Racine, Maria J. "Voice and interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God.' (Black Women's Culture Issue)." *African American Review* 28.2 (1994): 283+. *Student Edition*. Web. 28 Feb. 2013.

Consistent critical attention focuses on Janie's voice because, as Michael Awkward has stated, "Perhaps the dominant image in the recent creative and critical writing of Afro-American women [is] the struggle to make articulate a heretofore repressed and silenced black female's story and voice" (Inspiriting 1). For women, silence has crossed every racial and cultural boundary; and silence characterizes Hurston's Janie, who spends the first forty years of her life learning to achieve her voice against the opposition of men and, sometimes, against the opposition of other women. But in the end, she succeeds where many have failed. In her essay "What Do Feminist Critics Want?" Sandra Gilbert says, "Like Wagner's master singers, ...men had the power of speech, [but]...women, like Emily Dickinson, knew that they had, or were supposed to have, the graceful obligation of silence" (34). It is important to question the internal consciousness of each character in Their Eyes, including the purpose behind the male voices, and to examine the ways in which the male voices affect Janie's.

The term interiority refers to an author's relatively full and non-judgmental rendering of the internal consciousness of a character. Hurston, as an informing narrative consciousness, uses interiority in Their Eyes to characterize those who are silent and lack their own voices, as well as to add dimension to those with voices. Throughout the course of the novel, the evolution of the male voices seems to parallel the evolution of Janie's: Increasingly, Janie's men have voices, and her voice develops as her relationships improve. It also seems that Janie's consciousness and the narrator's consciousness fuse into one, which may explain the reason that the reader does not hear Janie's speech at a crucial moment near the end of the novel, during her trial for murder. If the narrator's voice and Janie's voice have melded throughout the novel, then perhaps there is no need for Janie to speak to the reader; her voice is evident through the narrator's (Du Plessis 107-08). Hurston creates this "speakerly text" by fusing "black poetic diction" with "a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition" (Gates 174).

Furthermore, passion and control directly correspond to voice and silence as expressed by the four influential men in Janie's Life, three of whom are her husbands. Hurston effectively integrates the men and women of Their Eyes, paralleling Janie's personal growth and achievement to these men, of whom Killicks and Starks represent control and Tea Cake Woods and Johnny Taylor represent passion (Marks 152). John Callahan adds,

In form and theme, Their Eyes pursues the evolving possibilities of intimacy and autonomy. The novel presents Janie's experience and perspective as realities perhaps not yet realized but aspired to on some submerged level of feeling, thought, and speech by black women, women generally, and--such is Hurston's imaginative power--by men as well. (126-27)

To the reader's knowledge, Johnny Taylor says nothing to assist Janie in protesting her marriage to Logan Killicks. He is a teenager Like Janie, and he kisses her (Their Eyes 10). With some qualities similar to Tea Cake's, Taylor symbolizes playfulness, youth, love, innocence, and passion. And when Janie's grandmother spies the young couple kissing, Janie finds herself betrothed to Logan Killicks. Although the kiss ends Taylor's overt role in the novel, and although Janie is unaware of it at the time, Taylor has become a catalyst in her life: "She thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate" (Their Eyes 10). It seems unlikely that an elderly, feeble grandmother could have forced a willful granddaughter into marriage--at least not one with a voice of her own. But both Janie and Taylor are truly voiceless; they live without substantive control over their actions and destinies. Taylor is a minor character, and thus a lesser defined mirror of Janie, whereas Logan Killicks, by virtue of his labor, is a propertied man who has achieved material success and can provide his young bride "protection" and financial security. However, even though he is many years his wife's senior, he too is a man without a voice, except when it is rendered through Hurston, as narrator. In fact, his material success contrasts with his emotional inadequacy, which may be judged through his inability to express his hurt or disappointment to a sixteen-year-old girl.

Killicks and Janie speak peripherally to one another. Their conversations, in fact, are not intimate in either a loving or heated fashion. Instead, their discussions focus on daily living activities like chopping wood and peeling potatoes (25-26). Hurston portrays two people, different in their desires and concerns, unable to express true emotion or passion. For Janie, a teenage girl, passion is a dream; it is fantasy. For Logan, passion has been suppressed in the drive for security that Janie does not understand. Nanny, however, does. Helping her granddaughter to understand the reason that she has chosen Killicks to be Janie's husband, she says that white men subjugate black men, who, in turn, subjugate black women--thus characterizing them as mules (Their Eyes 14).

This metaphor originates from a folk tale, "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest," that Hurston collected and had published in Mules and men (74). Nanny uses the story to make the point that both white and black men denigrate women, although she hopes that Killicks, with his wealth, will not feel the need to do this to her granddaughter. Unfortunately, this is just what Killicks attempts, and, as a result, Janie rejects him. According to critic Sally Ann Ferguson, Janie's decision to run off with Joe Starks

signals her early determination to defend herself against assaults on her giving and loving nature. Her rebellion is analogous to that of an actual mule later in the novel--a dumb animal that stubbornly refuses until death to submit to an even dumber man. In escaping from Logan, Janie foreshadows her ability to triumph over patriarchal oppression throughout her life. (187)

When Killicks wants Janie to work by his side in the fields, he tells her that he has found a "gentle mule" to suit her (26). It is possible, if not probable, that he wants her in the fields, as Tea Cake does later in the novel, for her company--so that they might build their security together. But Killicks does not ask her to work by his side, as Tea Cake will later, Killicks tells her.

Essentially, Killicks fails himself. Except through Hurston, and then sparingly, Killicks has no voice. When he longs to express himself, he holds a tobacco wad "real still in his jaw like a thermometer of his feelings while he studie[s] Janie's face and wait[s] for her to say something" (26). When Janie threatens to leave him, we understand Killicks' interiority through the narrator:

There! Janie had put words to his held-in fears. She might run off sure enough. The thought put a terrible ache in Logan's body, but he thought it best to put on scorn.

When she pursues the topic, he tells her that there aren't any other fools out in the world that would take her, then "flop[s] over resentful in his agony and pretend[s] sleep. He hoped that he had hurt her as she had hurt him" (29). Through Hurston, the reader comprehends Killicks' emotions and fears. Unfortunately, his wife, Janie, never hears his voice. She has no perception of his emotions; in fact, because of his inability to express himself effectively, and perhaps also because of Janie's inability to express herself to anyone but her grandmother (and, even then, too hesitantly to prevent her marriage to Killicks), she reacts to the mere shadows of his emotions, to his gestures. Neither Janie nor Killicks is capable of full expression with the other, and this causes Janie to turn to Joe Starks.

Nonetheless, it seems clear through the narration that Hurston intends us to see a vulnerable part of Killicks, perhaps of every man, a part destined to remain hidden. Janie sees Killicks as a one-dimensional husband, and, in the best of circumstances, she's too young to be able to see more. But the reader is shown further dimensions of Killicks' character. Perhaps we can even sympathize with this man, who attempts to live a life like that of a successful white farmer, and understand why it is difficult, if not impossible, for him to express his feelings to a sixteen-year-old girl. Perhaps we can empathize with an African American man who must have worked twice as hard as a white man to grow and sell his produce. African American women may have been raped by white men, as Nanny and Leafy have been, but African American men, even "successful" ones, have sometimes been lynched. Killicks has much to concern himself with other than play. It may in part be fear that makes him act as he does, and Janie has been privy to no such narrative detailing of specifically male fear. She has, in short, no means of understanding Logan.

Although Janie's Nanny arranges the marriage with Killicks, Starks, perhaps even more than Killicks, represents the kind of man Nanny would have approved of. When Janie first sees Starks, she thinks of Mr. Washburn, a successful white man who solely supports and pampers his wife with material things (26). Joe Starks is a handsome man of "seal-color" who, according to Janie, is "kind of portly like rich white folks. Strange trains, and people and places didn't scare him neither" (32). Starks is confident and self-assured, and though he does not "represent sun-up and pollen and [the] blooming trees" of Janie's dream, he speaks for "far horizon." He speaks for "change and chance" (28). And Janie takes her chances with him.

Most readers are probably relieved when Janie leaves Killicks for the enthusiastic and energetic Starks, since she has escaped the mule and plow. Unfortunately, she trades a physical prison for an emotional one. Starks arouses Janie's interest by offering her a position, as well as comfort in life, when he says to her,

"You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." (28)

Unfortunately, like Killicks, Starks is primarily interested in property, prestige, and security; these represent his idea of changing and controlling his life. He wants a wife who stays at home and helps him in his store, so Janie is kept on the fringes of Eatonville society--allowed only to associate and communicate with the community members at a superficial level. The relationship between Starks and Janie is one of order and traditional white materialistic success.

Janie's interest in and love for Starks abates for two reasons. Fairly quickly, the energy Starks has expended to charm his wife becomes directed toward the citizens of his community; and, more importantly, his attractiveness, often manifested in his presence, and in particular his voice, comes to depend "largely on shutting up hers" (Ferguson 185). When Starks is elected mayor, Tony asks Janie to say a few words, but her husband interrupts:

"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."

Janie made her face laugh after a short pause, but it wasn't too easy. ...It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things. (40-41)

In the end, Janie's life with Starks is one of his control and his creation. As he makes Eatonville into a modern community, he directs its citizens through his power of persuasion. Some of the men in town say of Starks that

"he loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice."

"You kin feel a switch in his hand when he's talkin' to yuh...."

"Some folks needs thrones, and ruling-chairs and crowns tuh make they influence felt. He don't. He's got uh throne in de seat of his pants." (46)

Janie is also controlled and directed. When Starks proposes to Janie, he says, " 'Kiss me and shake yo' head. When you do dat, yo' plentiful hair breaks lak day' " (28). Yet, once they marry, he insists that she cover her luxurious hair with a head rag:

This business of the head rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. ... That was because Joe never told Janie how jealous he was...She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others. But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him. (51-52)

Like Killicks, even the outgoing Joe Starks with his big, powerful voice that shapes a community cannot express his inner emotions and insecurities to his wife.

Hurston makes connections between Starks's manifestation of his insecurities and slavery. Early in the novel, Nanny describes her master as he prepared to depart for combat in the Civil War. Just before leaving the plantation, he ran into her cabin and " 'made [her] let down [her] hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it...' " (16). Nanny's oppression is exemplified by her master's forcing her to display her hair, which represents her sexuality, just as Janie's oppression is exemplified by Joe's forcing her to cover her hair, and thus her sexuality, with the head rag. To some degree, whether out on a farm or withdrawn into a store, both Killicks and Starks remove Janie from the community.

Critic Lillie Howard observes that these men cannot "share themselves; they d[o] not know how" (104). Their voices are limited, as is Janie's. However, Starks isn't totally unaware of his wife's feelings and desires. Emotionally, he tries to support his wife, and Hurston allows us to see some of his tender moments. When a mule owned by a local citizen is being illtreated, Starks rescues it after he hears Janie's concern for the animal. Immediately, everyone thinks that Starks has bought the animal for work until he says," 'Didn't buy 'im fuh no work. I god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let 'im rest'" (54).

This event triggers Janie's acquisition of a voice, for the Eatonville community recognizes her as" 'uh born orator' "when she says,

"Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something."

Interestingly enough, when Janie finally speaks, Starks "never sa[ys] a word," but "bit[es] down hard on his cigar and beam[s] all around" (55). In fact, Starks never does tell Janie that he saved the animal because of her concern for it.

This scene, which depicts a lack of voice, recalls the earlier incident in which Killicks announces that he will purchase a mule that Janie can handle in the fields (26). Though Killicks probably realizes that his wife will react negatively to this news, though Starks believes that Janie is pleased by his decision concerning the mule, both men react in the same, silent manner. Starks believes that he does everything possible for his wife; he treats her well. In many ways, however, Janie is just another of his possessions.

Though Starks's voice booms as he awakens Eatonville into a genuine, active community, it diminishes when he might express his true emotions to his wife; similarly, Janie's voice inadequately expresses her true emotions to her husband. There seems to be a connection between a lack of voice and a need to control, for both men and women. Therefore, the only way that we as readers understand that Janie is unhappy is through the narrator.

Janie's voice and independence continue to grow even while she is married to Starks:

...one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes.... After a while [this vision] got so common she ceased to be surprised....In a way it was good because it reconciled her to things. (73)

Having learned to separate her mind and her spirit from her physical surroundings, Janie has taken a step toward attaining her own voice and, thus, control over her life. Initially, she begins mentally to challenge Starks's control over her. Soon, however, she will challenge Starks with words, and make clear that he has not completely subdued or dominated her. Janie is naturally gifted, as is Starks, with oral agility, and one day she uses that talent to "emasculate" her husband publicly (Ferguson 190) on the porch of their store. With one cutting sentence, she robs Jody of his voice, in an unmistakably sexual manner:" 'When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life' " (75). This humiliation before his friends destroys Starks's public image; unable to respond to Janie verbally, he slaps his wife.

In the pursuit of her voice and her independence, Janie later assaults Starks verbally in a comparable scene, as he lies dying:

"...you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died.... Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." (82)

Starks begins by suppressing his wife's voice, but in the end, his own is suppressed. Even though his voice is full and capable of motivating a town to organize and prosper, it is not authentic or proficient in expressing his internal thoughts and emotions.

Janie cleanses her soul of the bitterness she has held toward Starks, making her capable of forging a loving relationship with Tea Cake when he later enters her life. As Starks lies dead, Janie considers his life, revealing Hurston's idea that a voice can be created and that individuals can influence the outcome of one's life:

Poor Joe! Maybe if she had known some other way to try, she might have made his face different. But what that other way could be, she had no idea. She thought back and forth about what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man Then she thought about herself. (83)

Freeing her hair from the kerchief that has bound it, Janie sees her complete self in the mirror. No longer a reflection with head rag intact, no longer her husband Jody's creation, Janie comes to understand herself as she is--strong and beautiful. And she uses her power to create the face and the voice that the community wants to see and hear in the announcement of Starks's death. Like Jody's, hers is a voice not fully adequate to the task that must be performed; yet this physical and emotional creation is her choice.

Janie chooses Tea Cake Woods because she is ready for him. Emotionally and physically, Tea Cake takes Janie back to Johnny Taylor's kiss and her initial recognition of love and passion. Though Tea Cake is financially and socially inferior to both Killicks and Starks, he has the ability to express more intensely his feelings for and about Janie than either of the other prominent men in her life, as is partially witnessed by his expressed desire to include Janie in his play as well as his work. And with Tea Cake's support and encouragement (122), Janie continues to strengthen her voice.

In this marriage, Janie flourishes in love and experiences the respect of an equal that she so desired in her earlier marriages. In her heart and mind, Tea Cake will always live with Janie; his significance to her cannot be disputed. However, the nature of his influence on the growth of Janie's voice and independence can be.

Certainly, Tea Cake influences Janie's perceptions of life. He shows her a non-materialistic, day-to-day existence of love and respect between people who are not in a constant state of competition and control (McKay 61); he is acquisitive of experience rather than material possessions or success. Janie falls in love with Tea Cake because, unlike her previous, restrictive male companions, who sought to silence Janie's true feelings, Tea Cake does not expect her to act in a specific manner that is designed to make him look good. Unlike Starks, for example, Tea Cake teaches Janie to play checkers: "He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (91).

When Tea Cake asks Janie to go to a picnic with him, however, she asks him if he's sure that he wants to take her, since she's afraid that the request may have been made out of politeness. It's all right, she says, if there's another woman he would rather take, and Tea Cake replies, " '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). Though Janie's voice has become broader and more powerful through the years, she has not become truly independent. In this scene, Tea Cake must encourage, perhaps even admonish, Janie, to say what she means--what she feels. She expresses herself, but only after receiving permission to do so.

As their relationship progresses, both Tea Cake and Janie recognize that to stay in Eatonville is to invoke among the townspeople comparisons to Janie's life with Joe Starks, so Tea Cake suggests that they venture into the world, where they will be forced to live on his salary. Yet when he longs to be closer to Janie during the day, he asks her to work, too--which she does without hesitation. This action brings Janie back into a community which had been denied her in her earlier marriages. But their life on the muck is not perfect. For it is there that Tea Cake beats Janie:

Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior had 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)

This particular violence is analogous to the violence that occurs in Janie and Starks's marriage, and evidences a direct correlation between male voice and fear of expression. Like her earlier marriages, Janie's marriage to Tea Cake shows the inability of males to express themselves verbally.

When Janie has been married to Starks for seven years, their relationship reaches a turning point. Starks has always enjoyed Janie's cooking; then, one evening, the meal simply doesn't turn out, and he slaps her. Her spirit turns from his as she ponders her heart and discovers that her perception of Jody has been illusory from the start: "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" (67-68). As mentioned earlier, the other violent incident in the Starks household occurs after Janie has verbally defended herself by signifying on her husband.

As Henry Louis Gates observes, "...Hurston's use of free indirect discourse as the rhetorical analogue to the text's metaphors of inside and outside...[is] fundamental to the depiction of Janie's quest for consciousness, her very quest to become a speaking black subject" (181). In the scenes in which Starks physically abuses Janie, the slaps represent his inability to express himself verbally--more specifically, his lack of an intimate voice with his wife. The scenes also expose Janie's recognition of her lack of communication with her husband--her lack of voice.

When Tea Cake, whom Janie loves dearly, slaps her in a more violent manner, the act has an erotic tone to it for those within Tea Cake and Janie's community, who seem to perceive the slap as a socially acceptable expression of possessive love and authority. In contrast to Jody's actions, which are motivated by hierarchical social power, Tea Cake behaves from a communally shared romantic position. Critic Michael Awkward reads Tea Cake's act as "one of unmotivated viloence...intended to exhibit to others the extent of his authority over Janie" (Inspiriting 39-41)--a viewpoint the text seems to substantiate. Yet Awkward's reading seems like an incomplete reaction derived from a fundamentally feminist perspective. The slap also represents the inability to articulate--or a lack of voice. Tea Cake beats Janie because he does not know how to verbalize his fear of losing her to someone else--someone who is a lighter skinned African American like Janie, someone of innately greater value in white society.

The white community remains silent, always in the background of this novel. Even when Tea Cake and Janie work on the muck for white people, this dominant and authoritative community is kept in the background, its importance significantly reduced. However, there are two situations in which whites play an important, if quiet, role.

As the hurricane approaches, Tea Cake opts to stay on the muck and continue working to make money, even though many people and all of the animals are leaving the area. Although nature itself is telling everyone that danger lies ahead, Tea Cake decides to trust the white people in charge--and their seawall--and Janie defers to his "better" judgment:

The [black] folks in the quarters and the [white] people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the sea walls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. (150)

Yet as the hurricane approaches, the attitude of the workers changes: "The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God" (151).

Throughout the hurricane, Janie seems voiceless; it is as though her will is transferred to Tea Cake, who encourages her to move toward the cow, thus putting her in a precarious position with the dog. She slides down the cow's tail, away from the animal who would attack her, and Tea Cake attacks the dog, who "wanted to plunge in after her but dreaded the water, somehow" (157). Janie survives the hurricane, but Tea Cake, who has decided to trust in the white man's "wisdom," dies from the rabid dog's bite. Thus Hurston admonishes Tea Cake for his silent deference to white society's judgment.

Although Hurston tells us that Janie speaks at her trial, we do not hear her, and Hurston effectively uses Janie's silence during her trial before an all-white, all-male jury--the same representatives of white society that Tea Cake has deferred to--to emphasize their ultimate insignificance. Furthermore, Tea Cake pays the final price--his life--for his silence, whereas Janie, in her silence, fosters her own life.

Janie's trial for Tea Cake's murder, before twelve white-male jurors and many of Tea Cake's friends, illustrates the power of her voice. According to Robert Hemenway, this scene exemplifies her independence as a woman, for in it she shows herself to be "a complete woman, no longer divided between an inner and an outer self" (240). After all, this is Janie's story, not Tea Cake's, and it is here that Hurston reminds us of this fact. Tea Cake is gone, and Janie must deal with her future. Critic Nellie McKay observes that "the relationship with Tea Cake help[s] to shape [Janie's] self-knowledge, but in his death she is free to discover security in herself, and the courage to speak in her own black woman's voice, no longer dependent on men" (63). One reason that we do not hear Janie's speech is that Hurston's and Janie's voices fuse. However, having a voice means owning one's self and living as an independent person who makes her own decisions and determines her own life.

No doubt Janie has experienced a sense of helplessness--she knows that her husband's illness is incurable, that he will die, and that there is nothing she can do--yet she decides to live. This is not the decision of a helpless woman, since she must kill her husband in order to stay alive. According to Emma Dawson, Janie kills the one who represents her "self-fulfillment and self-assertion," and she experiences" an overpowering sense of her own helplessness at the end of her happiness" (178-79). In shooting Tea Cake, Janie makes the ultimate decision of taking another person's life. In contrast to her former husbands' acts of violence, born of their inability to articulate their emotions, Janie's violence is a conscious act of self-defense and a matter of choosing life rather than death. Thus, it is the ultimate act of voice. Shooting Tea Cake is Janie's assertion to the world that she has a life worth living, whether married or single. Ultimately, voice is more than speech; it is a state of mind--a positive sense of self.

It is important to note Hurston's silence to her reader--almost an implicit message that, ultimately, what Janie has to say to the all-white jury and the white audience is insignificant. The important message is the one that she later conveys to Pheoby, a black woman like herself (DuPlessis 109). As DuPlessis expresses it, Pheoby is the "proper jury and judge" for Janie, and the proper witness and defense lawyer are "all Janie herself" (106).

It is difficult to say whether or not Janie's view of white society was altered after the hurricance. But there must be significance in the statement that "six eyes were questioning God" (Their Eyes 151). Perhaps Hurston thought it appropriate that, after the hurricane, Janie's silence signify the unimportance of a white society whose power could not contend with a God who had created the powerful "monster" that tore down the manmade seawalls.

Through Hurston, we know that, during the trial, Janie speaks and that her voice is effective, for she is immediately acquitted and released. Had Janie's speech to a white-male jury been reproduced, it would have detracted from the significance of her self-defense, and from the voice she expresses in defending her life from Tea Cake.

Shortly after the trial, Janie returns to her home to Eatonville and, once there, does not speak to those who do not want to hear or cannot suspend their own thoughts long enough to hear:

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment. (1-2)

Like Killicks, who sought to control Janie and was unable to express his true feelings, these people have no voice, except at night when the bossman's absent; and even then, their voice is only one of noise and judgment. They lack an empowered voice. Rather than fight the onlookers and their judgments, Janie waits. When a receptive friend, Pheoby, chooses to listen, Janie speaks again.

Pheoby acts as a witness, and it may be argued that Hurston stresses Pheoby's listening to the story as much as Janie's telling of it. Critic Susan Willis observes that Pheoby tends to Janie's needs without knowing their cause and that Janie uplifts Pheoby spiritually (52). After listening to Janie's story, Pheoby says,

"Lawd!...Ah done growed ten feet higher jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishing wid him after this." (182-83)

According to Willis, this is Hurston's "most radical single statement" (52). Janie has used her voice to speak to one who will speak to the many. She has finally acquired what she has spent forty years searching for--her voice, and her self.

Janie had only enough voice in her marriage to Killicks to throw down her apron and walk out the door. When married to Starks, she allowed herself to live a dual life--one in which her body participated and the other in which her imagination played free. In Janie's marriage to Tea Cake, she physically enacts this freedom and associates with her new community. In slaying her husband, she forces herself to choose her self over the dominant society of men: "A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life" (Their Eyes 175). janie is androgynous here; she is a human being who wants to live and is not too afraid or too subservient to protect herself. Though she fears Tea Cake's death, she knows that it is inevitable. She does what she must, and Tea Cake dies.

As Janie gains voice, she associates with men who have progressively more voice, or fuller voices. Hurston, however, does not demonize even the voiceless men; indeed, she facilitates the reader's empathy toward them. Hurston demonstrates that her characters' voices have been influenced by people's subjection to a dominant authority. She would have her readers understand that African American men have been objectified (controlled and/or manipulated) by white society, as have African American women, and that African American women have also been manipulated by African American men. She indicates that voice may be personal and yet move into the universal; at the end of the novel, Janie's voice is heard and recognized by Pheoby, who will share it with her community. At last, there is a unity within Janie that allows her to share with others. She has acquired her voice, and she may choose when and how to express herself.

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