambivalence towards Janie’s chances, in her time and place, for finding a husband equipped to consistently encourage her self-actualization or listen to her voice.

The novel contains both a profound idealization of Tea Cake’s character and a skeptical critique of some of his behavior towards Janie. Whereas Janie’s personal development can be read as a progressive journey or successful quest, her romantic relationships seem to echo each other in pervasive and disturbing ways. Pfister comments that “For all its occasional romantic and pastoral cuteness and atmospheric

hopefulness, Hurston chose not to insulate her love story from destructive social forces and contradictions” (622). Tea Cake’s jealousy and violence is the novel’s most intense and disturbing representation of the pervasiveness of domination because he is so unlike Logan and Joe, yet sporadically performs the same dominative masculinity that they do. The story arc of Janie and Tea Cake’s courtship and marriage suggests that Tea Cake is *both* Janie’s “great and selfless love” *and* susceptible to the “diverse nuances” that “destroy” romantic relationships between African Americans. This ambivalence is represented through Janie’s steadfast devotion to Tea Cake in spite of moments where he unfairly accuses her of infidelity and brags about his ability to control her through beatings. It is the intraracial colorism that provokes this domination in Tea Cake, more so than physical aggression between the two, that I argue the novel criticizes.

Kathleen Davies, in her biographically informed reading of the novel, locates this same sort of ambivalence in Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Davies argues that Hurston’s depiction of the more “disturbing incidents” (*i.e.*, physical abuse and paternalistic decrees stifling her writing career) in her intense relationship with a man identified as “A.W.P.” must constantly negotiate gendered and racial politics: “Anticipating racist appropriation of a black woman’s description of abuse by a black man, she can both tell what happened and protect the black man” through what Davies terms a “poetics of embalment” (148). Davies arrives at this term through Hurston’s account of “embalm[ing]” her positive feelings for A.W.P. in *Their Eyes*. As Davies points out, in order to embalm these feelings, A.W.P. must be, in some sense, dead to Hurston, and therefore no longer a threat to her body or career. Davies’s reading of the novel finds a similar strategy in Janie’s response to Tea Cake’s “violent betrayal” (153). She kills him, but almost immediately reestablishes him as flawless in her retrospective narration. My reading of the novel follows Davies’s indictment of Tea Cake’s abusive response to Mrs. Turner’s intraracial colorism as a “betrayal” of his otherwise egalitarian expressions of love, and offers an account for why Tea Cake might react to that particular threat as he does. I also contend that Tea Cake’s death enables an idealization of his character that would otherwise be impossible, but suggest that Janie’s retrospective glorification allows *Their Eyes* to contain both a celebration of the liberatory possibilities of egalitarian love, and an indictment of the way racism and sexism can distort even the most satisfying heterosexual relationships.

Hurston’s novel foregrounds the sociohistorical racial injustices that infuse a unique tension into African American gender politics.³ Though Janie does learn to assert her own will and subjectivity throughout the course of the novel, she must constantly combat the pervasive hierarchies that make black women vulnerable to oppression. Though Janie does not criticize Tea Cake’s unwarranted mistrust, and consciously constructs a fantasy of her dead husband that excises the abuse and retains only the love, I argue that *Their Eyes* insists upon including such flaws in Tea Cake in order to simultaneously endorse love’s liberatory power while also implying that even a “great and selfless love” does not guarantee permanent liberation from social hierarchies.⁴ As Gates argues, *Their Eyes* is indeed a “speakerly text” (181)—one in which both Janie and Hurston have their say.⁵

Herbert Marcuse and Jessica Benjamin offer psychoanalytically sensitive theoretical accounts for how a society’s political narratives can inform and infect the personal space of romantic love. Marcuse offers a psychoanalytic, Marxist analysis of how societal “nuances” can diminish and damage human love relationships in *Eros and Civilization* (1966), his politically progressive revision of Freud. Marcuse argues that all individuals harbor memories of an earlier experience of unmediated bodily pleasure. This physical state, termed “polymorphous [whole body] perversity [non-genital, non-reproductive pleasure]” occurs in infancy and in Freud’s account is repressed for the necessity of psychic development (what Freud calls the “reality principle”).

Marcuse agrees with Freud that some repression of an infant's ability to experience pleasure polymorphously is necessary for human development, but adds that repression over and above what is necessary for development, *surplus* repression, needs to be recognized and resisted. Marcuse's thesis is that equitable and open love relationships between human beings would enable and support a radical reactivation of nongenital sites of pleasure on the body (made possible by the adult's memory of infantile polymorphous perversity) because the Erotic imperative to connect with the other would be intensified and reinforced by the physical gratification of sensory contact outside the strictly sexual (erotic) realm.⁶ Significant to my argument is Marcuse's contention that the memory of unmediated bodily pleasure is stored in every individual's psyche, and could be reactivated to sustain mutually satisfying adult relationships if not for social hierarchies that strive to keep people separate and desensitized. However, Marcuse's analysis of the social systems that thwart this liberation is organized almost entirely around a critique of capitalism, eliding the fact that economic and gendered systems of oppression operate concurrently but in different realms of human life and by different rules.

In analyzing the *gendered* social dynamics that mutate love relationships, Jessica Benjamin's *Bonds of Love* (1988) is particularly useful.⁷ She shows how capitalism isn't the only factor that causes surplus repression; patriarchy does as well. According to Benjamin, relationships work when people maintain the tension between asserting independence and recognizing the other as a similarly independent subject. When the paradox of recognition and assertion breaks down, the relationship mutates into a complementary dyad of master and slave, dominant and submissive, in which one partner denies her subjectivity while the other asserts his will independent of recognizing the other. The gendered formulation is not accidental. In patriarchal societies, gender asymmetry undergirds unjust hierarchies like autonomy/dependency and master/slave. Men are encouraged to reject femininity in order to bolster a gender identity relying on difference, and in so doing, reject dependency on the other, which is coded as feminine and weak. What is missing from both Marcuse's identification of the liberatory power of memory and Benjamin's analysis of patriarchal domination is how racialized social hierarchies infect the psyches of oppressed people, making the reactivation of unmediated pleasure and the maintenance of intersubjectivity extremely difficult to sustain.

bell hooks's 2004 study, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, attempts to account for why, in a social matrix shaped by capitalism and patriarchy, men of all races respond to crises with violence. According to hooks, patriarchy not only promotes a dominitive model of masculinity, as Benjamin suggests, but also insidiously infects the psyches of men who try to enact feminist egalitarianism in their life and relationships, resurfacing at moments of intense personal anxiety. Throughout the novel, Tea Cake in most ways demonstrates a real fluency of emotional expression, but what hooks terms the "seeds of negativity and domination" (58), sewn by the patriarchal world Nanny describes, do temporarily germinate into a disturbing public performance of masculinist domination over his wife. hooks prescribes a radical restructuring of academic, medical, and popular culture to address the latent impulse to dominate that she terms as almost unavoidable for men who come of age in an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (17). Hurston prefigures both hooks's deep engagement with the theoretics of love, and her concern with the way unjust social hierarchies affect its expression.

The novel takes seriously the Marcusean notion that the body is capable of an unrestrained and satisfying Erotic relationship with the world, the self, and other people in adulthood. Whereas Marcuse locates polymorphous perversity in the shadowy realm of infancy (31), Hurston situates Janie's Erotic liberation at the age of sixteen, well within her mind's capacity to remember and strive to replicate the experience (10-11). After thinking "awhile" about her past, Janie purposely "decided

that her conscious life had commenced” after this event. The novel characterizes the next twenty-five years of Janie’s life as a deliberate attempt to recreate this moment of psychic transcendence and physical fulfillment through a succession of romantic relationships that find their problematic pinnacle in *Tea Cake*. This narrative device allows the novel not only to document Janie’s growing sense of self, but also to detail the myriad ways marriage and love become distorted by masculinist domination.

The pear-tree vision literalizes the polymorphous perversity possible through the liberation of Eros and crucially, also fictionally enacts a racially sensitive version of Marcuse’s insight into the sublimation and diminishment of Eros into a genitally centered heterosexuality poisoned by a hierarchical society. Janie’s experience under the pear tree fully engages her body’s polymorphous capacity to experience pleasure. Rather than submit to a hierarchical understanding of sensory perception that privileges the objective distance offered by sight or hearing, all of Janie’s senses blend into one another to produce delight. In fact, the distance between viewer/auditor and sensory stimuli is collapsed into a synaesthetic experience of orgasmic satisfaction. The problem is that Janie translates the remarkable love she feels for and through the natural world into a metaphor for a traditional, heterosexual “marriage.”⁸

This impulse is fully realized in her reading of the bees surrounding the blooming tree. The interaction between bee and bloom undoubtedly suggests sexual contact between a man and a woman. The bee is imagined as masculine, while the “thousand sister-calyxes” are termed feminine, corresponding to the bees’ actual function of pollinating the plant. The image of the “dust-bearing bee” sinking into “the thousand sister-calyxes” which “arch to meet the love embrace” is strongly sexualized, undoubtedly a metaphorical representation of sexual penetration, which culminates in an orgasmic “ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight.” Janie’s body responds sexually to the sensory explosion of the tree, feeling a “pain remorseless sweet” that leaves her “limp and languid.” The narration of the episode is in third person, but Janie’s thoughts and actions immediately after the event indicated that the exclamation “So this was a marriage!” is a reliable representation of her thoughts. Janie reduces the tree to one female body, her own, thinking that “she had glossy leaves and bursting buds” and immediately bemoaning that there were no “singing bees for her.” However, the tree is not one woman, leaves and buds are not sexual organs, and the bees are not one man. Similarly, the experience also included the sight of the pear tree, the smell of its blossoms, and the sound of its song: all crucial elements that are not easily reducible to sex. In fact, the vision is persistently communal: a throng of “visiting bees” meets the tree, and the single bee on which Janie focuses contacts multiple feminine “calyxes,” resulting in pleasure that engages the entire tree “from root to tiniest branch.” The interaction is egalitarian, with the bee bearing the “dust” of the feminine blooms before it enters the flower, and the complete submersion of the masculine bee into the embrace of the feminine blossom. Additionally, the tree is covered in a “snowy virginity of bloom” in which virginity is not a state of sexual innocence, but pure, unmediated pleasure and fertility undefiled by repressive sanctions on sexuality. Janie’s hermeneutics of marriage diminish this vision of compounded sensory pleasure and satisfaction into a marital paradigm.

The consequences of Janie’s kiss with Johnny Taylor immediately following the vision succinctly preview how heterosexual relationships between African Americans in a sexist and racist society are unable to reliably satisfy and delight Janie’s body as her experience under the pear tree did. Repeatedly in her interactions with men, Janie’s optimism about heterosexual love’s power to provide pleasure will be disappointed by the intrusion of social hierarchies. Johnny Taylor is the first iteration of this pattern.

While looking down the road, she sees a “shiftless” acquaintance approaching. Janie’s previous sensory acuity is complicated by her newfound quest to satisfy her sexual desire: “Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes” (11). The catalyst of the vision, “pollen,” obscures Johnny’s class status: he is still wearing rags, but she just doesn’t see them in her fervor to find “a bee for her bloom.” However, this optimistic erasure of class is almost immediately reinscribed by Nanny’s reaction to Janie’s newfound sexual precociousness. Nanny provides a politically sensitive account of African American gender politics that theorizes why heterosexual love will not reliably replicate the egalitarian relationship Janie wants.

Interestingly, Janie and Nanny both have the same reaction to Janie’s sexual awakening: a flight to marriage. Janie’s response stems from *ignorance* of the way racism and sexism can distort love, and Nanny’s from a painful and intimate *familiarity* with how sexual receptivity often translates into defilement from men white and black. Janie’s grandmother scolds her for kissing Johnny because Nanny’s experiences with institutionalized racism and pervasive misogyny teach her that for black women, erotic love is infused with shame, physical pain, and unsatisfying labor. Nanny’s life story exposes the sociohistorical factors that render black women particularly vulnerable to racist and sexist abuse, and casts that abuse as an inevitable consequence of falling in love. After bearing Janie’s mother (the result of her forced sexual availability to her white “Marse”), Nanny is beaten by the slaveowner’s wife. Nanny fears that the trauma of the beating along with her subsequent escape has been transferred to her daughter, Leafy, through her milk, telling Janie, “Ah don’t see how come mah milk didn’t kill mah chile, wid me so skeered and worried all de time” (17). This fear seems to be realized when Leafy herself is raped and disappears. However, as Nanny further explains her protective strategies for Janie, she reveals that she does not believe that racial and gender trauma are unavoidably passed on from mother to daughter, and that Janie can escape her mother’s and grandmother’s fate through acquiring money and avoiding love.

Nanny believes that sexual desire will render Janie vulnerable to becoming “a spit cup” for white and black men. For Nanny, sexual contact inescapably leads to sexual abuse, which she conflates with the imperative to work. She describes sexist oppression in terms of punishing physical labor, an unsurprising formulation considering her enslaved past. She disparages love as “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” (22). According to Nanny, rather than opening the body in a way that is pleasurable, sexual receptivity makes black women susceptible to a painful “prong” that traps them in an agonizing life of physical subjugation. Under this reasoning, it is preferable that Janie barely knows and harbors a visceral revulsion towards Logan Killicks, the man to whom Nanny marries her to. As she tells Janie, “ ’Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (14). With Logan’s “often-mentioned sixty acres” (20) and “de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks” (22), Nanny is sure that he will offer Janie the “high ground” (16) of safety from transgressive sexuality and escape from work. Nanny chooses Logan because she feels marriage to a rich man will shield Janie from both sexual availability and thankless labor.

Nanny poignantly describes the threats Janie needs protection from in terms of dehumanizing work: “De white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man to pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14). According to Nanny’s experience, racism manifests itself through passing a physical burden along a hierarchy organized by white privilege. This racist mandate between men also incorporates sexism, because black men pass the burden “down” the hierarchy

to black women. Under this system, the power to refuse to work is what separates humans from beasts of burden. Black women become mules if they cannot choose not to work, so according to Nanny, access to Logan's economic privilege through marriage will save Janie from dehumanization and abuse.⁹ She wants "fuh it tuh be different wid you," and she thinks that marriage to Logan will secure this "different" fate.

The reliability of Nanny's account of love is another place where the novel demonstrates a persistent ambivalence towards the ability of love to provide liberation. As Rachel DuPlessis argues, Nanny's analysis of and solution to the problem of

Tea Cake does provide Janie with real liberation from the type of class-based femininity that Joe Starks imposes upon her. However, he also replicates those same classist concerns in disturbing ways. Nanny ends up being both right and wrong in her fears about the interplay between sexual desire and the black female body.

Janie's sexuality is not devalued in the logic of the novel, though Janie comes to despise it. In fact, "Nanny is given a profound narrative and textual function by Hurston. She is the prophet—without honor perhaps, but serving the function of textual prophet. For Nanny's words are predictive and come true later in the novel" (DuPlessis 111). I agree with DuPlessis, to a point. Nanny does accurately predict that marriage, rather than being a utopian space immune from political hierarchies, is in fact susceptible to reinforcing the oppression of African American women. However, her characterization of love and sexual desire as an inevitable disaster is not supported by Janie's story arc. Tea Cake does provide Janie with real liberation from the type of class-based femininity that Joe Starks imposes upon her. However, he also replicates those same classist concerns in disturbing ways. Nanny ends up being both right and wrong in her fears about the interplay between sexual desire and the black female body.

Because Logan fails to provoke sensory pleasure or physical desire in Janie, he "desecrat[es] the pear tree" (13), making her willing to desert him and Nanny's protective mandate for Joe Starks and the promise of novelty and travel. Through Logan, Janie learns that the answer to her poignant question, "did marriage compel love like the sun the day?" (20) is no. Marital relationships do not replicate the rhythmic and sacred patterns of the natural world. Though Logan does not abuse or violate Janie, even his money proves no protection from unsatisfying labor, as his ominous purchase of a mule "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im" (26) implies. The threat of compulsive labor, along with Logan's overweight and aged body, make Joe's handsome appearance and a future of "reaping the benefits" (28) of his ambition appealing. Janie sees in Joe the potential for a partial, though flawed, re-creation of the pear tree. After meeting Joe for the first time, Janie realizes that "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (28). Though Janie realizes almost immediately that Joe is not the perfect embodiment of the pear tree, he is the path away from an unsatisfying marriage. Janie has experienced the dissatisfaction a loveless marriage brings, but still has not grasped what Nanny inadequately tried to impart to her: sexual pleasure can be poisoned by racism and sexism.

Janie's marriage to Joe causes her to again revise her understanding of how marriage, sexual desire, and Erotic satisfaction relate to one another. Janie is optimistic when leaving Logan for Joe that "from now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (31). Joe offers the sexual appeal that Logan lacked: sex with Joe transforms their bed

into a "daisy-field for her and Joe to play in." The image emphasizes the sensory pleasure and freedom that erotic desire can enable, and recalls the sexualized interaction between the bees and blossoms on the pear tree. The blooming daisies reinforce Janie's imaginary transformation into a blooming flower or tree when aroused and in love. She both luxuriates in the beauty of the flowers and is a flower in the daisy-field herself: the perfect complementary metaphor of romantic love and sensory pleasure. However, Joe's commitment to replicating white power structures leads him to import sexist expectations of Janie into their marriage that destroy their relationship.

Joe enacts an interracial sensitive version of the way class hierarchies infect marriage with unappealing labor and sexual dissatisfaction. Joe's unceasing aspiration to replicate white upper-class authority figures damages his connection to "the folk" and ultimately to his wife as well. Joe's role models for success come from the white world. Janie immediately notices the false connection between his black body and his white affectations: "He was a seal-brown color but he acted like Mr. Washburn" (26). Though Joe's racial identity prevents him from resembling Mr. Washburn physically, throughout his tenure in Eatonville, Joe does replicate the connotations of the white man's name. He whitewashes the town until everyone chafes from his hierarchical imperatives. Though Joe cannot similarly whitewash his black body, he can acquire material manifestations of class privilege that consciously evoke white authority figures familiar to the townspeople (44-45). Joe also insists that Janie conform to his idea of genteel femininity at the price of her ability to interact with the Eatonville residents.

Joe claims, in keeping with middle-class paternalist values, that "[Janie's] a woman and her place is in deh home" (41). His desire to embody authority in all aspects of his life, public and private, mandates that Janie *not* work outside the domestic sphere in order to bolster his pose of economic superiority, but ironically requires her *to work* in his store in a way that stifles her voice and body.¹⁰ He strictly polices her appearance and forbids her to join the townsfolk in conversation. The hypocrisy of Joe's mandate is staggering: he often participates in the storytelling with impunity. Joe's rules for Janie's behavior while she is working at his store show how economic hierarchies are expressed and reinforced along the axis of gender. His mandates stem from his insistence that Janie's body and mind be inaccessible and impenetrable to reinforce his conflated patriarchal and economic authority: "He didn't want her talking after such trashy people. 'You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks . . . Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' stability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in' " (50-51). Because Janie (and Joe) share a racial identification with the poorer Eatonville residents, Joe feels he must consistently emphasize her class difference, and in so doing reinforce his own mastery. "Mrs. Mayor Starks" is too good to speak with the townspeople because Mayor Starks is as well. Joe's logic reads poor people as trash, and talking with (*i.e.*, being Erotically receptive to) trash would make his wife trash as well. She should "treasure" the economic wealth Joe has amassed rather than the cultural richness of the Eatonville community. It is not the store itself that is deleterious to Janie, but the way Joe manipulates her presence in it. One could imagine a scenario in which Janie enjoys her time working at the store, if she were allowed to banter with the community that gathers at its porch steps. However, Joe's brand of dominance precludes this possibility.

Janie's response to Joe's verbal and physical abuse proves that masculinist domination provokes sensory detachment in women in a way that makes emotional and physical love impossible (67-68). Joe's patriarchal impulses devolve into an abusive misogyny ("He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it" [67]) that in turn precludes Janie's ability to relate to her husband physically

or psychically. Joe's blows leaves a "ringing sound in her ears," drowning out all other sound and forming an ugly inversion of the bees' "alto chant." She literally cannot hear him while he physically dominates her, and cannot authentically communicate with him while being emotionally dominated. She physically closes herself off by "press[ing] her teeth together and learn[ing] to hush." Again, physical closure is accompanied by emotional withdrawal: her mouth is closed and she will not speak. Janie's impenetrability extends to the couple's heretofore open and pleasurable sexual relationship. Because she is no longer "petal-open" with Joe, "[t]he spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. . . . The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in."

Janie's mental landscape is as closed off and inaccessible as her physical body, initially even to herself: 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." Her realization that "she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (68) implies that Joe's abuse has created an inner sanctuary where "now" her memory of Erotic fulfillment can endure while she performs submission for her husband and the surrounding community. Janie's refusal to "mix" the two speaks to her attempt to keep her vision pure and safe in spite of the inauthentic self she must present to avoid abuse. Though this psychic division is drastic and unfortunate, it also creates a place for Janie to imagine a hopeful future where an ideal relationship can be established.¹¹

Their Eyes does not present Janie's fragmented relationship with Joe as the inevitable result of heterosexual love, as Nanny might. Janie's analysis of her disconnection from Joe, the wrong man, leads her to privately imagine a romantic relationship with the right man. Her ability to maintain and nurture her interior vision supports the Marcusean notion that the psyche is a place where the memory of and desire for liberation can be preserved. Janie "went inside" her own mind and sees "her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered." Janie realizes that she has elevated Joe in her mind, and it is only by the destruction of the image that she is able to perceive its artificiality: "But looking at [the ruins of her image of Joe] she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams" (67-68). Joe has unwittingly precipitated the destruction of his authority. Benjamin argues that in a dominative relationship, men are unable to find stable and lasting confirmation of their unjust authority because their power relies on devaluing the other. By enforcing domination, Joe has exposed the inherent fabrication of his elevated "cityfied" status, and caused his own devaluation within his wife's mind, as Janie recognizes that neither his officially sanctioned mayoral authority nor his economic success requires her submission. The apparently contradictory formulation of a "flesh and blood figure" residing in "dreams" indicates that Janie is anticipating a love that will effectively dismantle the domination Joe enacts. Janie finds a powerful model of resistance and optimism when she speaks of "saving her feelings for some man she had never seen."

It is undeniable, however, that Janie still figures a heterosexual relationship as necessary to recreate her earlier, Erotically ideal experience under the pear tree. When she realizes that her mistake has been to "drape her dreams" over a dehumanized idol rather than a "flesh and blood figure," the implication is that such a human figure, explicitly gendered male, would be necessary to realize those dreams. Her metaphor of "dusting pollen over her man" operates in the same way. She can only imagine herself as a blooming flower if there is a man to receive her pollen, reinforcing traditional reproduction-centered feminine roles. *Their Eyes* would be a very different novel if Janie and Tea Cake's relationship unproblematically modeled an ideal love free from sexism. However, despite his many positive attributes and profound dissimilarity from Joe, Tea Cake also uses violence against Janie to shore up his racial and class anxieties.

I have been arguing that Janie's first two marriages fail to satisfy her desire for emotional and physical satisfaction because neither marriage itself nor physical attraction is a reliable indicator of a potential partner's ability to maintain Benjamin's model of intersubjectivity, or in the novel's language, to replicate the pear tree. Tea Cake Woods, Janie's third husband, with his physical beauty, playfulness, and commitment to respectfully engaging Janie as an equal subject, seems to replicate and reactivate her experience of complete Erotic fulfillment. However, their relationship nevertheless ends in violence and dissolution. According to the novel, the psyche is indeed capable of preserving a utopian vision of bodily liberation, as Marcuse suggests. The novel suggests that, even this potentially liberatory space is not strong enough to consistently block out the racist hierarchies that attenuate self-sufficiency and lead to sexist assumptions that legitimate male domination.

Janie and Tea Cake's relationship has been a lightning rod for critical analysis since the novel's rediscovery in the early 1970s. Recent scholarship on their relationship attempts to compensate for earlier readings that idealize Tea Cake and Janie's marriage. These accounts, in their attempt to stress the problematic elements of Tea Cake's character, can at times underplay the undeniably utopian elements of Tea Cake that the novel insists upon, and therefore offer a reading that is as imbalanced as those that idealize him. Shawn Miller and Todd McGowan both attempt to negotiate the ambivalence I also feel is present in Janie and Tea Cake's relationship as well as the novel's larger politics, but in so doing blame love itself, rather than Tea Cake and his particular sociohistorical subject position, for his dominative outbursts. In "Some Other Way to Try: From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Miller contends that *Their Eyes* is ultimately an indictment of any man's capacity to liberate Janie. In order to equalize the three marriages and argue that Janie engages in "covert resistance" (85) to patriarchy by consciously submitting to Tea Cake, Miller is forced to make the dubious claim that Tea Cake "treat[s] Janie the same way" (83) as her earlier husbands. Such an argument ignores the distinction, among others, between oppressive and dehumanizing work in the store and satisfying and communal work/play on the muck, an improvement in Janie's situation that I believe the novel works carefully to establish and endorse. Though Tea Cake is not "Janie's liberator," his style of love and the intersubjectivity it invites makes Janie's memory of Erotic liberation, at least temporarily, a possibility. Todd McGowan, in his essay "Liberation and Domination: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Evolution of Capitalism," briefly acknowledges Tea Cake's obvious and legitimate superiority to Janie's previous husbands. However, he argues that for all Tea Cake's virtues, his domination of Janie makes her subjectivity impossible while he is alive. The essay suggests Janie's murder of Tea Cake is the "key moment of the novel" (111), because this act of self-defense indicates that Janie, even if only momentarily, resists the insidious domination that characterizes her marriage.¹² Under McGowan's analysis, Janie's love for Tea Cake is precisely the means by which she endorses her own subjugation. Though I agree with McGowan's identification of Tea Cake's rabid rage as an explicit manifestation of the patriarchal domination lurking in his character implicitly, the essay's exclusive focus on an economic critique leads McGowan to categorically mistrust the positive aspects of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, using a Lacanian vocabulary that understands love as "the primary manifestation" of "pathological narcissism" (120). Such a reading fails to fully account for the novel's ambivalence towards Tea Cake and his love for Janie. It is a socially mandated racial hatred that infects Tea Cake's psyche to the degree that he feels compelled to demonstrate power along the axis of gender: manifesting itself as a brutal beating of Janie. That is, it is not love itself that is pathological in the novel, but rather the racist fictions that Tea Cake imports that in turn activate a latent sexism that causes him to abuse Janie.

Tea Cake's character is refreshingly and remarkably distinct from those of Logan and Joe. Rather than revolting or stifling her, Tea Cake loves Janie by and through encouraging her equal participation in play and pleasure. Especially in their early interactions, Tea Cake piece by piece reassembles the play, pleasure, and beauty that Janie remembers from the space under the pear tree. Almost immediately after they meet, Janie is sharing in his laughter through wordplay that is an inverse reflection of "playin' de dozens" with Joe (75). That verbal interaction was designed to wound, while her banter with Tea Cake brings delight to them both. Tea Cake permits and normalizes Janie's human desire for pleasurable interaction: "Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (91-92). Tea Cake's desire for mutual enjoyment through play recalls the "natural" space of pleasure and satisfaction Janie discovered under the pear tree. His commitment to pleasure and leisure also replicates the time Janie would "steal from her chores" (10) to enjoy the bees and blossoms as a young girl. During their courtship, Tea Cake encourages her to play checkers, fish, learn to shoot a rifle, attend the Eatonville picnics, and most significantly, to reclaim the self-confidence that Joe worked to destroy through isolation and insults.

Tea Cake does not value Janie's beauty for how it can benefit him in the socio-political realm, but for the sensory pleasure it affords him, and more importantly, Janie herself. One evening, Janie awakes to find Tea Cake combing her hair and "scratching the dandruff from her scalp," an experience made possible by Tea Cake's desire to satisfy himself by and through providing pleasure to Janie. Whereas Joe prohibited the community, and by extension Janie, from enjoying her hair, Tea Cake exclaims, "Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair. It's so pretty. It feels jus lak underneath uh dove's wing next to mah face." Janie's response suggests that Joe's appropriation of her beauty for his own devices has alienated her from her body, saying her hair "tain't never gimme no thrill." By scratching the skin from her scalp, Tea Cake shows how her hair can give her a sensual "thrill," and thereby argues she should take pleasure in her own body, as she did during her sexual awakening at sixteen. Instead of behaving as if her beauty is a dangerous commodity that must be carefully controlled, he wants Janie to reclaim her body's intrinsic power and capacity for autoerotic fulfillment, dandruff and all: "You'se got de world in uh jug and make out you don't know it. But Ah'm glad tuh be de one tuh tell yuh" (99).

Additionally, Tea Cake teaches her to *speak* again by demanding that she clearly and honestly admit her feelings for him and thereby express the sexual desire that Nanny attempted to stifle and Logan and Joe jealously guarded. After they have made love for the first time, Janie still doubts his intentions, and expresses her insecurity through verbalizing the polar opposite of her true feelings by suggesting that she wouldn't mind if he went to the town picnic with someone else (104). Janie's deepest fear is, of course, that there *is* or will be someone else Tea Cake will love instead of her. Tea Cake understands this latent meaning, and honestly responds: "Naw, it ain't all right wid you. If it was you wouldn't be sayin' dat. Have de nerve tuh say whut you mean" (104). After this direct challenge, Janie admits that she "wants tuh go wid you real bad." Tea Cake recognizes Janie's insecurity, but will not let her withdraw from him because of her fear of rejection. When Janie effuses to Pheoby that Tea Cake "done taught her the maiden language all over again" (109), she in some sense means that he has reactivated her ability to speak honestly and openly—a type of discursive purity that paradoxically arises from a frank ownership of sexual desire.

Though Tea Cake is able to reassure Janie that she is beautiful enough and young enough to attract him, Tea Cake has his own underlying insecurities based on his inferior class status. Tea Cake boastfully defends his masculinity, preempting external critiques of his lower-class background in order to stabilize his self-conception. He compensates for his perceived inadequacies at the level of class by casting them as strengths in the realm of gender. He proudly gloats, "Ah don't need no pocket-full uh

money to ride de train lak uh woman. When Ah takes uh notion Ah rides anyhow—money or no money” (93). Tea Cake subverts the dominant power structure twice over. Not only does he transcend conventional regulations by refusing to play by the rules, but he also codes these regulations as feminine. His poverty therefore bolsters his masculinity, preemptively thwarting the community’s derision that “he ain’t got uh dime tuh cry” (107). Tea Cake performs similar rhetorical gymnastics in his courtship of Janie. Assuring her he could acquire a battleship if she asked him for one, he brags, “Ah shucks, dem Admirals is always ole folks. Can’t no ole man stop me from gittin’ no ship for yuh if dat’s what you want. Ah’d get dat ship out from under him so slick till he’d be walkin’ on de water lak ole Peter befo’ he knowed it” (97). Whereas Joe appropriated class status symbols to compensate for racial inferiority, Tea Cake takes the opposite strategy to achieve the same goal. Tea Cake repudiates (rather than emulates) the patriarchal “ole folks” who dominate the capitalist system in order to assert his masculinity. Tea Cake does not believe himself disadvantaged or subordinate because he is poor, but he cannot let anyone else believe it either.

Both Janie’s and Tea Cake’s latent insecurities are revealed and tested when Tea Cake steals two hundred dollars of Janie’s money and briefly disappears in the early days of their marriage. Janie’s punishing fantasies during Tea Cake’s absence reveal how the possibility of love’s inefficacy is *also* preserved in her psyche, along with her utopian memory of Erotic fulfillment: she repeats to herself almost verbatim the insults about her aging body originally voiced by Joe. When Tea Cake explains his absence, his narrative reveals his own class-based insecurities, as he honestly reveals his reservations about including Janie (“Ah was skeered. Too skeered Ah might lose yuh”). The negotiation between the two ends with Janie asserting her desire to “partake wid everything” and Tea Cake responding to her receptivity by telling her “all about mahself,” flaws included. This conversation seems to fictionally enact the model of mutual recognition proposed by Benjamin. The closing lines of chapter thirteen represent the complicated balance between subject and subject Benjamin describes: “He drifted off into sleep and Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (122). The violent division Janie imposed on her psyche while living under Joe’s domination has been healed. Her soul now resides in the space of her relationship with Tea Cake. The autonomous self that was hidden from Joe while Janie publicly played the role of dutiful wife is now being “crushed” through her love for Tea Cake. Though the formulation seems violent and oppressive, the metaphor indicates that she has finally achieved the experience of Erotic satisfaction earlier modeled in the pear-tree vision. As Benjamin proposes, authentic selfhood is possible only by admitting dependency, not denying it: this is Hurston’s textual representation of “a great and selfless love.” However, though Janie and Tea Cake are here able to maintain the precarious balance of mutual subjectivity despite gendered and class-based insecurities, the novel shows that racial hierarchies produce an anxiety so intense and profound that these insecurities violently resurface.

Tea Cake is aggressive with Janie three times during their relationship. I would like to draw a sharp distinction between the first episode and the two that follow, resisting the impulse to monolithically categorize any aggressive interaction between the two as either excusable or damaging.¹³ The first instance, I suggest, is another version of the work Janie and Tea Cake do to resolve the missing two hundred dollars. Janie’s jealousy over Tea Cake’s flirtation with another muck worker, Nunkie, leads to mutual aggression and then reaffirmation of their commitment (130-32). After Janie apprehends Nunkie and Tea Cake “struggling” in the field, the two argue at home. Janie angrily accuses Tea Cake of “messin’ round,” and he aggressively asserts his innocence. Their verbal argument quickly escalates into a physical altercation, which seamlessly turns into lovemaking. The next morning, they verbally reassert their love for one another. Though this episode includes physical violence, it is

clearly distinct from the passage I am about to analyze in that Janie strongly asserts her (justified) anger about Nunkie and uses it to communicate to Tea Cake what is and is not acceptable behavior from him.¹⁴ The evolution of the physical fight into sexual reconnection physically enacts productive conflict negotiation between subjects. Therefore, whereas Susan Meisenhelder uses Janie's justified anger during this episode as proof that she probably reacted similarly when Tea Cake later beats her as a message to the Turners (86-87), I think that the differences between the episodes are more striking. Tea Cake angered Janie because he responded to Nunkie's sexual attraction to him; in the next instance of physical violence between the two, Mrs. Turner has profoundly threatened (rather than reinforced) Tea Cake's masculinity, and his response is physical and aggressive, not verbal and defensive.

Tea Cake beats Janie after overhearing Mrs. Turner's disparaging remarks about him because he fears that his inadequacy, according to racial hierarchies, threatens their marriage and his masculinity. Though Tea Cake tries to defend his lower-class status through public demonstrations of largesse, he cannot escape the racial hierarchy that terms blackness an indisputable marker of subjugation. Mrs. Turner, who has thoroughly internalized white power structures that situate beauty only in white or light-skinned bodies, identifies Janie's lighter skin as a sign of physical and social superiority. Mrs. Turner questions Janie's affections for Tea Cake because of the ugliness she equates with his darker skin, a comment that translates into a threat to Tea Cake's social power and masculine appeal. Mrs. Turner assumes that Tea Cake "musta had plenty money when y'all got married" (134) to attract Janie and encourages her to "class off" (135) rather than associate with "common niggers" (134). The class denunciation that Tea Cake overhears is collapsed into the physical markers of his race, making legitimate and sustainable victory over the "ole folks" a biological impossibility outside the realm of his tall tales. The words "money," "class," and "common" all suggest that Tea Cake's inferior class status, inextricably tied to and inseparable from his unmistakable blackness, will ultimately cause him to lose Janie and his masculine identity, and he reacts with physical aggression.

As Joe demonstrated, gender violence is the default masculinist response to healing a wounded subjectivity. When the lighter-skinned and therefore socially superior brother of Mrs. Turner visits the muck, Tea Cake "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 he was boss" (140). Tea Cake's reaction to "the awful fear" that he will lose Janie leads him to enact the one hierarchical role in which his masculine power is secure. It is important that Tea Cake doesn't beat Janie until she loses hearing in her ears, as Joe did, but the unfair motivation behind the abuse recalls Joe's unwarranted attack for a dinner that didn't turn out just so. Janie doesn't deserve even "two or three face slaps" for another woman's colorist prejudice. The omniscient narrator and Tea Cake himself both explain this violent outburst as a way for Tea Cake to show the community in general and "dem Turners" in particular "who is boss" (141). Tea Cake's violence temporarily transforms the structure of his marriage from work and play between equals to domination by a male "boss," a word that inevitably recalls the employer/employee relationship Joe and Janie endured.

Tea Cake's commitment to publicizing the episode is another disturbing echo of Joe and Janie's dynamic. In opposition to the Nunkie fight, this conflict is about what Tea Cake can "show" (141) to the Turners and the other workers on the muck, not what he can tell Janie about his devotion to her. "Everybody," except, significantly, Janie, is talking about Tea Cake's "face slaps" the next day. The "envy" generated by Tea Cake and Janie's reconciliation can only logically be generated by a widely visible performance of Tea Cake's "pet[ting] and pamper[ing]" and the "helpless way Janie hung on him" in response. They presumably did not engage in similar public demonstrations of love after their altercation about Nunkie; they were presumably

too busy making love and talking to each other. If only temporarily, Janie and Tea Cake's marriage has moved from the bedroom to the parlor.

Refuting a reading that suggests Janie's relationship with Tea Cake simply and consistently enables a journey to self-actualization, Janie wordlessly succumbs to this beating. Whereas Janie speaks for herself forcefully in the fight with Nunkie in the chapter relating the fight, which also includes an account of Tea Cake and his male friends destroying the Turner family's restaurant, Janie's voice, thoughts, and actions are entirely missing. The heroine's absence from the narrative starkly demonstrates how completely Janie's voice has been stifled by Tea Cake's unfair physical punishment.¹⁵

The inclusion of this disturbing episode reveals an ambivalence about Tea Cake and Janie's relationship that Janie as a narrator does not share. Her "deep and abiding love" for Tea Cake does not waver throughout the rest of the narrative, even when Tea Cake's rabies infection manifests itself as a return of the jealousy inspired by Mrs. Turner. However, the resurfacing of Tea Cake's unfounded accusations during his illness (acquired by heroically saving Janie's life) cannot but recall his susceptibility to the social fictions produced by white society, and thereby at the very least suggests that racism and the sexism it provokes in the novel's black men is in some way a contributing factor to the destruction of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship.

The novel's ambivalence about the efficacy of Eros in the lives of African Americans produces the novel's equally ambivalent treatment of Tea Cake's death: *Their Eyes* employs a naturalistic *canis ex machina* to dispose of Tea Cake (as Nathan Grant argues, Tea Cake is for all purposes murdered by the dog, not Janie). Pfister reads the novel's title as indicative of an apolitical swerve in Hurston's narrative strategy: "Finally, Hurston's heroine's lover . . . does not die as a result of the poison of racism (as he might have in a Wright novel), but because he is bitten by a rabid dog. While Hurston wants her readers' eyes to be watching a God whose actions cannot be altered (God is the author of the hurricane's devastation), Wright wants his readers to train their sights on something humans made and can unmake" (623). However, both Grant and Pfister downplay the particularly relevant manifestation of Tea Cake's rabies-induced madness and the fact that Janie shoots her husband in self-defense. The passive determinism of the novel's title is tempered by Tea Cake's heroic encounter with the dog and Janie's decision to protect herself, even if that means losing the love of her life. Tea Cake's ravings while ill encapsulate both the best and worst of his behavior in the novel. In practically the same breath he tells Janie she "must let the flowers see [her] sometimes," revealing his willingness to encourage Janie's quest for sensual pleasure in nature, and ferociously accuses her of infidelity with Mrs. Turner's brother, demanding she must "stay where Ah kin see yuh" (172). Does Tea Cake want Janie to be free to see and be seen by the world, or to be confined to the limits of his jealous gaze? The novel, though not Janie, understands the answer to be both.

During her marriages to Logan and Joe, Janie's interiority is a safe space from each man's domination while she waits for a love that replicates the Marcusean memory of the pear tree and its bodily pleasures. The novel suggests that an equitable intersubjective relationship enables the reenactment of a Marcusean memory of polymorphous perversity. Janie experienced autoerotic sensory satisfaction under the pear tree, and Tea Cake explicitly reminds her of, and in so doing reactivates, her ability to take pleasure in herself. He encourages her to reclaim the self-expression that Joe stifled. Janie's descriptions of Tea Cake explicitly recall the language of the pear tree: "he looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (101), suggesting that she succeeds in doing what Marcuse theorizes: Janie reactivates her experience of unmediated sensory pleasure by and through a love relationship with another person. However, the end of the novel suggests that her mind is in fact the *only* place where such a love can endure. The first

chapter of the novel alerts the reader to be wary of the truth-value of Janie's memory: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (1). This caveat informs the reader that Janie's "dream" of complete Erotic fulfillment under the pear tree will guide her decisions throughout her life. Structuring a life around a dream, especially a dream as utopian as the pear-tree vision, is an action Marcuse would applaud. However, the first line of the characterization is equally important for understanding Janie's editorial tendencies.

In order to honor and preserve the possibility of re-creating the pear tree, Janie will manipulate Tea Cake's complicated character to shape a story that fits the dream.¹⁶ At the novel's conclusion, Janie tells *herself* a story about Tea Cake that downplays and ultimately abandons his susceptibility to violent jealousy. After talking to Pheoby, Janie retreats to her room and thinks about:

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. . . . [T]hen 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. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (183-84)

Here Janie, but not the text, excises the unpleasant aspects of Tea Cake and only retains the version of her husband that reflects the pear-tree vision. The dismissal of the highly racialized space of the courthouse, one of the few moments in the text where white power structures are explicitly recognized, suggests that she is consciously creating a place where whiteness can no longer intrude on and infect Tea Cake's love for her. However, this separation can only be accomplished through self-imposed isolation. In order to jettison the darker aspects of their relationship, she has to banish the "song of the sigh . . . out of the window" while she remains inside with her fantasy of Tea Cake. The function of memory is highly ambivalent in this passage. Though the "kiss of [Tea Cake's] memory" suggests erotic touch and intimacy, it is *only* a memory that necessarily excludes the material sensuality and physical contact so critical to the pear tree vision. Janie can only see the "pictures of love and light" made by Tea Cake's memory "against the wall" of her room. Similarly, in order to preserve this version of Tea Cake, Janie must "pull in her horizon," and foreclose any other forays into the outside world where new bonds could be formed.

Though there is warmth, comfort, and "life" in the horizon she gathers about her, her soul must "come in" from the intersubjective space of her relationship with Tea Cake, and again enact (falsely, according to Benjamin) an autonomous self. Kathleen Davies characterizes *Their Eyes* as "an incredibly affirmative novel [that] . . . portrays a black woman's poignant yearning to merge her quest for liberation with that of the black man, while maintaining her right to live without his abuse" (157). I suggest that *Their Eyes* is questioning whether such a merger is even possible in Jim Crow America. The novel's hybridity of narrative style, constantly vacillating between Janie's direct narration and the narrator's omniscient, third-person voice is another version of Gatesian Signifyin(g) that keeps this question in the foreground of *Their Eyes*—Hurston is gently but persistently signifyin(g) on Janie's editorializing of Tea Cake.¹⁸ Though Janie might throw the gun and the bloody body out the window, Hurston has kept it in her novel. Why does Hurston not allow Tea Cake to live and grapple with his propensity for gender violence, and therefore offer an unambiguous affirmation of equitable and liberated love between African Americans? Or, why is Janie compelled to definitively respond to his attacks only after she has been shot at twice?

Hurston's influence over other African American writers, particularly women, is often cited in matters of voice, feminist or womanist empowerment, and the inclusion of traditional folk narratives. An equally important literary inheritance from Hurston is precisely this problem of love: why does Eros become infected with, and sometimes overtaken by violence? How does the legacy of slavery and institutional racism in America provoke and perpetuate this process? Can a Marcusean conception of memory as a repository for liberatory physical and psychic receptivity and pleasure counteract the gender oppression detailed by Benjamin coupled with the racial fictions exposed by Hurston? These questions are echoed and complicated by postwar novelists often linked to Hurston, such as Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day* (1988). However, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) as well as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) (along with *Jazz* [1992] and *Paradise* [1998]) are also deeply engaged with the lethal fusion of love and aggression. More recent texts like Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer-Prize winning *The Known World* (2004) and Susan Straight's *A Million Nightingales* (2006) also look at love and violence through the prism of American slavery. Additionally, these novels often posit memories of bodily pleasure and plenitude as possible modes of resistance to these destructive "nuances," including pear tree visions of their own. Hurston's identification of and serious struggle with the problem of love in a racist world offers novelists and scholars a new way of exploring, critiquing, and ultimately transforming racial politics in America.

Notes

1. Kubitschek and Robert Hemenway (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* [Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980]) offer early and influential versions of the novel as a quest, and Nellie McKay (" 'Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography" in *Awkward* 51-70) takes this by now standard interpretation and enriches it by adding the element of black female autobiography. As an example of how reading the novel as a quest tends to elevate Tea Cake by design, Kubitschek, in an archetypal reading of the novel, argues that Janie develops a more sophisticated definition of love through the course of the novel, reclaiming the "natural and transcendent meaning" of Erotic liberation when she compares her life to a tree in bloom. Her analysis of *Their Eyes* as an unproblematic *Küntslerroman*, however, precludes a sophisticated analysis of Tea Cake's dominative tendencies, and leads Kubitschek to claim that "only a manifestation of natural power, the hurricane, ever dominates Janie" (109). Acknowledging that the novel's treatment of Janie's romantic life does not fit neatly with an exclusive focus on her life as an undeterred evolution from immaturity to artistic mastery allows for a reading of Tea Cake and Janie's relationship more sensitive to the text's ambiguities. For representative readings of Tea Cake's relatively unproblematic status as the novel's hero, see Dolan Hubbard, "Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, Gloria L. Cronin, ed. (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 100-14; Robert Bone, "Ships at a Distance: The Meaning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Bloom* 15-20; and Roger Rosenblatt, "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Bloom* 29-33.

2. See my discussion of McGowan and Miller below, as well as Grant, for reactive readings of Tea Cake that emphasize his similarities to Logan and Joe.

3. Hurston stridently and repeatedly denied that her fiction was political or anti-racist in composition or purpose, counting herself separate from the ranks of the "tragically colored." However, I, along with most of the critics cited below, do read the novel as responsive to the racist Jim Crow environment surrounding the characters. In other words, there is nothing "tragic" about the state of being black, but tragedies caused solely by racist politics were nonetheless endured by the African American population.

4. Boyd makes a similar argument, suggesting that "Hurston will not let Tea Cake get away with 'whipping' Janie, even if Janie will" (303-04).

5. Kodat complicates Gates's argument about Hurston's celebration of the African American oral tradition in the novel, suggesting that the text represents her "marriage" to the folk as fraught by the specter of misogyny, which Kodat reads as represented by "Tea Cake's wounding bite": "Far from representing a happy marriage of equals between the folk and the feminist, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates the many impediments to such a marriage embedded in a largely patriarchal oral narrative tradition and

the difficulty faced by women seeking to enter and find voice within that tradition" (321). I will offer a similar reading of the limitations of Janie's literal marriage to Tea Cake, and suggest that Hurston's "voice" at times contradicts her main character's pronouncements in the service of exposing the patriarchal impulses that lurk in "Tea Cake's bite."

6. I would like to emphasize the distinction between "Erotic" and "erotic." Though Janie's experience under the pear tree is a representation of the Erotic pleasure of connection with the self and the outer world that includes sexual fulfillment, Janie understands the pleasure of Erotic connection as only and exclusively a preview of an erotic (sexual) relationship.

7. Benjamin is responding to the foundational work of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein concerning patriarchal social organization and psychic formation. I focus on *Bonds of Love* because it offers a convincing theoretical and practical paradigm for resistance to the dominant/submissive dialectic.

8. Pines's study of "the cultural imperative to marry" in modernist novels also identifies the persistence of Janie's desire for matrimony despite warnings from Nanny and multiple unsuccessful unions. However, she does not fully explore the racial and gendered mechanisms that destroy Janie's romantic fantasies.

9. The truth and the limits of Nanny's parable are explored later in the novel through the fate of Matt Bonner's mule (chapter 6). The mistreated animal is excused from its mandate to work by Joe Starks's money, which according to Nanny's logic should also elevate it from its dehumanized and devalued state. However, the mule remains a mule and serves as a metonymic symbol of Janie's exclusion from the community through Joe's refusal to let her participate in joking about the mule or attending its funeral.

10. In this reading I concur with Carla Kaplan (*The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* [New York: Oxford UP, 1996], 103), who calls into question previous readings that understand the book as a fictional account of a black woman's acquisition of voice, arguing quite convincingly that Janie already has the self-possession to argue with her Nanny and stand up to Logan. This reading makes Joe's stifling of her strong sense of self even more upsetting.

11. Johnson also recognizes the centrality of this moment. According to Johnson, Hurston's representation of Janie's response to Joe's domination enacts the relationship between the ability to use imagistic language and the ability to articulate as a subject. Though my methodology is different, Johnson and I arrive at a similar place: Janie's creation of a psychic space where Joe's domination is neutralized allows her to maintain her dream of a satisfying relationship, and to articulate her newfound sense of Joe's impotence in an insult so profound that, as Johnson puts it, "in a sense, he dies of it" (162).

12. Rather than argue, as Miller does, that Janie and Tea Cake's entire marriage is governed by Janie's strategic use of dependency and submission to exercise power over her husband, McGowan reads Janie's capitulation as indicative of love's devious compliance with cultural manifestations of domination. McGowan carefully traces the different types of submission Janie undergoes in her succession of marriages, and argues each relationship mirrors the oppression endemic to the historical evolution of capitalism. Tea Cake therefore represents the insidious form of late capitalism where the subject (Janie) is personally invested in that which dominates them.

13. See Meisenhelder for the former and Maureen McKnight, "Discerning Nostalgia in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 2007): 83-115 for the latter.

14. The novel allows for the presence of pain and/or violence within the scope of intense feeling. One thinks of Janie's "pain remorseless sweet" under the pear tree, or Tea Cake "cold-cock[ing]" a look at Janie (91) when they first meet, his eyelashes like "drawn scimitars" (92). However, in all of these examples, pain is located firmly within a relational matrix that encourages Janie's physical and emotional development. As Tea Cake himself will admit, the beating that he administers in response to Mrs. Turner's remarks have nothing to do with Janie, and are about showing the community who is "boss."

15. Walker offers an interesting account that collapses the narrative distance between Hurston and Janie at the moment of the murder, suggesting that the author lets Janie kill Tea Cake to vindicate her character's humiliation at the unwarranted beating (305-06). Though Hurston does place the weapon in her character's hands, I do feel it is significant that Janie never expresses anger or resentment over the episode.

16. Davies suggests that Janie and Hurston are, in the language of Gates, "signifyin'" in the post-mortem depiction of Tea Cake. For Davies, Janie's "suspiciously maudlin discourse" immediately following Tea Cake's death implies that she is consciously burying the dominating characteristics of her husband in order to create an "artistic vision" of their life together. Though this reading provides an intriguing framework to interpret the opening and closing passages of the novel, Hurston's overall treatment of Janie's dreams and memories is more ambivalent.

17 The novel's slippage between first- and third-person narration has attracted much critical attention and politically charged debate. See Awkward and Mary Helen Washington's foreword to *Their Eyes* for a good overview of the scholarship on this issue.

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