"Liv[ing] by Comparisons": A Post-Structuralist Feminist Analysis of Identity, Community, and Narrative in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'

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"LIV[ING] BY COMPARISONS": A POST-STRUCTURALIST FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND NARRATIVE IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

By

Katherine Ostrinski

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Honors Bachelor of Arts Degree

Departments of English Literature and Women’s and Gender Studies
In the College of Arts and Sciences
University of Redlands
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THESIS APPROVAL

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“Liv[ing] by comparisons”: A Post-Structuralist Feminist Analysis of Identity, Community, and Narrative in Their Eyes Were Watching God

I. Introduction

In 1937, while on a fellowship in the Caribbean, Zora Neale Hurston published her third novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Although it eventually was a best-selling novel for decades to come, it was not well received during its first publication and quickly went out of print. In the late 1960s, early 1970s, the book was rediscovered and republished by a womanist writer, Alice Walker, and it was soon after praised as an influential literary text in black feminism. The black feminist critic, Mary Helen Washington, commended the use of black folk tradition in the Foreword to the novel, saying of Janie, “here, finally, was a woman on a quest for her own identity and...her journey would take her, not away from, but deeper and deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, and communal life representing immersion into black traditions” (Washington xi). Washington also argues that “what Their Eyes shows us is a woman writer struggling with the problem of the questing hero as woman and the difficulties in 1937 of giving a woman character such power and daring” (Washington xvi). Washington, like many others, identified a black feminist struggle in Hurston’s words. For example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr claims, “Their Eyes is a bold feminist novel, the first to be explicitly so in the Afro-American tradition” (Gates 197). There is no denying that Hurston took a chance with Their Eyes Were Watching God, challenging the male literary tradition to accept a female character of Janie’s stature.

Not only has Their Eyes been a signal text for black feminist critics, Hurston’s text has also attracted poststructuralist feminists who have re-interrogated feminist concepts such as community, identity and narrative in ways that could be applied to Their Eyes. It had been my
original intention to examine the texts with the concepts of black feminism in mind, with hopes of uncovering the meaning of the admiration it received from black feminists. Upon examination of different forms of criticism, however, I found comfort and understanding in poststructuralist feminism that offered perspectives that would allow me to analyze the text better. In the *Handbook of Feminist Research*, poststructuralism is said to reject “the essentialism that attributes the experiences of women to ‘an underlying essence of womanness, an essence contained in bodies and expressed in culture,’ or that universalizes women’s experiences” (Gannon 82). Because of this rejection of universalism, “individual subjects take up their existence in specific moments and are always located historically, politically, and discursively in contexts from which they are not separate” (82). Poststructuralist feminism really works towards challenging the ideas of universality and unification and how they play a role in feminist analysis, which is more in line with my own personal beliefs. These concepts of universality and unification are important in black feminism, which infers that “for black women, history is embedded in experience, one that creates a specialized knowledge about their collective struggle, pain, and marginalization, which are direct outcomes of the cumulative effects of slavery” and other oppressive systems that many black women have faced throughout history (Hesse-Bieber 109-10). Some have read these examples of 1970s black feminism as establishing essentialism which is something I struggled with while working with black feminism. While there is no doubting that black women share a history of triple oppression, poststructuralist feminism allows room for difference while maintaining the importance of historical identity, as well as other cultural contexts from which a character, such as Janie from *Their Eyes*, may not be able to be separated. I do not want to discount black feminism in any way, but instead I use poststructuralist feminism as a way to approach the topic while maintaining some of the important concepts of
black feminism. I feel that poststructuralist feminism allows me to locate myself discursively and culturally with black feminism and work with it in a way that allows my own interpretations to mesh with some of the older black feminist critics. Much of recent black feminist criticism has taken on new routes, including a branch known as black poststructuralist feminism, which I work with throughout my thesis. With this in mind, I have established three particular categories to focus upon when examining the text: identity, community, and narrative. For each concept, in order to establish how I will be analyzing the text, I will examine some of the original feminist theories concerning the subject and how poststructuralist feminism relates or departs from those theories. I will then present my own analysis of the texts, including textual evidence with an overlying poststructuralist feminist understanding.

II. “De [black] woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see”: Identity in Their Eyes Were Watching God

a. Literary Criticism Context

When considering the modern usages of the concept of identity, the categories that first come to mind are often one’s name, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, class or economic status, and culture. Many of these categories, however, come with particular stereotypes, roles, and guidelines that are often followed by the person who is associated with them. Black feminists, for example, have often found a commonality in the intersection of race and gender. In her essay “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” critic Barbara Johnson explores this intersection and the placement of black women on an identity map. A problem is created because black women are pushed out of what she terms the binary oppositions of this identity map, which is made up of four different quadrants: man versus woman, and white versus
Black. In this map, the category of white men are considered “universal,” with white women being seen as “complementary,” and black men being defined as “otherness” (Johnson 217). Black women, however, become “both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in [their] own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends” (Johnson 216). This becomes a problem, according to Johnson, especially for a writer like Hurston, whose “work is often called non-political simply because readers of Afro-American literature tend to look for confrontational racial politics, not sexual politics” nor a combination of the two (Johnson 215). Instead of giving in to male domination in order to maintain a sense of racial awareness, Hurston challenges the binaries by allowing Janie, her black female character, to be “acquitted of murder…by an all-white jury but condemned by her fellow blacks” (Johnson 215). Inversely, instead of allowing racial demands to cloud her novel, Hurston creates a female character that is not common, one who is more independent than the usual women of fiction, and one who challenges the idea of a unified and uniform black community. Johnson views Hurston as bold and willing to challenge the male standards that have been established in both the racial and gender categories of identity.

Johnson also indicates being skeptical of some black feminist views on universality. While she does not give any particular names she seems to be referring to critics such as Barbara Smith who, in her essay “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” argues that the creation of a black feminist literary canon is dependent on the literature of black women that is a “direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience [black women] have been obliged to share” (Smith 164). Smith continues with this argument, ultimately suggesting that black women unify in literature through their shared experiences, a suggestion that implies a sense of unified commonality possibly leaving no room for difference. While she readily agrees that unification exists in much of literature, she does not agree with the concept, saying that “unification and
simplification are fantasies of domination, not understanding” (Johnson 218). Unification implies bringing and forcing together that which may not readily fit. Commonly, formation of identity in literature has been seen as a unification of different aspects of a character’s identity; Johnson builds her argument differently, however, in saying that Janie does not begin to articulate identity and an authentic voice through unification, but rather self-difference. She determines this by analyzing a passage from Their Eyes where Janie is having a heated conversation with her second husband Joe that results in Janie realizing that “she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurston 113). In this passage, as Johnson points out, “a relation is set up between an inner ‘image’ and outward, domestic space,” a relation that results in “the inner spirit of the marriage [moving] outward from the bedroom to the parlor” which is a move that can also be seen as “the form of a narrative of movement from private to public space” (Johnson 211). She is arguing that it is through this division and Janie’s subsequent articulate understanding of the division that she is able to begin to formulate her identity and thus her voice. Johnson sums this up in saying, “Janie’s increasing ability to speak grows out of her ability not to mix inside with outside, not to pretend that there is not difference, but to assume and articulate the incompatible forces involved in her own division” (Johnson 212). Johnson feels that, through Janie, Hurston “narrate[s] both the appeal and the injustice of universalization” by means of an articulation and application of self-difference (Johnson 216). Johnson argues that Hurston does this by challenging the viewpoint of the novel, as well as the narrative which readily switches from first to third person with ease and from the standard English of the narrator to the cultural dialect of the characters. This binary opposition between the use and rejection of unification is culminated even in the inside/outside binary that is set up in the novel, for “the inside/outside boundaries between narrator and character, between standard
and individual, are both transgressed and preserved, making it impossible to identify and totalize either the subject or the nature of discourse" (Johnson 216). Johnson is suggesting that Hurston brings about a sense of unification in Janie's identity through this understanding and accepting of self-difference: for example, there are things within ourselves that cannot mix, but rather than trying to force them together, we must instead recognize and understand their differences and allow them to exist as such. According to Johnson and Hurston, doing so will bring about that sense of peace that Janie attains in the final moments of the novel, perhaps in knowing that "the process of de-universalization can never, universally, be complete," and that we must continue to work towards a goal of understanding the difference that exists rather than adhering to the standards that currently exist (Johnson 216).

In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Judith Butler, a poststructuralist theorist whose early writing appeared around the same time as Barbara Johnson's, also argues against the idea of identity unification and the social standards of aspects related to identity. Butler challenges the components of identity by arguing that they do not occur naturally, but are rather performed. When one begins to perform an aspect of identity, one is adhering to the strict demands of society. Butler expands on this idea by suggesting that if a facet of identity, such as gender, "is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 520). She makes this concept clearer in her essay "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative" when she says that "gender appears to be a performance that relies on a certain practice of repetition that over time produces the effect of identity; on the other hand, this repetition is compelled and"
necessitated by a failure to achieve the ‘identity’ which is its goal” (Butler 2). She is overall suggesting that acting out gender—e.g. dressing feminine by wearing dresses, as a woman—is not something that naturally occurs, but is rather constructed through performance of gendered expectations. Over time, as Butler says, these acts come to establish substance and, in turn, represent identity. Identity then becomes dependent upon the demands of both current and past societies that determine what the socially suitable determinants of aspects of identity are, and is limited by these accepted and predetermined standards. What is particularly important about this is that with identity performance comes consequences for those who deviate from the norm. Butler suggests, in “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” that “when a category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character and, hence, exclusionary in principle” (350). By this she means that when particular “values or dispositions” have been established, a person who does not uphold or conform to these standards is punished by being labeled as an other, much as black women are pushed out of Johnson’s identity map, unable to satisfy the demands of a particular identity category. Thus, identity conformity becomes a key factor in one’s being an accepted member of a community or society. This conformity, however, needs to be challenged and to take into account what Butler calls “historically delimited possibilities” as determining conditions of identity (Butler “Performative” 522).

Butler develops this idea of historically delimited possibilities from Simone de Beauvoir who, in The Second Sex, discusses the idea of woman as “an historical situation rather than a natural fact,” referring particularly to the body (Butler “Performative” 520). Butler explains that Beauvoir’s idea of woman as an historical situation indicates that “the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts
one’s body...but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived” (“Performative” 523-4). Applied to the idea of identity performance, this would suggest that one’s perceptions of an aspect of one’s identity—whether it be gender, body, race, religion, etc—is historically delimited by one’s culture, and one’s culture’s perception of that identity. By historically delimited, I mean that one’s understanding of concepts of identity are restricted to what one is available from one’s own historical background, as well as the historical background of the concept itself. Concepts are established through the history of the concept—for example, gender has been established historically as the physical differences between masculine and feminine, and is beginning to change as different perceptions are being conceived. Aspects of identity are also shaped by how one was taught about them culturally—some cultures, for instance, indicate that the woman is to be the homemaker while the man holds the job outside of the home. Butler is suggesting, in my view, that one’s identity is inherently affected by both of these historically delimited possibilities. In establishing one’s identity, one can not help but establish themselves discursively amongst what one already knows of aspects of identity. Take Janie into consideration: as the first woman of her family to be born in the postbellum era, yet as a child of rape, Janie struggles with her identity. Being raised by her grandmother Nanny, a woman who suffered from slavery and from the social and cultural conditions associated with it, Janie’s ideas of gender and race are limited to what she has been taught. From Nanny, Janie learns that the white man is the ruler of everything, with the black man being the one who picks up after him and works for the white man, but who ultimately gives that load to his womenfolk to carry. With that arrangement comes the black woman, who as Nanny claims, “is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston 14). So, from her early years, Janie is taught that the black woman is the lowest on the ladder, put on earth to tote what the white and black men
refuse to bear. This account of actually existing social relations is what establishes Janie’s historically delimited possibilities. Since this is all Nanny wants and allows her to know, she is denied the ability to define her own terms of her identity.

b. Textual Analysis

One of the first moments when Janie encounters her identity comes during her childhood, at the age of six years old to be precise. In the beginning of the novel when Janie is talking with her best friend, Pheoby, and while she is sharing a memory, she admits that she did not know she was black until she was six years old. In her childhood, Janie lived with her grandmother and a white family, the Washburns, for whom her grandmother worked. She discovers her racial identity because a picture was taken of her and all of Mrs. Washburn’s grandchildren together, and “when [Janie] looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl… but [Janie] couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as [herself]” (Hurston 9) until someone else pointed it out to her. The moment Janie realizes the small black girl is herself, she cries out, “‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’” (Hurston 9). She admits to Pheoby that before she had seen that picture, she had thought she was white just like all the other children. Hurston seems to be making an interesting remark on black identity for a few reasons. One is that Janie had spent the first six years of her life believing she was a white child, perhaps suggesting she had not faced any racial discrimination during that time. The second is that the only reason Janie finds out she is black is because a picture is taken of her in a place where they were able to afford such a picture. Had she been in a different place with different people who may not have been able to afford the picture, it might have been some years before she saw herself and realized she were black. While the novel takes places primarily in black communities, this is one of the only times that the reader is given insight into Janie’s feelings about her race, and we are not
given much. Thinking of the critics, I am reminded that both Johnson and Butler discuss that social standards tend to affect how a person conceives his or her identity, and in this scene Janie’s sense of her identity is shaped by social expectations. Janie states, “before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like the rest,” giving an indication that Janie perhaps understood whiteness as being the norm (Hurston 9). Black skin color represents “others”—not “the rest”—forcing Janie into that “other” category and reinforcing the idea that racial identity is for the most part defined in relation to skin color and other visual markers. This understanding of racial identity would bring with it particular cultural implications that would result in, considering Butler’s theory of identity presentation, performance, partially due to the constructions of identity that Nanny has presented to Janie, but also due to the determined standards of racial construction. These standards include individuals and groups being distinguished from each other visually, thus being categorized into races such as black. Janie is inherently unable to established her own opinions on her racial identity because of her historically delimited possibilities that have been set in place by both her grandmother and society.

The next challenge for Janie occurs when she is denied her own terms for her sexual identity as a young woman of sixteen, the time at which “her conscious life had commenced” (10). One spring afternoon, Janie felt the world calling to her outside to witness the marriage between a pear blossom and a bee. At a time in which Janie found herself questioning and curious about the world and its inner workings, she came across a young man, Johnny Taylor, and found herself kissing him. When Nanny caught her doing this, the dream and curiosity were quickly ended. With that, Nanny tells her “youse got yo’ womanhood on yuh...Ah wants to see you married right away” (12). But Nanny does not want her to marry just any man, she instead envisions Janie as a woman of status, held on high ground as a wife to a man in good financial
standing and respected as such. Nanny then sets her up to live this kind of life by arranging Janie’s marriage with a man named Logan Killicks who owned sixty acres nearby. While Janie was interested in finding love, she found herself limited by the demands of Nanny who wanted practicality and comfort for her. Nanny chides Janie and discourages her idea of love, insisting that she is being foolish for wanting love when she had a providing husband and freedom, Nanny says, “if you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and...Lawd have mussy!” (23). Limited by Nanny’s desires, Janie performs the part of an obedient wife.

It is not long before Janie finds that life as a young married woman is not a good fit for her. She feels that she is meant to stay in the kitchen and cook all day or to work in the fields alongside her husband. Her identity as the obedient wife, she finds, is shifting, and so she looks towards the horizon, and when a flashy man named Joe Starks comes walking down the road and woos her, Janie decides to leave Logan. Once she realizes this, “a feeling of sudden newness and change came over her,” and she decides that “the change was bound to do her good” (32). This decision to leave Logan is a nod to the young girl beneath the pear tree; eager for something new and different, she moves towards a new identity. Upon finally reaching Joe at their designated meeting place, Janie thinks of how “her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (32). This is a sure sign of a shift in her identity, for she is actively accepting the fact that she will have to alter her life to meet the demands of the new situation that has risen before her. While she will still have the same mind and thoughts, she will have to adopt a new language in this new relationship with this new man Joe Starks.
Joe Starks, who woos her with pretty words and promises, seems to be the man Janie has longed for, a man who “spoke for far horizon...change and chance...” (Hurston 29). Yet, when Joe becomes the mayor of a new town, Janie is faced with a new challenging aspect of identity: being the mayor’s wife and fulfilling the expectations that come along with this. From the town’s perspective, “she slept with authority and so she was part of it,” and Joe saw himself as “building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world” (Hurston 46, 62. Being the mayor’s wife included working in the store that he built daily, for Joe said that “she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted her to use her privileges. That was the rock she battered against” (54). Janie finds herself in a dilemma between utilizing the privileges she has as the mayor’s wife, including the ability to work in the general store, something that her grandmother, or any other women born into slavery, may have never been able to do. This is partially due to the fact that stores and post offices may not have been available for black people, let alone positions for working inside of them. Joe sees the ownership of the store and post office as a privilege, so it would therefore be a privilege for Janie to work in it simply because she had the option. Limited by Nanny’s desires and now Joe’s expectations, Janie is forced to perform the part of the mayor’s wife: a woman of high stature, authority, dignity, and duty.

Janie’s identity becomes reconstructed through her relationship with Joe and the demands he has on her as his wife. When she first runs off with Joe, away from her marriage to Logan, Janie feels that Joe meant a chance to experience far horizons, the world beyond her grandmother. It is not long, however, before Janie realizes that Joe has his own restrictions that were not very appealing to Janie. Joe expects Janie to be the model wife and citizen of his new town, and Janie has a hard time conforming to that given identity. One night Janie makes a dinner that does not come together right, “one of those dinners that chasten all women
sometimes" as the narrator puts it (71). For this, Joe slaps her hard enough to leave a ringing in her ears. When this happens, Janie comes to a harsh realization about her relationship with Joe, understanding now that her image of Joe "was never the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over" (72). This becomes particularly important because Janie also realizes that "she was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen" and that "she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how to not mix them" (72). This recognition of having an inside and an outside complicates Janie's identity, especially through Janie's attempt to bring coherence to this division within herself. She does not allow her soul to be broken, but she decides to play along with Joe's demands, to be the obedient wife, until she has the freedom to do otherwise. This is the recognition of self-difference that Johnson refers to in her article. In this recognition of self-difference, Janie is also recognizing that she has an inside, that harbors her genuine feelings, and an outside that acts as the mayor's wife that Joe expects her to be. Janie ultimately admits to having a limited, performed identity. It closely resembles what Butler suggests in her article on gender performance, where she understands "constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion" ("Performative" 520). The illusion is created through the performance; being a creation of society, Butler implies, one's performance creates the illusion of identity because it is not representative of genuinely complicated identity. In this scene and the scenes following, Hurston seems to be alluding to the fact that identity performance is draining for an individual, yet for someone like Janie, with her historically delimited background, it was necessary. To not perform, to not be the mayor's wife, would be giving up the privileges that her grandmother longed for her to have, which would in turn be giving up her cultural understanding of herself. This dilemma arises when Janie mentions to
herself “maybe [Joe] ain’t nothing’…but he is something in my mouth. He’s got tuh be else Ah ain’t got nothin’ tuh live for. Ah’ll lie and say he is. If Ah don’t, life won’t be nothin’ but uh store and uh house” (Hurston 77). She lies by convincing herself that Joe is fulfilling the needs she has even though he does not; while it is obvious that Joe is more interested in the collection of material items, Janie finds herself craving the emotional connections she is lacking. Beating against a rock of privilege that she had not experienced before Joe, she feels that she has no other options. Yet, we hear from the narrator how “[Janie] didn’t read books so she didn’t know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop,” implying that the narrator recognizes that Janie is much more than the material item that Joe is making her to be, yet she is limited by what she knows of herself and her history (Hurston 77). This is a statement that suggests that it is indeed Janie’s historically delimited possibilities that are keeping her from attaining an identity beyond the one conferred by others upon her; she knows nothing but what others, such as Joe and Nanny, have let her know.

A conversation with Joe while he is on his death bed marks another important change in Janie’s life and particularly in her identity. Minutes before his death, Janie gathers the courage to walk into his sickroom and truly speak her mind. She admits to him that he was not the same man she ran away with as a young girl and that he forced her to change to fit his expectations, telling him that her “’own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours...’” (86). Even to his dying breath, Joe fights with her, aiming to bring her down to his level, but Janie warns him that “’all dis bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice—dat ain’t whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you’” (Hurston 87). As though the harsh reality of her words were a knife, Joe dies after she says this, and Janie is freed from the ties of her marriage to him. Janie is finally able to turn attention back to herself, realizing that
“years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass” (Hurston 87) and that she was free to answer the call of that young vibrant girl within herself. The first step in doing so is utilizing her voice and speaking out against Joe, the second is tearing off the kerchief that tied up her hair as demanded by Joe. In reassessing her image in the mirror, Janie sees that “the young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place” (Hurston 87). As with the picture from her childhood in which she sees herself, Janie’s identity is changed when she sees the new woman in the mirror, which speaks once more to the importance of one’s image in the construction of identity. The woman that she once had seen in the mirror during her relationship with Joe was the representation of Janie’s performance as the mayor’s wife of her outside identity that she kept separate from the young girl she had asked to wait in the looking glass years before. She finds freedom in this new woman and a chance to establish her own identity liberated from the demands of others.

From here, Janie assumes a new identity as the widow of her late husband and as a woman of her own means in her town. After Joe’s funeral, Janie finds herself at a loss of what to do, and she begins to think about Nanny once more. She finds, however, that she does not really miss Nanny and in turn discovers a hatred for her that Janie had hidden from herself “all these years under a cloak of pity” (Hurston 89). This hatred stemmed from the fact that Janie had been interested in exploring the world and finding people; “she had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell” (90). After Joe’s death, her hatred for Nanny and the limitations Nanny put on her is the only thing keeping Janie from freeing herself. In her recognition that Janie “hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love,” Janie is finally able to come to terms with the historically delimited possibilities set in place by Nanny that have
constructed her life and identity (Hurston 89). With no one, including the memory of her grandmother, there to command Janie, she begins to establish her own identity.

After six months of performing the role of the mourning widow, Janie meets another man, Tea Cake, who brings back a feeling in her that she had not felt since her early womanhood. Tea Cake, a man much younger than herself, reminded her of the “love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring” (Hurston 106). Free from the limitations of Nanny and Joe, Janie drifts back to her earliest thoughts of conscious identity, where she yearned for love and the unadulterated sensuality of the world. There were many in her town who felt that Janie should not be with a man like Tea Cake, younger than her, and so soon after Joe’s death. Janie, a freed woman, believes otherwise, and she is finally unafraid to tell her friend Pheoby of her genuine feelings for him. She proudly tells Pheoby, “Ah’m older than Tea Cake, yes. But he done showed me where it’s de thought dat makes de difference in ages” (Hurston 115). Despite the snide comments being made by the women of the Eatonville community, Janie decides to pursue these feelings for Tea Cake, telling her good friend Pheoby that “Ah wants tuh utilize mahself all over” because “Ah got up on de high stool lak [Nanny] told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin’ extra and Ah ain’t read de common news yet” (Hurston 112, 114). Janie shows recognition for the historically delimited possibilities that have been set upon her here, and she is determined to distance herself from them. She demonstrates her genuine opinions, acknowledging that her expectations of life are much different than what Nanny and Joe wanted from her, and now she understands what she really wants. Janie challenges the social temporality of a woman of her age and stature; were she to perform her expected identity correctly, she would have married a respectable man of her age from the town and followed the same
relationship pattern as she did with Joe. She instead chooses to deviate from these expectations; having already followed society’s expectations, she is eager to create her own expectations for herself.

Tea Cake challenges Janie’s identity in a different way than Joe had because Joe never challenged her mind or her thoughts; he was always too eager to push himself into her mind. Rather than trying to force himself in, Tea Cake works with her to take her to new horizons. Janie admits that “he done taught me de maiden language all over” (Hurston 115). It is as though Tea Cake has had to teach her how to speak again because she had been oppressed so long by the demands of others. In this part of her life, Janie seems to find comfort in defining her identity as Tea Cake’s wife and lover. Never having had her own voice, she is unsure how to use it; Tea Cake gives her the help and confidence she needs to use her voice, something she does frequently in her relationship with him. When they move down to the Everglades so Tea Cake could work, Janie learns the bitter sting of jealousy when she suspects that Tea Cake is cheating on her with another girl from the fields. Instead of allowing it to happen, however, Janie speaks up and admits to Tea Cake, “Ah b’lieve you been messin’ round her!” (137). Although she is wrong, it is important that Janie is able to utilize her voice and speak her mind. Janie had never been comfortable being the quiet and obedient wife that both Logan and Joe demanded her to be. In her relationship with Tea Cake, there is a sense that she could be comfortable speaking her thoughts in a way that Joe never allowed, and this is perhaps why their relationship is so successful.

Her final shift in identity comes after the death of Tea Cake and the trial for his death. To save Janie, Tea Cake jumped in the way of and struggled with a rabid dog, being bit in the process. To save herself, Janie had to shoot the rabid Tea Cake as his mind was deteriorating
beyond recognition. The trial against her was quick and to the point; Janie did not mean to kill him, but she did it to save herself and to save him from pain. After her acquittal, Janie decides to bury Tea Cake in the Everglades and then return to Eatonville. It is upon her return, when she is telling her story to Pheoby, that we become aware of her final sense of identity. She had spent her whole life in search of her identity, and now, as she tells Phcoby, “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons” (Hurston 191). In these final moments of the novel, Janie’s growth and development become acutely obvious. From all her experiences, Janie is able to convey to Pheoby some of the most important things she has learned. “Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves” she tells Pheoby, “they got to go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (Hurston 192). 

Janie has spent most of her life dependent on others. From her grandmother to her three husbands, there never seemed to be a time that Janie was allowed to make decisions for herself or speak on her own behalf. Now, however, she has come to a new destination, which is actually an understanding that the search for her identity, as Barbara Johnson would argue, can never be totalized. She is accepting of the fact that she has not entirely constructed her identity, some aspects have been constructed for her by her husbands and by her family. I believe Janie can be seen as a woman of her own means; her identity may have been shaped by her experiences with men and her family, but in the end she is able to comprehend her own identity by accepting the experiences for what they were. She recognizes Tea Cake’s affect on her identity, but she does not allow Tea Cake to entirely encompass her identity.

What is significant about the end of the novel is the fact that Janie accepts that her quest for identity is not one that can be fulfilled. This is highlighted when Janie “pulled in the horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder”
(Hurston 193). The horizon can be seen as representative of this never-ending quest for her identity because it is something that is always receding once approached. Every time that she has felt she has reached a place where she would be able to establish her identity, she finds that her sense of identity has once again receded and she has to find another way out. This is consistent with Johnson’s argument that Janie’s identity does not collapse into oneness but rather grows out of self-difference (Johnson 212). From her grandmother’s house to Logan Killicks, from Logan to Joe Starks, from Joe to Verigible “Tea Cake” Woods, and finally back to Eatonville by herself, her quest for her own identity is constantly being rerouted by her interactions with others and the expectations they place upon her. Returning to Eatonville, her acceptance of her previous inability to establish her identity is obvious, and instead of trying to once again redefine her identity, we find her reaching toward the vast horizon and figuratively pulling it around her shoulder. This could be read as a reflection of Janie allowing her identity to assume the qualities of the horizon in its boundlessness; its ability is to adapt and change no matter where the person is located or which way they are looking. The horizon is constantly changing, as does Janie’s identity.

III. “You got tuh go there tuh know there”: Community in Their Eyes Were Watching God

a. Literary Criticism Context

The ideal community has often been rooted within unity. Derived from Middle French to mean “joint ownership,” the word itself assumes the presumption of defining a body of people with a common attribute unifying them (www.oed.com). This makes identity and community intrinsically linked because communities tend to be based on unifying aspects of identity. Some black feminists, in their quest for unification, place great importance on the community they
create beneath this title. In her essay “Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Jennifer Jordan explains what black feminists were expecting of their literature during the late 1980s, when this essay was written. Jordan explains that “there has been a call for a literature in which women have ‘pivotal relationships with one another,’ achieve a feminine bonding, and arrive at ‘liberation through [their] sisters,’” all the while maintaining a strong connection with their racial culture and community (Jordan 107). Barbara Smith suggests that “black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” in her essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (Smith 4). Smith implies that a black feminist canon arises out of the experiences that black women writers share as a result of their common histories, implying a community that exists both within and out of literature. Yet another critic, Lorraine Bethel, describes “the basis of Black feminism and Black feminist literary criticism” as “most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels—psychic, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical—with other black women” (Bethel 184). With all these black feminist critics, we see the common theme of collective experience, and it is through this shared experience that black women create their community.

In “‘Tuh De Horizon and Back’: The Female Quest in Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Missy Dehn Kubitschek offers the idea that Janie’s quest for identity throughout the novel ultimately results in Eatonville’s ascent, referring to an advancement in the community. Upon completion of what Kubitschek argues is Janie’s quest towards self-definition, all that is left in the structure of the quest narrative is her return to the community. While Kubitschek points out that reintegration into the community has always been a problem for the heroine in the American
quest narrative, she argues Hurston approaches this final moment in a different way in order to reach her ultimate goal. Janie does not easily assimilate back into life in Eatonville upon her return; she does not even stop to chat with members of the community when she does return. Instead, Kubitschek points out that Janie still reaches out to the community, by means of allowing Pheoby, her good friend, to be her "mouthpiece" (Kubitschek 113). It is only through this, the retelling of her story to her friend and, thereby, becoming an artist through her storytelling that Kubitschek argues Janie is able to "discover her own soul" (Kubitschek 109). This particular kind of storytelling fulfills three different purposes in Kubitschek's view: she is able to be articulate, but only at the cost of being isolated from her community; she exhibits a "narrative of immersion" that allows her ascent above and subsequent immersion back into the black community; and finally a group ascent occurs which "involve[s] a community's growth to literacy and awareness of the modes of expression in surrounding white culture" (Kubitschek 114). In this argument, Kubitschek, while not a black feminist, supports the black feminist notion of community through Janie who, after her quest for identity, remained one with to the community of Eatonville by returning to it.

While communities allow for groups of similar people to come together, it also creates room to exclude both those who do not share the common attribute as well as those who do share the common attribute but also harbor different, less accepted characteristics. This is best explained by author Iris Young in her essay, "The Ideal Community and the Politics of Difference," when she says that "the ideal of community presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves," which is difficult in itself because it "presupposes that a subject can know himself or herself and express that knowledge accurately and unambiguously to others" (302, 310). This would require the subject to attain a unity of self which, Young
suggests under the influence of Julia Kristeva, is impossible. One inherently has a constant array of desires which may not always be coherent or compatible, which ultimately makes one “a play of differences that cannot be comprehended” (Young 310). A person unable to fully understand him or herself would therefore not be able to translate or express his or her needs and desires to another person. This could perhaps be why Janie is unable to tell her story until returning to Eatonville, from which she then revisits the tale upon telling it to Pheoby. The concept of shared subjectivity, then, becomes null and hence detrimental to community because “it denies difference in the concrete sense of making it difficult for people to respect those with whom they do not identify” (Young 311). This is a powerful statement because in attempting to unify a group, there is a tendency to assume that all members of the community possess some common property separating them from other communities, not allowing any room for disparity. This is much like the perception of identity I have previously explored in the sense that it is limiting to the point that any person who presents difference from the demands of the community are intrinsically established as an other. As Butler has suggested, Young says that “any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure,” with the impure being the “other” (Young 303). Innately, “any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn” with inflexible categories (Young 303).

In her article, Young also argues that this ideal community “denies the difference within and between subjects,” supporting that same concept that the ideal community calls for total concord, leaving no space for individuality (Young 305). Gender and gender roles become complicated when considering that this form of community creates dichotomies, as Young proposes, between individualism/community and separated/shared self which finds its outlet in
the opposition between the masculine and the feminine (Young 306). Young suggests that “culture identifies masculinity with the values associated with individualism—self-sufficiency, competition, separation, the formal equality of rights,” while identifying femininity “with the values associated with community—affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation” (Young 306). These are dichotomies that Young believes are present in modern political theory with the qualities of individualism and masculinity being favored over those of communalism and femininity. The other as the other is constantly being challenged against the normality of masculine values, never able to assimilate into community. For Young, then, the ideal community “is thus defined as openness to unassimilated otherness,” where there is “political representation to group interests and [celebration of] the distinctive cultures and characteristics of different groups” (Young 319). This open acceptance of those who may not clearly fit the standards of a given community would allow for a more cohesive community in that the sense of otherness would be reduced alongside the growing approval of that which defines otherness. Such reconstruction of community gives more depth to the concept of community, which in turn permits one’s identity to remain intact despite the standards of the community one is a part of. It should be noted, however, that in the creation of a community, such as the one that is established under black feminism, recognition of shared experience could also be a way to accept differences between each other. The most ideal community, one that showcases genuine unity through acceptance of similarity and difference, seems harder to find. I believe that the model of community follows a pattern throughout the novel for Janie, where Janie encounters a community and is unable to establish connection, thus being pushed out of that community, a difficulty decidedly mirroring her search for identity. It is only upon her understanding of her
identity that she is able to understand community differently and exist comfortably within a community without fear of being other.

b. Textual Analysis

There are three different groups of people in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who constitutes communities. Janie’s interactions between the three are very different, and the difference has different implications. The first of the communities that Janie is that in which she is located during her childhood, while she is living on the Washburn’s property with Nanny, her grandmother. Mrs. Washburn has four grandchildren of her own, three boys and one girl, with whom Janie becomes close with. This community is not racially based, which is obvious given the fact that Janie is not aware that she has a different skin color from the other four children until she is six years old, despite the fact that she may not be much darker than the grandchildren themselves. This environment reflects a bit of the ideal community that Young presents because, although Janie’s grandmother works for the Washburns, Janie is still accepted as part of the group of children despite her different skin color. While it is complicated in the sense that Janie has no understanding of her racial identity while being a part of this community, she is still able to feel recognized as a member of the community. This is contrasted with the community of black school children she interacts with and struggles against in her racially segregated school. Living on the Washburn’s property becomes a problem when the children she goes to school with make fun of her for living with the white people whom her grandmother works for and for accepting gifts such as hair ribbons from them. She is also pushed away from this community of black schoolchildren because of her own racial background. The children would make fun of her father, talking about how the sheriff put “de bloodhounds on de trail tuh ketch mah papa for whut he done tuh mah mama,” referring to the fact that Janie is a child of rape and, thus, mixed in race
In order to maintain contact with her racial community, something that Jordan implies is crucial in black feminism, Nanny decides that they should move off premises and get their own home. Despite the fact that Janie finds comfort and acceptance in the small community of Mrs. Washburn’s grandchildren, Janie is forced away from it in order to establish racial connection. This situation is complicated by Janie’s denial into the community of black schoolchildren, who refuse to accept her because of her association with whiteness both physically and spatially. This could be due to the fact that while Janie was likely more than half white, being a child of rape, she was still considered black by racial standards of the time. Because she was not entirely white, she could not be a part of the white society, and since she was not entirely black, she could neither seamlessly integrate into the black community. The utopian society that is created on the Washburn property is not congruent with societal expectations, and it seems that because of this fact, it must be destroyed and Janie must be displaced from it.

Eatonville is a community very different than that of Janie’s childhood. When Joe first tells Janie about Eatonville, he describes it as an all colored town and as an opportunity to “buy in big” and have an important role in this new town (Hurston 28). Upon arrival at the town, however, both Janie and Joe are met with disappointment. The fledgling town is not much to look at, but Joe aims to change that. What is interesting about this town is that it is all black, but it closely mirrors that of the white society that many had been trying to escape. This is due mainly in part to Joe who seems to have admired the power that the white men hold over others, and he sees the opportunity to exercise his own power in this new town. Joe starts by building a general store, a place to act as a store, meeting place, and post office. From here, he insists that the town needs “tuh incorporate lak every other town. Us got tuh incorporate, and us got tuh
have a mayor, if things is tuh be done and done right” (Hurston 43). This model of society is taken directly from the typical white community of the early twentieth century, with a focal point such as the store and a mayor to overlook all the details of the town. After being elected mayor, Joe decides that the town needs a street lamp, and in the first lighting ceremony of the lamp Joe tells the community “dis occasion is something for us all tuh remember tuh our dyin’ day. De first street lamp in uh colored town” (Hurston 45). Joe and the rest of the community pride themselves on their advancements and on the fact that they are really creating a working, all black town. Pride in their town is countered by the discomfort some feel for Joe as mayor, particularly because he is very commanding. One such example is when Joe asks a ditch to be dug in the middle of the street, and the community members “murmured hotly about slavery being over, but every man filled his assignment” (Hurston 47). With Joe as the mayor, the town is reminded of the power struggle they encountered during times of slavery, especially because Joe is “kind of portly like rich white folks” and painted his two story house “a gloaty, sparkly white” that was associated with white men of stature (Hurston 34, 47). The structure of the town is centered around Joe and what he wants for the town, which eerily mirrors that of his white counterparts.

The members of the Eatonville community are glad to be a part of the town, but an interesting relationship is established between the man of power, Joe, and the rest of the town. This relationship affects Janie who, as the wife of the mayor, has a particular image to uphold and expectations to meet. She is not able to connect with other women in the town because “she slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn’t get but so close to most of them in spirit” (Hurston 46). This disconnect between Janie and the rest of the community greatly affects her, for she has no real interaction with others and is denied it even
when she tries. For example, when the rest of the town gathers to hold a funeral for an old mule that had been the source of plenty of porch talk, Joe does not allow her to attend, informing her that she is better than that. The class divide that Joe created between himself and the rest of the community continues to affect Janie even after Joe’s death. As her interest in Tea Cake grows, as do the town rumors from those who are shocked that of “all the men that she could get...[she’s] fooling with somebody like Tea Cake!” (Hurston 110). This statement alone reveals the class hierarchy that was established as a result of Joe’s reign as mayor in Eatonvielle; as the ex-mayor’s wife, she is considered to be of a higher class than the working class Tea Cake, and therefore their interest in each other is unacceptable. Since Janie is no longer the mayor’s wife, however, she feels comfortable doing what she likes; the town, however, does not, and its members are quick to judge and ostracize her for her decision to continue to see Tea Cake. Because she no longer assumes the identity she had joined the community with, she does not meet the standards of respectability from the community that she had before. Many of the members of the community thought she was just “throwin’ away whut Joe Starks worked hard tuh git tuhgether” instead of considered her own personal views (Hurston 111). In a conversation with Pheoby, the only women of the Eatonville community that Janie is able to connect and establish a bond with, Janie admits “Jody classed me off” in a way she had never really desired (Hurston 112). While Eatonville was able to set up an all black community with the help of Joe Starks as mayor, it is not an entirely open community, and Janie is still cast as an other, left looking for another community to connect with.

Of the three communities, the Everglades is the one most like the ideal community that Young discusses. Being primarily made up of migrant workers, the community of the Everglades is transient and continually changing with those who come and go. Janie’s first impression of the
place is that it is a wild and new place with “people wild too” (Hurston 129). Being in such an ephemeral community, Janie finds herself accepted more for the woman she is. This is likely because no standards have been firmly established because the entire community is made up of strangers who are only there until the job is done. All of the workers are there for the same reason, which also destroys any class structure or hierarchy among them. These are all things that are deeply appreciated by the members of the community as well as Janie, who is more comfortable there than she ever was in Eatonville. In the Everglades, members of the community all gather on Janie’s and Tea Cake’s porch to share stories and laugh, “only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to” (134). She enjoyed the company and her ability to participate in that which Joe would have never allowed her to. The Native Americans who could be seen every now and then living peacefully are never bothered or disrespected. Janie and Tea Cake even befriend the immigrants from the Bahamas, learning to love their music and even began regularly attending their gatherings. Since Janie and Tea Cake have established a relationship with this immigrant community, once the people returned for another season, the Bahamans “quit hiding out to hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn’t laugh at them as they feared” (154). Janie and Tea Cake are able to create a community out of people who were perhaps never meant to bond.

What is most interesting about this community is the fact that they band together to support each other when conflict arises. One member of the community, Mrs. Turner, is very different from the others in that she does not like darker black people, and she makes it widely known. Although Janie does not have any problem with her, the rest of the community is taken aback that the Turners are willing to take the community’s money at their restaurant and hate them once they leave. While the members of the Everglades community have been relatively
accepting of most differences, they are unwilling to tolerate intraracism and decide to stage a fight in the Turner restaurant in an attempt to drive them out of town. After the fight causes Mrs. Turner to vow that they will move “back to Miami where folks is civilized,” the men still come into the restaurant a few days after the incident and ask for forgiveness by giving her five dollars a piece (Hurston 153). While the community was willing to come together to force the Turners out of the town, they still returned to support the Turners with money. This speaks to the dynamic of the Everglades, and the workers, acceptance of otherness. Despite their dislike for Mrs. Turner, they still respect her enough to pay her for some of the damages. They also come to respect the Bahamans and their cultural differences, even celebrating them. This is the kind of community that Janie comes to feel comfort and acceptance in, but that, like her relationships with other communities, does not last for long. As with the first community Janie is a part of, with the Washburn grandchildren, it seem as though the muck is a utopian society. Difference is accepted, similarity is celebrated, and there is a general sense of happiness. With the hurricane, however, Hurston seems to be suggesting that it is too good to be true; this utopian society where otherness is accepted cannot truly exist in the larger society, so it must be destroyed.

After Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake, Janie finds herself facing a court room with a jury of twelve white men. The dynamic of the white community conflicts with that of the black community of the Everglades in this scene, mainly because the black community is against her. Physically, the differences between the communities were highlighted in the clothes that they wore: the white people “wore good clothes and had the pinky color that comes of good food” while the blacks were “packed tight like a case of celery, only much darker than that” (185). A strict divide is immediately set in place between the two communities, with the white community being seen as the more refined. What is most interesting is that the community of workers,
despite having accepted her at one point in time as a working member of their community, is quick to judge her. They believed that Tea Cake “had been good to that woman...He worked like a dog for her and nearly killed himself saving her in the storm, then soon as he got a little fever from the water, she had took up with another man” (Hurston 186). The black community is established as the ones unwilling to listen to what Janie has to offer, while the white women from the town begin to sympathize with her, crying and protecting her from the Everglades community after she is acquitted of her charges. Hurston challenges racial politics with this scene by having the white community side with Janie as the people of the Everglades fights against her. Even after Janie is acquitted, members of the Everglades still scrutinize her with comments such as “‘Well, you know whut dey say ‘uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth.’ Dey do as dey please” (189). This again shows the inability for such a utopian society to exist; in this scene difference is not accepted but is established as “otherness.”

What is interesting, however, is how the racial politics are transformed within the white courtroom. In the Everglades, while there is a sense of race particularity with the scene between the Turners and the rest of the community, race is not as big of a factor as it is here. It seems to be a reminder of how the rest of the society—primarily white—dictates a community and what can be socially accepted.

In spite of her hardships with the different communities, Janie finds herself relatively unaffected. Even after the black community of the Everglades apologizes to Janie for their judgment, she decides to leave the Everglades because “the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn’t there” (191). Her return to Eatonville is no more glorious than her departure from the Everglades; she is met with reluctance and disdain, and the women of the Eatonville community are quick to gossip about her. Janie accepts the talk for what it is and lets it pass her by, telling
Pheoby that “‘talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else...you got tuh go there tuh know there” (192). Janie finds herself at peace in not being able to establish herself in a community; she is comfortable being alone and outside of the confines of the standards of a community. In his essay “‘The Hierarchy Itself’: Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority,” Ryan Simmons suggests that this occurs because “*Their Eyes* is an expression of ‘feminist dialogics’” (Simmons 191). He expands upon this by saying “despite the value of self and community, Hurston is willing to sacrifice the possibility of attaining a coherent version of either, recognizing that, in a patriarchy, the coherence of one necessarily means the sacrifice of the other” (Simmons 191). Simmons is suggesting that in the traditional patriarchal society, one must sacrifice a sense of a nontotalized identity in order to become fully established within a community; alternately, one cannot completely assimilate into a community without forgoing some sense of individual selfhood. As with her inability to establish a totalized identity, Janie is able to accept the fact that there is no community she can incorporate into; the only communities that she found comfort in were in fact too good to be true. Simmons believe that in creating this fragmented character, “Hurston hopes to provide...an account of a “self” and a potential community that will sustain readers and provoke them to act against oppression” which could in turn create a community of readers to help perpetuate the message of the novel (Simmons 191). While Janie is unable to fit contentedly in any community in *Their Eyes*, she may be able to find consolation in the community of readers that is established over time through which there is acceptance of similarity and difference unable to exist within the text.

IV. “Mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf”: Narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
a. Frame Narrative

The use of the frame narrative device is not one unfamiliar to many students of literature. It is found in those texts that establish a narrative frame around another narrative, usually as an indicator of past and present. Hurston uses this device in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, framing the story of Janie’s life with her return to Eatonville after burying her final husband Tea Cake. Robert Stepto argues in his book *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* that the frame narrative in *Their Eyes* “creates something new in that it, not the tale, is Hurston’s vehicle for presenting the communal and possibly archetypal aspects of Janie’s quest and final posture” (Stepto 165). It is through this use of frame narrative, Stepto suggests, that we as readers are given insight into Janie’s story before having even heard the story which gives us time to reflect upon the tale we are about to encounter without all of the details. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, in his chapter “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text” in *The Signifying Monkey*, that “Hurston draws upon the framing device, which serves on the order of plot to interrupt the received narrative flow of linear narration of the realistic novel” and in turn allows Janie “to recapitulate, control, and narrate her own story of becoming, the key sign of sophisticated understanding of the self” (Gates 185). Gates seems to be suggesting that it is through this frame narrative that Janie is able to control her own story; from the beginning of the *Their Eyes* we see that, no matter how the narrative unfolds, in the end Janie has a voice and is able to share her story with her close friend.

The first line of Hurston’s novel opens with a third person narrator; this is the same narrator that we as readers will come to know as the main narrator throughout the novel. This narrator opens the first line with “every man” as her subject. From this, her subject changes from every man to a single man, then from “women” to single woman whom we will later find out is
Janie. These shifts between gendered subjects immediately seems to establish a binary opposition between men and women and their different wants, needs, and expectations. For men, “ships at a distance have [their every] wish on board,” and there are some who come in with the tide, and others who remain at sea until “his dreams [are] mocked to death by Time”; the narrator then states simply that this “is the life of men” (Hurston 1). Women, however, “forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget,” and for them “the dream is the truth...they act and do things accordingly” (Hurston 1). Comparing these, we can see that, for men, their manner of life and death needs to be considered, while for women ideas of life and death may be forgotten at their discretion. This then sets up the community that the woman, Janie, enters into, where we are told “so the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead” (Hurston 1). Although the community that she is entering has already been established, the narrator makes it clear that it had only been created through the story of this woman; for some reason, without her, this community would not have been in existence. Looking to the statement about the woman, or Janie, it is interesting that the narrator establishes this as the beginning, although we later find that this is in fact the end of her story. This gestures towards what Gates had been arguing, which is that this is not simply a story of Janie’s life, but rather her road to discovery of self. By this, I am in agreement with Gates’s argument that it is through the retelling of her story and her ability to retell her story that Janie assumes a comprehensive understanding of self. While, in this outer frame narrative, we are given the end of the tale we are about to overhear, it is also a beginning of a new narrative of self-consciousness.

The following paragraphs of the opening frame narrative continue to shift subjects. After we are told of the beginning, the subject matter shifts from people, whom we assume constitute
the community, and back to the woman, then back to the community, and finally to nobody until we are given direct discourse from characters. Drawing upon my argument about the development of communities throughout Their Eyes, the formulation of narrative within the beginning frame actually gives us insight into the relationships established within the community before we have even seen the communities at work. With Janie being continually opposed, both by the narrator and the language, with the community she is entering, we see that Janie is not a well-accepted member of this community. The community is obviously undone by her return, and yet Janie is generally unaffected by the community’s reaction to her return.

The final aspect of the opening frame that we see is the interaction between Janie and Pheoby. Pheoby, curious to learn of Janie’s well being, brings over food and words of encouragement against the members of the community who had been talking about her as she entered the town. While Pheoby makes it clear that she is there to hear where Janie has been so she can deliver the story to the rest of the community, Janie is comfortable sharing her story and, in fact, supports it, saying “‘you can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah toungue is in mah friend’s mouf’” (Hurston 6). This seems to reflect another argument that Gates makes in his chapter, which is that this novel is actually designed for readers to reflect on the tradition of oral storytelling (Gates 181). The frame shows us that Janie is going to tell a story to her friend, and she tells it in a manner so that it may be retold. In a sense, we as readers are also being prepared to listen to this story and eventually retell it, because Janie remarks that she and Pheoby have been friends for over twenty years, “‘so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint’” (Hurston 7). This allows readers to be aware that not only are we learning of a personal story, but we are also getting the personal insight that a long time friend would be getting. As Gates suggests, the reader is introduced into
the situation with intentions of overhearing the tale Janie is telling to a friend, but the frame and
the narrator allows the line between being a person who is overhearing and a person who is
actually listening to the story, to be blurred.

The outer frame of the novel is presented in the final chapter, following a blank space
that comes after the final words of the actual story. Janie spends the final moments of her time
with Pheoby leaving her with overarching messages she has gathered from her tale, and after that
"there was a finished silence" when Pheoby made her way back home (Hurston 192). Much as
the novel has opened, we are given the third person narrator to close with a blend of third person
perspective and free indirect discourse, a narrative concept I will explore later. The closing of the
frame gives the feeling of completion. The narrative that is being told in the outer frame of the
novel becomes real because it exists in the present time of the story being told, hence its
appearance of real life. The inner frame's placement within reality is altered by the reader's
perception, generally because of the familiarity of the story being told. Looking at *Their Eyes*,
this same kind of situation occurs: Janie's tale is, in fact, not a new one to us. It is a story of a
woman's life and the love she looks for along the way to her discovery of self. There is a familiar
strangeness in the story from the past being told in the inner frame, which makes it seem unreal
or displaced from our own reality. This could be what Gates is addressing when he mentions that
the frame narrative used by Hurston "interrupt[s] the received narrative flow of linear narration
of the realistic novel" (Gates 185). The ending of the frame brings readers back to reality and out
of the familiar strangeness of the novel, as well as bringing the characters out of the tale to
complete the story. It also serves as a reminder that life exists beyond the ending—the story has
been told but it is not necessarily a tale being told on Janie's deathbed.
b. Free Indirect Discourse

Hurston also employs different narrative styles throughout the novel, using a combination of direct discourse, indirect discourse, and free indirect discourse. Direct discourse, which is direct quotations from the characters of the novel, usually provides a first person perspective, meaning that the characters speak from their own perspective using their own personal pronouns. Indirect discourse is the use of the third person omniscient narrator to describe the story as it is unfolding. Free indirect discourse, the style that I will be focusing on for this subsection, is a narrative technique that combines first and third person narration to create a combined voice where it is unclear who is speaking. In “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments that “free indirect discourse attempts to represent ‘consciousness without the apparent intrusion of a narrative voice,’ thereby ‘presenting the illusion of a character’s acting out his [or her] mental state in an immediate relationship with the reader’” (209). It is in these moments of free indirect discourse that the reader is unable to tell who is really speaking—whether it is the narrator still narrating the story to us or whether it is the actual thoughts of the characters. For Gates, free indirect discourse is doing much more than just allowing the reader to see inside characters’ minds and thoughts, it is also a “dramatic way of expressing a divided self” by representing “rhetorically, [Janie’s] interrupted passage from outside to inside” (Gates, “Speakerly” 207). It is not clearly her thoughts, for during these particular moments the narrator does not follow the thought with a comment such as “she thought.” It is instead a moment that happens almost seamlessly, blending the third person narration of the narrator with the first person; in fact it is easy to miss these moments of free indirect discourse if we are not particularly looking for them. Gates also argues that free indirect discourse “reflects both the text’s theme of the doubling of Janie’s self and that of the
problematic relationship between Janie as a speaking subject and spoken language” (Gates, “Speakerly” 207). This argument closely mirrors Barbara Johnson’s argument on Janie’s identity in that it is through the understanding of the division of her self that Janie is able to articulate her identity. By following Janie’s thoughts and voice through free indirect discourse, we as readers are able to track the development of Janie’s voice throughout the novel, which in turn reflects the development of her identity. Janie as spoken language is common throughout the novel; it can be seen as the narrator using her particular “dialect-informed discourse,” as Gates calls it, describes Janie or Janie’s story. Janie as speaking subject takes time to develop throughout the novel, and we finally begin to notice the strength of her voice as the novel is coming to a close. Free indirect discourse thus allows this gap between Janie as speaker and as spoken subject, blending the language and diction of the narrator and Janie to display the development of Janie’s identity through her voice.

The first prominent example of free indirect discourse comes early in the novel arriving in the second chapter, just after Janie has commenced her tale. After thinking for a moment, she decides that her cognizant life began when she was sixteen years old when she had her first experience of sexual longing. One spring afternoon she had spent most of the day beneath a pear tree in Nanny’s yard, for “it had called her to come and gaze on a mystery” (Hurston 10). Upon Janie’s examining the blossoms of this pear tree, we find short moments of free indirect discourse: “it stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why?” (Hurston 10). We at first have the narrator commenting on how this image enthused Janie, but then we have these open questions that seem to be coming from Janie in between these statements about her. After finding herself back inside her grandmother’s house, she remembers that her grandmother “was lying across the
bed asleep so Janie tipped on out of the front door. Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen” (Hurston 11). This is yet another perfect example of how the narrative shifts seamlessly from the third person narrator to this free indirect discourse with seemingly no narrator. It is not the outside perspective of the narrator retelling the moment, and it is not a direct quote from Janie; it instead finds itself somewhere in between and would not be particularly noticeable unless we were looking for it.

Gates has a similar view of free indirect discourse, commenting that it “is not the voice of both a character and a narrator; rather, it is a bivocal utterance...an utterance that no one could have spoken, yet which we recognize because of its characteristic ‘speakerliness,’ its paradoxically written manifestation of the aspiration to the oral” (Gates 208). It allows consciousness to become available to the reader without the obvious intrusion of a narrator, thus allowing a relationship to begin to develop between reader and character/narrator (Gates 209). I believe that it is the characteristic of being spoken that makes it so hard to clearly identify free indirect discourse, yet at the same time this discourse allows us insight into both character and narrator’s minds in an apparently unobtrusive manner.

It is not only the development of Janie’s personal identity and voice that is affected by free indirect discourse; however, as Gates also argues free indirect discourse becomes a way of reflecting a communal black voice throughout the novel. Gates suggests that “the ultimate sign of the dignity and strength of the black voice is this use of a dialect-informed free indirect discourse as narrative commentary beyond that which represents Janie’s thoughts and feelings alone” (Gates “Speakerly” 215). With the community in mind, one of the characters who comes to dominate the narration with passages of his free indirect discourse is Janie’s second husband Joe Starks. After Janie notices a man walking by her house as she is sitting in the yard, we have a
brief moment of Janie’s free indirect discourse before we are introduced to Joe as a character. His introduction is not conducted in direct discourse, however, as many other characters are introduced; instead he is introduced in a combination of the third person narrator and free indirect discourse. We are bombarded with this man: “Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Georgy. Been workin’ for white folks all his life” (Hurston 28). The whole paragraph of his introduction seems to be a struggle between Joe Starks’ free indirect discourse and the narrator, which shows through the way that the narrator could only get in bits and pieces between Joe Starks’ “big voice.” The narrator proclaims that “he had always wanted to be a big voice,” and is interrupted mid-sentence with “but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else” (Hurston 28). This begins a long battle between the narrator, Joe Starks, as well as Janie’s voices; these voices always seems to be clashing, one trying to overrule the other and Joe often coming out the winner of this battle.

In his essay “The Hierarchy Itself: Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority,” Ryan Simmons argues that Joe’s “big voice” is actually a metaphorical representation of the “Western, white male author” who dominates the discourse of other characters from the moment he encounters them (Simmons 187, 183). Joe is, by far, the only character, other than Janie, who gets a significant portion of the free indirect discourse displayed in the novel, presenting this real battle for narrative authority that can be discerned from his introduction in the novel. As the novel progresses, however, and we see Janie begin to develop her voice through the increasing amount of free indirect discourse in her favor, Joe’s use of free indirect discourse lessens and becomes less prominent and demanding. When Joe is descending into death, it seems as though the narrator actually begins to mock Joe and his initial use of her free indirect discourse by using it to vividly describe his imperfections relevant from
age. It begins when Janie “noticed how baggy Joe was getting all over,” which is the only clear-cut implication of the narrator and is followed by “like bags hanging from an ironing board. A little sack hung from the corners of his eyes...a loose-filled bag of feathers...from his ears...a sack of flabby something hung from his loins...But even these things were running down like candle grease as time moved on” (Hurston 81). Where Joe had once dominated his own introduction and description through the use of free indirect discourse, the narrator and Janie have now turned on him to introduce and describe his old age and decline.

Joe puts up a final fight in this battle for narrative authority just before his death, while Janie is actually represented via a free indirect discourse. With Joe’s approaching death, Janie has begun to think about death and the person that death is: “death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West...She was sad and afraid too. Poor Jody! He ought not to have to wrassle in there by himself” (Hurston 84). We see Janie actually feeling sympathy for her dying husband, despite all the pain he had caused her throughout their time together. She decides to send in Sam, a man from the community, to check on him, “but Jody said No. These medical doctors wuz all right with the Godly sick, but they didn’t know a thing about a case like his...He wasn’t going to die at all. That was what he thought” (Hurston 84). After Joe puts up his fight, Janie decides to verbally speak and confront him; the conversation between the two is interrupted by his death, which directly follows Janie saying, “all dis’ bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice—dat ain’t whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you” (Hurston 87). Simmons points out, however, that following this outward statement, Janie immediately experiences deep pity for her dead husband, thinking, “poor Joe! Maybe if she had known some other way to try, she might have made his face different. But what other way could be, she had no idea” (Hurston 87). Simmons argues that Hurston is suggesting through this use of
pity that "while the loss of the 'big voice' associated with the Western, white male author is regrettable in some ways, nonetheless it must be demolished in the name of a new type of narrative" (Simmons 187). Hurston, with the use of free indirect discourse in this way, seems to be suggesting that she is not willing to give in to the traditional masculine demands of narrative—such as Joe's authoritarian voice—and thus sacrifice the freedom of her character's voice, but she will gladly pity the death of this voice in the process.

c. Reader's Relationship with the Text

While in the two previous subsections I have touched on how Hurston established a relationship between the text and the reader in Their Eyes, I will delve further into it in this section. It might have been very easy for Hurston to create a very different relationship between reader and text if she had adhered to the demands of black writers of her time. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out that there had been "ironclad 'Instructions for Contributors' [that] had been widely circulated among black writers in the 'Illustrated Feature Section' of the Negro Press" that were expected to be followed (Gates 179). In these instructions written by George S. Schuyler, writers were asked to submit stories "full of human interest," "written in that intimate manner that wins the reader's confidence at once and makes him or her feel that what is written is begin spoken exclusively to that reader," where "the heroine should always be beautiful, desirable, sincere and virtuous" (Gates 179). The characters must also be familiar to the reader base, particularly of black descent, and the stories must not be sad in nature because "our people have enough troubles without reading about any. We want them to be interested, cheered...comforted, gladdened, and made to laugh" (Gates 179). With these particular expectations, it is easy to see how Hurston was met rather harshly when her novel was published. While Hurston did follow some of these standards, she also worked to challenge the reader/text
relationship that was set before her. Her narrator, for example, may not be able to entirely gain the reader’s confidence from the beginning; it is much more of a process. Hurston challenges this, I believe, by opening the novel in the way that she does with bold all-encompassing statements about men and women. The gravity and importance of these opening statements are not very clear from the beginning, so it may cause the readers to be unsure about these narrator’s assumptions. While the reader may feel as if she is being spoken to during moments of free indirect discourse, there is more of a sense of overhearing the story that is being told than actually being told the story. And finally, although the story ends in an uplifting manner, it most assuredly has moments of sadness, which would have seemingly been unacceptable by these standards. It may be for all of these reasons that Hurston’s text was not well-received when it was first published in 1937—it had a different agenda than much of the work that was published contemporary with it.

In his essay on narrative authority, Ryan Simmons argues that Their Eyes is a dialogical novel that requires some work and willingness from the reader to understand in order to reach its full potential. Simmons calls it “an expression of ‘feminist dialogics’” where there are “segments of a self that is fragmented, that may be recovered by readers over time; and this process of recovery offers, itself, the potential of forming a new community” (Simmons 191). Simmons believes that Hurston did not provide a complete version of either self or community because she recognized that “in a patriarchy, the coherence of one necessarily means the sacrifice of the other” (Summons 191). He is suggesting, then, that Hurston provided segments which would allow readers to step in and, under the right conditions, recover the missing pieces. With this in mind, the timelessness of the novel and its message are entirely dependent on its readers and their personal interpretations. Simmons also points out with this theory that Hurston does not
seem very interested in having her readers reach any specific conclusion, but is rather interested in her readers reaching any conclusion at all (Simmons 192). A conclusion, however, is not easily reached if the reader subscribes to previous ideas of authoritative discourse, as Simmons calls it, for it is by means of an undermining of the “language of the empowered” that this novel works inherently to describe the story of a woman who struggles against that language (Simmons 190). Hurston was creating a new kind of language—a discourse for black women around the world to clash against the discourse that had hurt them for so long. Poststructuralist feminism allows all women alike to access this same language and share it amongst each other in their fight against patriarchal demands of society. In order to really create a dialogue as a reader with the novel, however, the reader must be open to the concepts that Hurston is offering. It is not something that can be accessed without possibly having to challenge one’s own understanding of societal norms. Janie herself suggests that the other townfolk would be unable to understand her story unless they realized that “love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing everywhere and do de same thing tuh everything it touch,” a concept that could easily be applied to the readers of the novel (Hurston 191). Hurston seems to be suggesting that an understanding can only be achieved once readers open their mind to the ideas that not all stories of that time needed to be exactly the same or have the same message. She may not have given the answer to how to end gender or racial discrimination, but she gave something much more important: everlasting tools for readers to figure out for theirselves how to help end discrimination through her words. Hurston’s story was different and had different requirements, and she was eager to make that known. These different requirements requested that the reader question more than racial politics; authoritative discourse existed over issues such as class, gender, and other aspects of identity as well. While it may not have easily been assimilated into the literary canon of the
time Hurston’s novel was published, I believe that these different requirements for readership is what has allowed Their Eyes to withstand the mark of time, for the themes remain relevant despite the changing time.

Simmons also suggests in his article that Pheoby, the original listener of Janie’s story, is the perfect example of the kind of readership that Hurston was eager to reach. Pheoby, who exclaims after the conclusion of the story, “‘Ah done growed ten feet higher jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo,’” and concludes the story truly satisfied and having benefited from hearing Janie’s tale (Hurston 192). It is as though Hurston was eager to have all of her readers affected by the encouraging tale of Janie’s life and, hopefully, if all went well, they would have the same reaction as Janie’s close friend. Establishing this kind of relationship and expectation between Pheoby and the readership indicates how much Hurston valued her readers. I also believe that Hurston showed deep appreciation and value for her readers in the way the story was told: with the frame, it is as though we are there in the house overhearing this story for the first time like Pheoby. With the set-up of the inner frame story, it is as though the readers are hearing the tale for the first time from Pheoby herself. Both positions are places of value and appreciation; whether we are hearing the tale as it is being told or for the first time after it has been told, we as readers are given importance by knowing that we are some of the first people to hear this story. This position of privilege, however, is something that can be easily wasted as Ryan Simmons suggests when he says, “if we do not become more fully connected than a loose assemblage of monadic readers is likely to become, then the political effect of Hurston’s writing will be highly restricted, if it exists at all” (Simmons 192). There is a sense of urgency in utilizing the privilege that we have been given as readers to turn around and use it; how we use it is less important than actually using it. Simmons believes that “the success
of [Hurston’s] (and Janie’s) narrative does depend to an extent on having good readers, but even if these implied readers are not available—if those who encounter this text are not yet prepared for it—the writing of the text is important for other reasons as well” (Simmons 189). This does not discount, however, the fact that every reader who is moved by this novel takes the novel one step closer to reaching a particular goal. Simmons believes that Hurston envisioned “narrative as crucial because, given enough time and enough readings, it can change the world, one reader—connection—at a time” (Simmons 190). Hurston set out in this novel to question traditional themes of authoritative discourse, so every connection made between the novel and its readers is an accomplishment.

Every scholar and joy-reader who has ever picked up Hurston’s novel and written about it, whether their ultimate response was “right” or “wrong,” has added to the success of her novel in my opinion. Even the critics such as Richard Wright who, when the novel was published, essentially criticized it as worthless have given scholars of our time room to reinterpret his allegations. I believe that, as both readers and scholars, we are allowing the novel to grow and develop in every which way possible. As Simmons has suggested, I do not believe that Hurston was looking to guide readers to any particular conclusion as much as she wanted them to come to a conclusion at all. While this point may seem controversial from an activist standpoint, it is important to realize a few limitations that Hurston faced while writing this novel. Being a black woman, Hurston may have not had very many opportunities to openly face those who were perpetuating an authoritative patriarchal discourse she was battling against. Through this novel, Hurston was able to challenge this discourse and, hopefully, inspire others to challenge them as well. Therefore, when a reader or scholar is able to reach a conclusion, even a negative opinion of the novel, she has given opportunity for thought and consideration, and allowed the novel to
live on. While a person such as Pheoby would be an ideal reader, one who listens adamantly as well as responds with action in mind, Hurston did not seem to demand this of the reader because of the way the novel was structured. She could have been accepting of the fact that while she would love to have all of her readers be as eager and attentive as Pheoby, not all readers are the same so the novel allowed room for difference in readership. In her essay "'Words Walking without Masters': Ethnography and the Creative Process in Their Eyes Were Watching God," Emily Dalgarno spoke to the versatility of the novel. She comments that Their Eyes satisfies "the reader whose interest in African American personal narrative is determined by notions of the romantic quest which have the effect of isolating Janie from questions of race and gender," (Delgarno 538). Delgarno also says that Their Eyes also satisfies "the reader who recognizes that study of a culture, whether from the perspective of anthropology or art, creates a horizon from which to recognize that narrative constructs both history and self" (Delgarno 538). Delgarno is arguing that Their Eyes is a text that is available for both the simple joy-reader who picks up the novel for its love story, as well as the scholar who is interested in the cultural aspects of the novel. All together, we create the community that Simmons suggested we will create from the relationship we have all established with the text, which speaks to the genuine strength of the novel being able to bring together all walks of life, perhaps with all of our eyes watching god.

V. Conclusion

While Their Eyes Were Watching God is widely known and appreciated now, I have previously noted that upon its original publication it was not well received. It had received a few good reviews, but the negative reviews that Zora Neale Hurston and Their Eyes got, along with the expectations of black literature of the time, seem to be what ultimately drove the book out of
print. Michael Awkward talks about this in the introduction to *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, he tells us that despite Hurston’s deep knowledge and recognition, “Hurston’s novel quickly disappeared from the minds of readers and critics, selling fewer than 5,000 copies before going out of print” (Awkward 6). One critic, Alain Locke criticized *Their Eyes* for its focus on what he considered more social themes and questioned when Hurston was going to “come to grips with the motive fiction and social document fiction” (Washington x). Perhaps one of the most popular and harsh critics of Hurston’s work was Richard Wright who, at the time, was becoming more popular because of his own work. In a review called “Between Laughter and Tears” for a magazine called *New Masses*, Wright criticized Hurston’s novel saying that it “carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (Wright 22). For Wright, Hurston was not congruent with the demands of black literature of the time, which was based mainly on a masculine ideal and seemed to demand a focus solely on racial politics. Consider again the strict instructions for black literature that were actually promoted during the time Hurston was writing, as written by George Schuyler. He, along with many other writers of this time, demanded things such as to “keep away from the erotic!” and that “the heroine should always be beautiful and desireable...the hero should be of the he-man type, but not stiff, stereotyped, or vulgar” (Gates 179). These were the standards that Hurston was expected to abide by, and she had no problem re-evaluating them to fit her own needs.

Hurston seemed to take criticism rather well and in fact was unafraid to lash out at the critic if it were fit. In the case of Richard Wright, Hurston openly shared her own opinion of his
work, stating that she believed that “Wright stood at the center of ‘the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low down dirty deal’” (Gates 182).

In response to Wright’s criticism of *Their Eyes*, Hurston simply said that “she had wanted at long last to write a black novel, and ‘not a treatise on sociology’” (Gates, Afterword 200). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states that “no two authors in the tradition are more dissimilar than Hurston and Wright” when discussing what he named the Hurston-Wright debate in his chapter “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text” (Gates 183). I am personally glad that Wright published this public criticism of Hurston’s work because it gives scholars, such as myself, the opportunity to see how scholarship on the subject has developed since its original publication. To say that a novel such as *Their Eyes* has no message, thought, or theme is to read the novel without any regard for the techniques she is using. Hurston had different demands of her readers than many of her counterparts did; the harsh review from such a celebrated writer of her own time is a reminder of the society’s inability to accept that which differs from the norm. As Simmons has suggested, I believe that Wright was operating under the influence authoritative discourse, ignoring some of the goals of Hurston’s work.

Hurston truly was one of the first women of her time. She challenged conventions of the literature of her time by rethinking and reworking concepts of identity and community and by creating a new technique of narration in *Their Eyes*. The scholarship on these three theories is wide and falls many a time on opposing poles; I did not try to find anyone particularly right or wrong as much as I tried to rework theory into what I felt was more applicable for the perspective I was approaching it from. I feel that Hurston approached these different subjects from a new, innovative perspective that was hard for many to grasp in a time where racial tensions were still running high. What I find most intriguing about her novel is its ability to
withstand time and remain relevant; while it may be well over seventy years since the novel’s original publication, research on *Their Eyes* continues to emerge. Ryan Simmons puts it well when he says, “*Their Eyes* is, despite its readability, a truly surprising text, one that continually subverts any expectations a reader might put upon it” (Simmons 190). While there may be hundreds of published books and novels dedicated to the research of this novel, there always seems to be something new to discover. I believe that this was Hurston’s intention when she published the novel: to create a community of readers and scholars who will carry on the memory of Janie Crawford-Killicks-Starks-Woods beyond the confines of its time period. Janie even tells us herself, “‘naw, ‘tain’t nothin’ lak you might think. So ‘tain’t no use in me telling you somethin’ unless Ah give you de understandin’ to go ‘long wid it” suggesting that we have been giving all the tools to understanding Janie’s story, all we have to do is go along with it (Hurston 7). Whether we might think we are hard of understanding or not, Hurston wants us to hear this story and be a part of a growing community of readers.

Hurston also displays that she is eager for her readers to discover for themselves what Janie has discovered throughout her own journey to love and self-discovery. In her final statement to Pheoby, Janie says:

‘Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. And listenin’ tuh dat kind uh talk is jus’ lak openin’ yo’ mouth and lettin’ de moon shine down yo’ throat. It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves. (Hurston 192)
Through a combination of moral message and folklore, Hurston seems to be suggesting that the only person one can really depend on is one's self yourself and one's own personal experience. One can talk all one wants, and listen as though one knows what someone is talking about, but until one actually goes there one will not be able to articulate your own opinions of Their Eyes as well as life. It will not be as easy as just allowing one's parents to teach one this kind of understanding; it is something that can only arise out of the experience of reading. Janie challenges Pheoby in these last few moments of her story by telling her not to listen to what is being said in the mainstream; it is something you must do for yourself. While her final message may seem rather clichéd, it creates a subject for thought and discussion for all who read it. Hurston ends the novel in such a way as to create peace for Janie and to continue to challenge us as readers. Now that her story is over, Janie reels in her horizon and finds “so much of life in its meshes!” then calls in “her soul to come and see” (Hurston 193). We will never know what it is that Janie saw in the meshes of her horizon; we are left only knowing that it is something one must personally experience to truly understand. While we contemplate Janie’s story, we join the rest of the community of scholars and readers who have found themselves in the same position, in hoping to one day find the feeling of peace Janie lives out in the final pages of Their Eyes Were Watching God.
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Womanism is a term coined by Walker herself. She defined it in her book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* as:

Womanist 1. From Womanish…A black feminist or feminist of color…[A womanist is also] a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture … and women’s strength … committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist … Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (pp. xi–xii).

I consider this to be a form of universality because, while some black feminists are taking into account experiences that they likely to share with other black women, they are also creating an assumption that they have all had the same experience. Drawing from E.P. Thompson, Joan W. Scott describes in her essay “The Evidence of Experience” that “experience, because it is ultimately shaped by relations of production, is a unifying phenomenon, overriding other kinds of diversity” (Scott 784). While it does become a way for women of like backgrounds to unify, “the unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience” so that “when class becomes an overriding identity, other subject-positions are subsumed by it, those of gender, for example” (Scott 785). The black women’s experience then is able to become the basis for all of black women’s identity and historical experience, which I feel is another limiting aspect of unification (Scott 786).

A question that may arise from this statement is how does Hurston’s text do something remarkably different from what other texts do? I believe that because of its themes and new type of language, *Their Eyes* invites the reader to not only read the text, but have the ability to engage with the text and carry on its themes into their own lives. As Simmons argues, however, it is easy to entirely miss this point if the reader subscribes to the authoritative discourse present in the patriarchal literature of our society.