The Use of Vernacular as Cultural Defiance: Politics of Respectability in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

D' Costa, Shaina S

The Use of Vernacular as Cultural Defiance:

Politics of Respectability in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Shaina D'Costa

Master Thesis

MA Literary Studies: Literature in Society, Europe and Beyond

Leiden University

November 11, 2025

s4382218

First Reader: Dr. Nidesh Lawtoo

Second Reader: Dr. Sara Polak

CONTENTS

Introduction

A recent African American Vernacular English (AAVE) term 'bussin' began to widely gain popularity on the internet. Dating back to the historical use of AAVE, during an era where Black literature adhered to prescriptive ideals of respectability, a term like 'bussin' would have likely been dismissed as a cheap or unsophisticated form of approval. How does time transcend and redefine the comprehension of these terms? According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, the term "bussin" traces its origins to AAVE as a modern adaptation of the word 'bust',[1] which synonymously connotes the word 'smash', here; an overwhelming wave of excitement that is mostly associated with food or something that is extraordinarily, authentically good. This term made its way into the teen slang dictionary, rap and hip-hop culture and now a popular expression among the Gen Z social talk. Hanna L. Smokoski in her work "Voicing the Other: Mock AAVE on Social Media" (2016) emphasizes on Mock AAVE[2] which refers to the stylized version of African American Vernacular English spoken by non-natives in larger Western parts of the world. Such adaptations mostly grew upon on what was fancied, creating an affiliation with Black culture or sometimes, rather a superior take on a negative stereotype. We could similarly concur to a positive affiliation on the modern take of the word "bussin". Smokoski takes on a discourse that analyses the AAVE not merely as a "collection of slang terms, a less-than complete language" (4), but rather attempts to understand the "negative characteristics stereotypically associated with urban,

[1]The word "bussin" can be found on the Merriam Webster Dictionary.
[2]For more on Mock AAVE, see Smokoski's discussion on the affiliation towards Black culture.

socioeconomically marginalized adolescent" (5) folk. Thus, if mainstream culture influences the evolution and acceptance of the African American vernacular, how does Hurston's portrayal and defence of vernacular speech illustrate this cultural influence in her own period?

The evolution in the adaptation of the AAVE from its native heritage to modern day slang suffers its positioning as a 'standard language' that speaks for its culture. The idea of what makes a language 'standard', implies an objective outlook in the midst of ethnic profiling. Zora Neale Hurston's work draws in a similar struggle that battled with the ideal positioning of the African American Vernacular as a language proud to its heritage during her literary career. Hurston, a poignant Black woman writer of the time (1891-1960), occupied a distinctive position in the realm of Black art and literature. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, respectability politics emerged as a strategy within the African American community to counteract racial prejudice and gain societal acceptance. This strategy was welcomed in the era of the Harlem Renaissance [3], a revolutionary intellectual movement in literary history that led to a powerful assertion of Black identity, breaking away from white-dominated cultural norms and rejecting the stereotypes of Black life in mainstream American culture. In her work *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture*, Margaret G. West agrees to Robert Hemenway's succinct description of the period as 'more a spirit than a movement' (15). Hurston rejected the notion that Black art needed to serve a political agenda

[3] A pivotal cultural movement (1918-1937) centered in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City, that marked the emergence of the emancipated Black folk that established their own take on politics, music, art and fashion. See more on The Harlem Renaissance in relation to Hurston as articulated by West, M. Genevieve.

or prove Black worthiness to a white audience. However, Hurston was critiqued by her contemporaries W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright who argued that art should enable political change. Both, Du Bois and Wright shaped the early canon of African American literature around the politics of respectability. Although they adopted two distinct strategies of assimilation and protest respectively, they emphasized that literary portrayals of Black life must serve the broader project of racial uplift and social justice.

Building on her earlier exploration of folklore and oral storytelling in works like *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston crafted a narrative that is both richly rooted in the Black vernacular and demonstrative of the complexities of African American life. Her *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) stands as a monumental work that intricately weaves together her anthropological expertise and carries deep reverence for African American cultural traditions. Through her protagonist Janie's journey towards self-realization, Hurston not only celebrates the richness of Black folklore and spirituality, but also creates a space where voice and the use of African American vernacular serves as a tool that strongly reflects Black identity and expression. With a clear spotlight on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, this thesis aims to advocate Hurston's use of aesthetics as an act of resistance against conventional narrative traditions.

Amidst the push of respectability, Hurston in her work fiercely attempts to celebrate the use of vernacular in its entirety, rather than using it as a political tool. Scholars like Betsy Barry, Maria J. Racine and Keiko Dilbeck analyse Hurston's use of dialect and voice as an authentic representation of Black agency. Barry in their article "It's hard fuh me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it: representing language in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching Go*d", speaks about the use of language as an "orthographic

representation" (174), [4] where Hurston not only uses dialect as a mere stylistic device, but captures features and mannerisms of Southern AAVE. Rather than elevating her characters through refined language or idealized behavior, she immerses them in the raw, unfiltered realities of Southern Black life that revolved around gossip, violence, humor and contradiction. This portrayal unsettled critics who sought dignified Black representation as a tool for a kind of racial advancement. Yet, Hurston's choice was deliberate. By refusing to sanitize Black life, she rejected the need to perform respectability. In the novel, her protagonist remarks, "So long as they get a name to gnaw on they don't care whose it is, and what about, 'specially if they can make it sound like evil" (Hurston 6). Hurston critiques the eagerness with which people consume damaging narratives, especially when they serve as a form of entertainment at someone else's expense. The act of "gnawing" on a name evokes a slow, consuming destruction, attempting to portray how language suffers abuse when it lacks a mainstream identity.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston implicitly, yet powerfully negotiates this very tension between artistic expression and the era's prescriptive ideals of Black literature and respectability within the context of African American literature. What still builds and stands out as an imperative question among the claims of inferiority and symbolism made by previous scholarship, is Hurston's manner of resistance. In this paper, I thus argue, that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* recurringly highlights the duality between thought and speech,

[4] The mental representation of the sounds and combinations of sounds that comprise words in a particular spoken language. On 'orthographic representation', see: Rapp, Brenda, and Simon Fischer-Baum (338-354).

activism and aestheticism, as cultural defiance through her speakerly [5] assertion of Black culture to be rich, worthy, and complete on its own terms.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To support this argument, I will draw on W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of "double consciousness" as articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which would provide an elaborate understanding of the split voices in Hurston's narration and the internal feeling of two-ness through the use of storytelling as an authentic form of Black narration. Although both, Hurston and Du Bois took a different course in resisting white linguistic oppression, his lens articulates the internal conflict Black artists face, as they navigate self-expression under the gaze of a dominant white culture striving for authenticity while being pressured to conform to respectable representations. This internal conflict also attempts to answer the linguistic identity debate opened earlier in the introduction, in regard to the adaptation of African American slang used by teenagers in daily social conversations sometimes, intended to create a sense of affiliation with African American culture, naïve of the deeper political impact it might entail. This also draws parallels with performative Blackface performances during the respectability era when modern voices use exaggerated tones, gestures, or emojis that mimic caricatures of Black speech and behaviour.

[5] The term 'speakerly' refers to a rhetorical strategy in writing, employed by Hurston in her work, that blends in rhythms and patterns than a direct form of expression. Henry Louis Gates emphasises on this strategy in 3.2, (36).

To further contextualize this discourse, I will incorporate Frantz Fanon's framework of internalized oppression and the construction of Black identity as conveyed in his *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952). Hurston's use of Black Southern vernacular is a direct counter to the internalized colonial expectation; that respectable Black literature must mirror white linguistic and cultural standards. It pushes back against the fractured identity that Fanon describes in his essay. In his work, Fanons focuses on the lived experience of the Black man, repeatedly posing the question: "What does the black man want?" (10). Fanon acknowledged this racial illness from which a black man perished during an existential crisis that emerged from an oppressive background during revolutionary France [6]. Although his colonial reality differed from Hurston's, he believed that to speak the colonizer's tongue, was to assimilate and become one of them, which he firmly refused to stand by. Hurston in her own expertise, did not directly address the 'fractured self', but redefines it as beauty, rather than an impairment that needed to be fixed.

Additionally, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of "Signifyin(g)," will add to my analysis as a recovery of AAVE, as articulated in his seminal work *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). This theory will be employed to analyse Hurston's engagement with Black vernacular and rhetorical play, 'Signifyin(g)' her use of African American vernacular to be a sophisticated, culturally rooted rhetorical strategy, as I believe, creates a catch on her syntax and satirical

[6] Fanon's remarks on "what the Black man wants" emerged during a later literary period (1950-1960); his works were intellectual attacks on the racial distortion of the Black man during Martinique's struggles to racially liberate themselves. See more: Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

play of words adding texture and flavour to her narration, again, as a celebration and acceptance of Black orality.

Melding the theories of W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers a framework that would enable one to understand how Hurston's choices are more than just artistic choices. Together, these theories reveal how Hurston's embrace of folklore, dialect, and oral tradition act as layered forms of resistance. Du Bois and Fanon outline the pressures that necessitate resistance, while Gates highlights the tools through which that resistance is enacted. Their combined lens will thus allow for a nuanced reading of Hurston's work as both politically defiant and artistically innovative.

To further provide an intimate understanding of this argument, this research will engage a range of secondary sources that offer critical insight into the intersections of race, gender, vernacular, and cultural politics. Each source contributes to exploring key sub sections that build through this paper illuminating how Hurston negotiates the tension between artistic freedom and the ideological constraints of her time. Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) will offer a crucial theoretical lens that advocates Hurston's refusal to conform to the 'mountain' of white approval and middle-class Black respectability. Hughes and Hurston shared the same professional timeline and collaborated with their aligned ideas of presenting a raw image of the "overtones and undertones" (693) of Black folklore. However, the medium to their ideas seemed to distort when their method of presentation began to differ [7]. Although Hughes did not explicitly

[7] Hughes and Hurston collaborated and wrote the play *Mule Bone* (1930) with the intention of establishing a new Negro Theatre, as both yearned for a non-assimilationist approach towards Black literature. However, the play was never staged as he perceived her stylistic themes to be unserious. (Manuel, Carne. *Mule Bone*)

comment on *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* his professional experience with Hurston asserted that "she was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the south" (Rezapoorian, Sanchez 105). This conflict between two Black writers again highlights the internal split in approaching this racial illness that Fanon speaks about in his work. The Black man loses his capacity to create what he deems as the only approach to present his worth. Hughes wrote his plays inspired by the jazz and blues of the time, picking a more class-conscious approach towards linguistic liberation. Meanwhile, Hurston chose Black culture to be her muse by leaning towards her anthropological knowledge of folklore. Hughes often worried that Hurston's work with its focus on humor and satire could risk being misread by white audiences and thus would confirm the ingrained stereotypes of the 'quaint' Black folk. Why was such expression considered uncivilized, and why did cultural diversity rooted in different linguistic and aesthetic traditions become a justification to differentiate skin colour, establish racial hierarchy, and assert dominance? Was the inability of white society to "digest" diversity genuine, or was it merely a convenient excuse to rationalize control, using history as a tool for exclusion rather than understanding?

Advancing on refusal to conformity, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) reflects the need for a literary movement that would encourage and promote feminist writing as intended in Hurston's pursuit of female agency. Carby articulates her take on gender, race and class which posed as a wall that divided agency and privilege between white and black folk. Decades later, Carby advocates for Hurston's take on a woman's voice in

society. Carby's call for movements solely dedicated to feminist voices is a recall to Hurston's theme of silencing her protagonist.

In her *Looking For Zora,* Alice Walker picks on Hurston's imprints. She believes that her legacy left much for her readers to fall back on. Hurston's take on orality and the linguistic wealth it entailed, continues to show in Walker's work. On interviewing a woman known to Zora, she mourns the lack of recognition and ignorance to the author's work in her good years. Albeit, some of these writers might not share Hurston's timeline, their linguistic struggles blur the lines of time, shouldering the responsibility of bringing Hurston's advocacy for language; here, vernacular as cultural defiance, a resistance that does not have to adhere to politics or any sort of respectability to frontline or define Black folklore.

To explore this research argument adequately, this thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 provides the historical and literary context necessary to understand the stakes of Hurston's work. It explores the socio-political forces of the early 20th century, the rise of respectability politics, and the expectations placed on Black writers during and after the Harlem Renaissance. Chapter 2 further forms the core of the analysis, focusing on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and its theoretical engagement with her contemporaries namely W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, incorporating their juxtaposing ideas on artistic expression in the midst of cultural and political upliftment overtly addressing the 'activism' versus 'aestheticism' battlefield. Chapter 3 contextualizes Hurston's protagonist; Janie's journey towards self-realisation and female agency. Chapter 4 wraps up this study by drawing Hurston's rejection of these ideals that positioned her as a forerunner for more radical Black expression in modern African American literature and feminist criticism, showing how her influence resonates in contemporary literary movements.

I

Historical and Literary Context of Hurston's Era

1.1 The African American Literary Tradition: "high art" vs "folk art"

In the early 20th century, mainstream American literature largely catered to the white audience by affirming dominant cultural norms, centering whiteness as the universal human experience. During the Great Depression, Zora Neale Hurston and several other Harlem Renaissance writers contributed to the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) [8]. A key component of the FWP was its Folklore Division, which focused on documenting oral traditions, music and stories to safeguard America's folk heritage for future generations. Unlike the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine, as a space for intellectual protest and racial uplift, the FWP was not explicitly political in its origins. Rather than functioning as a tool for Black activism, the FWP aimed to preserve the cultural richness of the nation during the economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression. The FWP allowed for a broader representation of Black voices. It welcomed writers like Zora Neale Hurston who sought to center the cultural value

[8] The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was a U.S. government program under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression, active from 1935 to 1943. Further articulated in King, Lovalerie's *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston*, 28-30)

of Black orality, spirituality, and folklore, not merely as a political argument but as a reclamation of cultural sovereignty.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the use of dialect by Black writers was often seen as problematic due to its associations with minstrelsy [9] and the Plantation Tradition [10]. Minstrelsy was perceived as a comedic performance that did not exhibit dignity of Black folklore, but rather enforced its acquaintance with the 'savage' and 'exotic'. In his work *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott suggests that the "impulses behind minstrelsy reflect a cultural dialectic marked not only by exploitation and control but also by interest in and attraction to black culture" (West 33). Minstrelsy functioned as a veneer that shadowed race. Both black and white artists participated as blackface performers. Although minstrelsy was solely intended for the white laugh, Hurston's critics accused her work to promote the same reaction.

These performances conceived an association of Black folklore to the wild, childlike and uncivilized, binding it to the central term: 'primitivism'; a product of colonial and racist ideologies that created a 'we vs 'them' on Black writers. Marianna Torgovnick in her *Gone Primitive* suggests that these depictions of Black life were birthed based on civilizations that were considered to be 'immature' and 'undeveloped', which directly labelled a poor

---

[9] refers to a form of theatrical performance popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, where white and black performers wore blackface makeup and caricatured African American speech and music for entertainment.
[10] a literary and cultural genre that idealized the lives of white plantation owners; romanticizing the brutal realities of slavery.
[7] and [8]: (West, M. Genevieve. *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture,* 2005.)

economic locus to be primitive. She asserts, "The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it" (9). This emphasized a sense of exoticism that limited Black authors to roles that reinforced cultural otherness. This sense of exotism shares parallels with the distortive ideas of celebrating Black speech between Hughes and Hurston that forced them to bring their first theatrical play, *Mule Bone* (1930) to a halt. To dampen the association of Black culture to a primitive way of life, W.E.B. Du Bois advanced an assimilationist model of Black progress through respectability and 'high art', demanding that literature should function as a moral and political tool.

Through platforms like *The Crisis* magazine and concepts such as the "Talented Tenth"[11], in his *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois notes, "By refusing to give this Talented Tenth the key to knowledge, can any sane man imagine that they will lightly lay aside their yearning and contentedly become hewers of wood and drawers of water? No." (Du Bois 58) In these lines Du Bois lays down the blueprint of intellectual control that he believed was meant to be exercised by a partial section of Black folk. Du Bois argued that all art is propaganda and that is all it should ever be. He asserted that Black artists ought to fight with their own positive propaganda. This brings one to the question: who decides if a propaganda is morally correct and how does it shape the politics of respectability?

To Du Bois, art as propaganda meant political liberation. To Hurston, propaganda meant internal manipulation. Over the years, the use of AAVE has circulated through political

[11] This concept believed that 10% of the African American population; the most intellectually gifted and morally correct should lead the way in uplifting the race as a whole.
See Du Bois, W.E.B. *Talented Tenth*, 1903.

and radical definitions stripping off its context and authenticity, causing it to become an extremely performative way of expression than a language of its own. This policed version of expression could draw connections with the racist myths of inferiority and social acceptance that was birthed during a time (Harlem Renaissance) that penned its own definition of 'respectable behaviour'. Du Bois' propaganda believed that art has its own moral duty. Martina Mallocci in her essay "All Art is Propaganda": W.E.B. Du Bois's The Crisis and the Construction of a Black Public Image" notes Du Bois' advocacy for federal support to public education, as well as federal intervention against racial segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching during 1920 America. As a Black writer suffering from his own conflict of being an elitist, that is, by encouraging an intellectual section of Black folk (The Talented Tenth), Du Bois held tight to the belief that if art ignored injustice, it would amount to moral negligence. Hence, these personal, yet political interpretations of morality shape modern perceptions of the African American culture, especially its social linguistic nuances.

Didactically shouldering Du Bois' take on political writing, his contemporary, Richard Wright criticized Hurston's use of dialect and folklore, asserting that it did little to advance the race politically. Wright in his *Blueprint for Negro Writing* (1937) argues, "The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary" (102). Wright's statement suggests that a writer who seeks to serve as a "purposeful agent" within their race must offer a socially conscious portrayal of Black life. He believed that a writer should not only represent the cultural richness of Black people but also provide insight into the social and political forces shaping their existence.

Published in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Hurston's essay "The Characteristics of Negro Expression" advocates for the motives behind her work. In response to her critics

she asserts, "If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and the burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of "ams" and "Ises." Fortunately, we don't have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself" (Hurston 12). With this stance, Zora Neale Hurston rejected both didacticism and assimilation. Instead, she focused on the richness of Black vernacular culture, folklore, and everyday interior life. When asked why her work often omits direct engagement with the social injustices faced by African Americans, Hurston responded pointedly, "as if the white people did not know already that we are suffering injustices and denied our rights" (Hurston 69). This remark reflects Hurston's awareness of how narratives centered on Black victimization were often consumed by white audiences. She recognized that such portrayals, while politically charged, could be appropriated in ways that affirmed white moral superiority.

1.2 The Influence of the Harlem Renaissance: Literary Expectations in the Context of Race, Class and Gender

The term "politics of respectability" was first coined by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in 1993. In her work *Righteous Discontent* (1993), she defines respectability to be a "reform of individual behaviour and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (187). Women belonging to the black Baptist women's movement [12] saw this form of assimilation as a fluid shift that did not seem harsh, but rather a mannered form of assimilation. Conforming to this push of respectability meant securing a voice in the elite society without judgement or criticism. Was

[12] Emerged from the black Baptist church; an oppositional space provided for black women to protest against social injustice, however, adapted to the larger political framework of race relations in America. (1900-1920) See: Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement In the Black Baptist Church.*

this pressure purely about maintaining white historical dominance, or was something deeper and more personal at play; particularly the role of vernacular, as a threat to white mainstream literature?

Whiteness was an asset, while Blackness was equated with enslavement and criminality. The idea of darkness as a link to evil, persisted even after slavery was abolished. The Jim Crow [13] institutionalized this hierarchy through laws that enforced segregation and racial terror. Black artists, writers, and thinkers were often expected by both white and Black audiences to confront or respond to this brutal reality. In his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926) Langston Hughes writes, "And the mother often says 'Don't be like niggers' when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, 'Look how well a white man does things' …The whisper of 'I want to be white' runs silently through their minds" (55). In these lines, Hughes addresses this racial terror of adopting to mainstream literature and its proposed manner of narrative. When Hughes wrote in the rhythms of the blues and jazz, he did not borrow it from mainstream art but honoured the roots of a tradition that mainstream America had tried to co-opt. In his work "The Significance of Blues", Douglas Henry Daniels gives his readers an insight on the cultural symbolism of blues and jazz imperative to African American culture with a notable assertion by Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, a renowned composer during 1930's America. Ellington notes, "This music was the result of our transportation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation

[13] refers to the period of racial segregation and legalized discrimination against African Americans in the United States, lasting roughly from the late 1870s to the mid-1960s.
On Jim Crow laws of segregation, see Claudrena N. Harold's *New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South*.

days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as 'jazz' is something more than just dance music" (Daniels 15). Black working-class musicians saw these rhythms as a reclamation of Black art forms that wrapped the tyranny, survival and the bond of their inner circle during slave culture. Hughes uses this musicality as a celebratory, at the same time a revolutionary discourse to exhibit the richness of Black culture.

Writing in 1926, Hughes here likely refers to Countee Cullen, a classically trained African American writer whose poems largely adhered to European traditions of form and meter. Resonating with the mannerisms of a Negro man caused conflict within an artist's art of portraying his native culture. Although Hughes presented Countee Cullens to be a Black artist who adopted the European meter and form in his writings, Hughes might have not entirely grasped the artist's intended purpose. Sibyl Adam's study[14] on Hughes and Cullen's poetic dilemma in the midst of a prejudiced world, advocate for these conflicting ideas between the two authors. In her work "The African-American poet's dilemma: Langston Hughes' and Countee Cullen's poetic response to a prejudiced world", she pins down a claim by James Smethurst and Jean Wagner stating that Hughes' unnamed "young Negro poet" in his The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain indeed refers to Countee Cullen after his resemblance with the statement, "I want to be a poet-not a Negro poet" (Hughes 1) in the opening lines of Hughes' essay that Cullen asserted in an interview in 1924[15]. Perhaps, for

[14] On Hughes and Cullen, see Adam, Sibyl's take on the "The African-American Poet's Dilemma: Langston Hughes' and Countee Cullen's Poetic Response to a Prejudiced World."
[15] For more on the interview in 1924, see Smethurst, James. "Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes." (112)

Cullen, although he shared the same revolutionary intention of uplifting Black culture with Hughes, his method of doing so reflected an internalized pressure of measuring oneself against white artistic norms; that is, he simply might have not wanted to be narrowed into the category of race literature and rather protest within the European convention of literature. Unlike Cullen, Hurston fights the traditional battle of conventional adherence to white writing. Like skin, language became relic of deficiency, and so did Black culture in its entirety. A deficiency that needed control and surveillance.

While Du Bois, emphasized "uplift" through respectability, Hurston chose to document the beauty and struggle of ordinary Black folk including their flaws, satire, and contradictions. Why did she intentionally depict Black local culture in a way that appeared to fit the very puzzle piece white audiences had long assigned them; uncivilized, primitive, and unserious?

Hurston's protagonist, Janie, stands in stark contrast to the era's preferred model of Black womanhood. The prevalence of light-skinned individuals among the Black upper class comes from a time when white men provided for their mixed-race children. By giving a voice to her protagonist shaped by these histories, Hurston subtly critiques the intersection of race, gender, and class, while reclaiming the Black woman's narrative from invisibility. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Janie's journey is one of self-definition, not in opposition to whiteness, but to the gendered silencing within her own community. Hurston conveys this gendered silencing through these very lines in the novel: "They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment" (Hurston 1). The porch talkers of Eatonville depict mindless voices, gossip and judgement. The feeling of powerlessness in the midst of the white gaze and its norms, enabled them to criticise their own kind. As depicted in fiction, these traits significantly seem to find its way into the conflicting state of Black writers. The fractured self- esteem of being authentic on one's own feet created conflicts within their works

although they intended the same purpose; dignity and emancipation of their own heritage, language and culture. The exaggeration in the phrase "passed nations" depict control and surveillance. Hurston through her novel, traces how envy and judgement within the fictional realm mirrored the intra-racial tensions among Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance, and how both forms of internal conflict ultimately served the expectations of the white gaze, hence, inviting white control.

Hurston's refusal to center victimization or conformity in her storytelling was a radical act; reclaiming the narrative space for Black women's interiority and vocal freedom during a period when both were denied. An observation of Hurston's depictions of Black male characters can suggest that these figures were not crafted for white approval, but were interpersonal critiques rooted in lived experience. Her decision to depict Black men as sometimes lazy, violent, or promiscuous was a deliberate choice that exposed gender tensions and sought to challenge patriarchal norms within the Black community, even if it meant alienating male contemporaries like Richard Wright, who accused her of lacking political depth. In doing so, she challenged both white and Black expectations of what 'proper' Black literature should look like.

II

Negotiating Artistic Expression vs. Political Ideals in Black Literature

2.1 Activism vs. Aestheticism

Wright and Hurston represented two juxtaposing ideas of defiance in Black literature; activism vs. aesthetics. In his review for the *New Masses* on October 5,1937, Wright stated:

> Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction … Miss Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes. Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh.

Protest writing, however, could not alone carry the entire burden of cultural transformation**.** Black literature was reduced to a political pamphlet that was expected to scream and never sing. While protest literature was necessary, it was not sufficient. Black literature needed the liberty to look messy, flawed, raw and promising.

In her work *What White Publishers Won't Print*, Hurston asserts, "To grasp the penetration of western civilization in a minority, it is necessary to know how the average behaves and lives" (Hurston 121). Activism in Black literature has often been both an armour and a burden. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights era and beyond, Black writers have been expected not only to create art, but to justify its existence through a political voice.

She further notes, "Outside of racial attitudes, there is still another reason why this literature should exist. Literature and other arts are supposed to hold up the mirror to nature. With only the fractional "exceptional" and the "quaint" portrayed, a true picture of Negro life in America cannot be" (Hurston 121). Hurston repetitively in her works attempted to establish a sense of self celebration by asserting that joy, beauty, folklore and love are also radical forms of resistance.

Wright criticized Hurston for not only lacking a political message but also accused her of making Black life seem quaint. His discomfort suggests her work was subverting expectations of what Black literature 'should' be. Wright notes, "The fact that Negro writing has been addressed in the main to a small white audience rather than to a Negro one, it should be stated that no attempt is being made here to propagate a specious and blatant nationalism" (Wright 100). Hurston's characters were not icons of political resistance, but real people; unapologetic, contradictory in race and colour and full of life. Unlike her contemporaries, Du Bois, Richard Wright, and later Achebe, Hurston rejected both protest literature and the act of assimilation, but anchored resistance through aesthetics.

By separating dialect from standard English, Hurston ensures that the characters' voices remain true to their culture, while allowing Janie's personal journey to unfold in a universally accessible way. Janie's inner world is described in standard English, while her spoken voice is in dialect. Does this suggest that her thoughts are more refined than her speech? We observe these shifting speech patterns that reflect her agency and resistance. The code-switching between narrative English and folk dialect marks her journey of self-definition. Spoken in a third person narration from Janie's perspective, "So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (11), Hurston makes a distinct framework throughout the novel keeping in mind a universally accepted narration, bringing in texture and flavour to

Janie's thoughts. She attempted to articulate Janie's thoughts in standard English symbolising that the Black voice is not primitive and exotic, but is clear and defined. The lines, "Who Ah'm goin' tuh marry off-hand lak dat? Ah don't know nobody" (13), is conveyed through her spoken voice which reflects the nuanced texture of her social world, relationships, and identity that authenticates her native dialect.

Hurston deliberately chose to create this duality by adopting the code-switching aesthetic to weigh the reception of AAVE in accordance with the traditional style of narrative, attempting to prove that the vernacular is as valid and comprehensible as standard English. Through Janie's alternating thought and speech, Hurston also attempts to bind in the feeling of two-ness, allowing this duality to co-exist rather than glorifying one above the other. The dynamics of the shift in speech changes throughout the novel. The communal silencing endured by Janie through the course of her journey to self-actualization plays a significant role in the way she speaks her mind. Janie remains silent, adhering to her feminine duty as the mayor's wife. Joe Starks' authoritarianism creates a sense of inferiority when he addresses Janie. He uses language as a tool of superiority to address the crowd and shifts accordingly to exhibit control. In his work *Discourse Strategies* (1982) John Gumperz defines code-switching as "the juxtaposition of distinct varieties of language within a sentence or discourse" (Gumperz 59). This sociolinguistic choice is generally used to navigate linguistic differences within a diverse community. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston uses this sociolinguistic choice as an aesthetic through Janie's voice to explore how her agency unfolds as she grows through her marriages. She elevates vernacular to carry both emotional and intellectual weight. The novel's narration and dialogue intertwine effortlessly into each other, blurring the lines between thought and speech, which is part of how Hurston resisted dominant literary hierarchies.

The use of figurative rhetoric is another element that complements Hurston's aesthetic in her 'speakerly text'. Hughes and Hurston shared this common element of a sort of poetic imagery in their works. The use of metaphoric and personified language became an element of beauty in Black dialect that described feelings and emotions; the same feelings that were perceived as primitive or shameful by the white dominant perspective. It has been noted by etymologists that Black Americans reshaped much of the language to their liking, and had their innovations adopted even by the ruling class. One only needs to hear a Southern white man speak to recognize this influence. From softening harsh consonants like turning 'aren't' into 'ain't', 'party girl' into 'party gyal' to creating potent expressions from existing elements, the transformation is undeniable.

In doing so, this anticipates what Chinua Achebe writing from the perspective of finding a new medium, would later articulate in *The African Writer and the English Language*, "He is like a man offering a small, nondescript routine sacrifice for which a chick, or less, will do. A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering" (Achebe 5). Achebe critiques superficial artistic effort, associating it to a trivial sacrifice. He argues that a writer must find a form and medium powerful enough to carry the full emotional, cultural, and historical weight of their subject matter. He emphasizes that it must be reworked and infused with the rhythms, imagery, and structures of Black thought and speech, much of what writers like Hurston and Hughes exhibited in their work. However, Achebe did not reject the use of the colonizer's language. Instead, he advocated for infusing it with the worldviews of native culture, transforming it into a tool that served, rather than silenced the Black experience, without submitting to assimilation.

2.2 Cultural Memory and Afro-Diasporic Tradition

By grounding her storytelling in the spoken and cultural textures of Black southern life, Hurston challenged the boundaries of what was considered "literary" and who got to define it. She was deeply engaged in Afro-diasporic storytelling traditions which valued communal storytelling over individual authorship. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Janie's telling of her own story to Phoeby, and the porch talkers highlight these examples of speechmaking and storytelling which often incorporate elements of the oral tradition. An imperative voice in the narrative are Joe Starks's speeches. When Janie is asked to comment on her husband's election as mayor, Joe interrupts, "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'" (Hurston 43). Many of these conversations were used to characterise the relationship between men and women. Janie's journey towards self-actualization stems from finding her own voice in the face of patriarchy. The use of vernacular and its dynamic diction characterises Janie's maturity as a grown woman. It is her voice that empowers her with autonomy than love or wealth. More than simply preserving folk speech, Hurston uses language as a vehicle to interrogate gendered power structures, portraying a Black woman who navigates and ultimately challenges the male-dominated society that seeks to define and confine her.

Hurston was well acclaimed for her interests in anthropology. Her guide, Franz Boas helped fuel her interests to continue pursuing this study. Hurston chose to conduct her research in an intimate dimension by directly melding with the folk. Her renowned anthropological work *Mules and Men* (1935) was a significant contribution to honouring the oral heritage of Black people, as it gave a voice to those whose stories had been marginalized or ignored in mainstream literary traditions. She believed that by attaining knowledge about her people, it would enable her to center herself in the storytelling tradition to proclaim the lives of her people and celebrate it as it deserved to be celebrated and appreciated. She

consciously bridges the gap between anthropology and literature by showcasing folklore, including her deep interest in hoodoo and spiritual traditions. Lovalerie King in her *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston* states that Hurston's "participatory approach allowed her to become part of the group under study" (49), thus providing her readers with a close watch on these lived experiences. Traditionally, Africans have passed down the art of storytelling as a paramount characteristic of their heritage and culture that signals the need to entertain, enlighten and educate. A classic form of storytelling called the griot [16] oral tradition where the knowledge, values and stories told, create a dynamic for the listener or the viewer.

These stories conveyed become a public diary once purely known to the victim, the oppressed. These narratives are not mere recollections of the past but an intentional effort to confront and reclaim the past. As Mieke Bal asserts, "'cultural memory' bridges the gap between private and public" (Bal 11). Despite the culture's complex history with slavery and restrictions to literacy and education, folktales, songs and gossips became a language of resistance. Hurston articulates the very trauma and the treatment of gender through her unconventional mode of storytelling. Janie grapples with the understanding of a promising life that she once caught a glimpse of, through a fleeting feeling under the pear tree. The horrors passed down to her by her nanny and mother rips this vision of the life she pictured. The fate of her marriages compel her to confront her sense of true love and fulfilment. The

[16] an oral storytelling tradition from West Africa, where griots; pronounced *gree-ohs*, served as hereditary oral historians that descended from a lineage trained from a young age.
See article: African Mythology, February 6, 2025, https://african.mythologyworldwide.com/the-legacy-of-the-griot-storytellers-of-african-mythology/

lines "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (Hurston 1) in the beginning of the novel, create an opening to these gendered horror stories that are conveyed through Janie memories throughout her life.

Memory has played an intuitive role in the Black experience. Hurston entangles this performative memory through Janie's internal monologue. These lived experiences mainly stem from cultural memory and trauma that is passed down like inheritance. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* paints a picture of this experience. Her characters suffer from a haunting that is caused by slavery which minimizes their capability of living a life without carrying the guilt of their decisions impaired by white brutality. In Hurston's novel, Nanny's memory of being sexually assaulted by the white slave owner, affects her ability to heal the idea of pursuing a life without sacrifices. Janie's delusion, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think. Ah . . . " (Hurston 24) was not fed into, as Nanny believed that the life Janie yearned for, was a dream far away for women of her colour. Nanny's perception of what constitutes womanhood bled through her violent past. "So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it" (Hurston 14). Nanny's memory of her sexual exploitation limited her perception to understanding the position of a woman in a man's world. Hurston allows Nanny's voice to embody the violence of memory while transforming it into tradition, reminding readers that tradition is not merely a cultural trait but a collective inheritance that weave in memory and wisdom birthed through one's experiences that is passed down to generations. The African American vernacular acts as a vessel for collective memory, allowing communities to preserve, communicate, and process the history of sexual violence. The lines "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston 14) depict how a woman's autonomy is dehumanised to a 'mule'. Woman in the African South

were associated to beasts of burden that were obliged to carry the weight of physical as well emotional labour. Janie's marriage with Logan Killicks is a paradigm of this imagery. Despite Nanny's efforts of gifting Janie with a different life than she endured, her blinded vision of stability causes her to send off Janie to Logan Killicks which was no less than offering a mule to a man. Hurston's use of dialect through Nanny's voice evoke her pained words with its emotional depth that formal standard English would trivialize. Hurston made sure that even though Black women were robbed off their agency, that their language would not be tamed or censored.

2.3 Construction of Black Identity through Janie's Internal Monologue

Hurston's narrative strategy isn't about dividing Janie's interiority into a "literary" voice and her speech into a "vernacular" one. This struggle could have much to do with Hurston finding her own place in the literary world given her critics such as W.E.B Du Bois and Richard Wright who considered her work to be worthy of the 'white folk's laugh'. Hurston's own life mirrored Janie's struggle. She rejected marriage, travelled alone, and was financially independent, embodying a similar sort of defiance that translated into her writing. This act of storytelling grounded in Black vernacular and intimate orality becomes a powerful tool of self-representation where Janie returns to Eatonville not in shame or defeat, but with possession of her own agency. As the reader notices, "The story begins with an ode to the Horizon and Janie Crawford's return to Eatonville after having buried Tea Cake and stood trial for killing him" (King 54). As a young girl, Janie watches nature, particularly the blossoming pear tree, and imagines 'love' as something boundless and fulfilling.

Through her protagonist, Hurston's defiance of assimilation was not only a threat to white society but to those within her own community who internalized the need to conform.

While Wright leaned on protest, W.E.B Du Bois centered resistance on seeking emancipation through assimilation. While enslaved blacks had been characterized as childlike and appropriate for slavery in antebellum America, they were often depicted as morally regressive and therefore, dangerous in the late nineteenth century. Lynching was one approach to eradicating the so called 'black menace'. African American writers and critics saw it as their duty to challenge and counter such stigmatizing acts. Du Bois saw assimilation as a tool of uplifting black art and culture and hence argued that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be" (66). He believed that having an agenda as Black artists would create and would be a sort of refinement from the mental predicament they were trapped in. This mental predicament referred to the feeling of two-ness. Du Bois introduced the concept of 'double consciousness' in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903*)*. He attempted to articulate the psychological struggle African Americans faced in a racially divided society to express how it felt to be both Black and American in a world that denied the humanity of Black people. He said that "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois 3). This created the urge to prove themselves worthy of being treated with dignity by creating culturally palatable forms of art and expression. This internal split tore Black folklore between gaining mainstream recognition and preserving its authenticity, something Hurston could not digest.

Hurston attempted to present this very feeling of 'two-ness' through the duality of thought and speech that allowed her to articulate Black womanhood. Joe Starks words, "Ah told you in de very first beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you" (Hurston 46) exhibits the kind of agency that makes a woman feel stripped of. A kind of agency that needs to be split in order to possess an identity of her own. The experience that Janie obtained from living and working in the muck,

her love relationship and the achievement of sexual fulfilment, distanced Janie from the narrative that had served to limit her grandmother's options for self-actualization.

Although Hurston explicitly conveyed this feeling of two-ness in her narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she sought to offer the audience a more celebratory interpretation of this duality rather than weaponizing it. Her contemporary, Alice Walker walks Hurston's readers in her defence. In her article *Looking for Zora*, she mourns the death of not the author alone, but the invisibility shown towards her work by people of her own kind. Walker saw Hurston's work as a celebration of people of colour in their own worlds, on their own terms, drawing attention to their simple ways of living, not as social problems, but as rich traditions worthy of preservation and admiration. Walker critiques the rigidity of respectability politics that dominated mid-20th-century Black literary circles, and instead insists that embracing the folk in its entirety without shame was an act of reclamation and pride. In her essay *How It Feels to Be Coloured By Me,* Hurston writes, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Rather than adapting herself to the "sharp white background", she resisted the pressure to dilute her culture and language. She did not seek to become less Black to gain acceptance, instead, she sat in this in-betweenness and celebrated her identity that was something to exist as it was and celebrated rather than minimized.

Like Hurston, in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon presents his readers with a similar argument that "Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (12). Through his words, Fanon questions this issue of whether using one's dialect defines who should feel inferior or superior, or if it is solely about blindly throwing race onto the battlefield due to pre-existing stereotypes? Society has always treated language as a racial identifier. Although language should not define race, historical events of enslavement have categorised and racially pre-segregated

AAVE speakers from mainstream society. When speech patterns are often categorised, it creates a sense of desperation to fit into the larger community to avoid being policed and violated. Fanon challenges readers to consider whether language itself, rather the use of vernacular is what creates these hierarchies of power that forces one to equate standard language with superiority. In the last scene of the novel, while wrapping up her story to Pheoby, Janie asserts, "They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (Hurston 192). This creates a powerful outlook on agency where she addresses the porch talkers who judge their own kind. Their judgements, shaped by white norms and assimilation, highlight a painful irony where one's own community upholds the very structures of oppression by demanding conformity. This internalized oppression is why misery continues within one's own race, which brings back Fanon's question that seeks to understand what the Black man really wants.

Similarly, in his *The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain*, Hughes writes, "The Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain" (Hughes 57). Hughes repeatedly positions the 'mountain' to be some sort of cultural barrier that adheres to seeking white validation. In his essay, he pities a young Black poet that seeks to be just a poet and not a Negro poet. This again ties to Fanon's understanding of what happens when the oppressed do not find their way out of their cultural burden where one's culture feels like a curse instead of a blessing. This is why Hurston steps in again and again to celebrate Black culture where one constructs his identity based on his own agency to find himself amidst destruction.

III

Vernacular as Cultural Defiance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

3.1 *Their Eyes*…Whose Eyes?

Throughout the novel, Janie is in search of the 'horizon'; a metaphor for the life she dreamed of, filled with love and fulfilment. The narrator notes, "She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made" (Hurston 11). She experiences the warmth of womanhood and her desire to find true love as a pathway to that horizon.

As Janie moves through different relationships, her perception of the horizon evolves. She is initially married off to Logan Killicks by her Nanny in order to detour from the lineage of her mother's misery. Janie's life sees nothing beyond the fields and digging in the muck. The taste of her ripening womanhood, bestowed upon her by the pear tree, did not in one glimpse match her marriage. Thirsty for the horizon she envisioned, she eventually flees with Joe Starks. These lines highlight this very notion, "Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them." (Hurston 72). She felt bound by her Nanny's vision of a woman's stability and security, a vision that initially shapes her understanding of fulfilment.

However, her initial notion of the horizon resurfaces when she meets Tea Cake, offering her a more complete sense of love and companionship. By the time she returns to Eatonville, Janie discovers that the horizon was not a distant dream but something she had carried within her all along. The final lines of the novel affirm this powerful realization: "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see." (Hurston 193). Janie's marriages thus stifled her natural way of being in the world. She still dreams of the horizon, and finally devours it when she meets Tea Cake. It seems like Janie seeks for the horizon all her life. The horizon, here; stands as the epitome of all her desires, dreams, aspirations, and search for fulfilment. Janie's yearning for the horizon creates a spiritual awakening that is elevated when she no longer seeks validation or fulfilment. The phrase "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net" highlights her long-awaited yearning for what she considered to be her horizon. The metaphor of the fish net deepens the essence of her story. The fish net seemed to collect all her experiences; the good and bad, all to bring her to her final moment of autonomy.

The command to be silent under the guise of God's work exposes how spiritual authority was used to maintain racial and social hierarchies. The ideology of respectability politics adopted biblical codes of conduct in order to confine and tame the black folk under the guise of the white master. These biblical codes emphasized on the values of obedience, humility, forgiveness and silence. For many Black Christians, biblical verses of submission and order were recontextualized within the long history of racial oppression. Silence and endurance were presented as forms of spiritual strength and divine obedience in the imagery of Christ's endured pain and suffering. Within the framework of respectability politics, Black women bore the heaviest burden. They were filtered through virtue, restraint, and silence. To be a 'respectable woman' meant to suppress desire, conceal trauma, and embody Christian

purity in the face of sexual degradation. To imbibe Mary's[17] chastity, or to embody the role of the silent wife who endures for the sake of the family uplifted a woman's dignity. This pretentious norm costed women their bodies. These norms silenced their voices about sexual violence and emotional pain.

Through Janie's experiences, we observe how her voice is repeatedly stolen. First, when she is alarmed and threatened for even imagining a life of her own that is stripped of by her Nanny. Then, by Joe Starks, who silences her when she attempts to speak as the mayor's wife. And finally, when she loses Tea Cake and is confronted with judgment from the porch talkers. These scenes show how Janie is trodden upon because she refuses to conform. Janie comes face to face with this spiritual awakening in the Everglades when the storm cuts through the land. She is reminded that the life of stability promised to her all her life, holds no doors open in times of an external uncontrollable force, rather, only reflects the terrifying unpredictability of life, where no amount of love or labour could shield her. The lines, "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (Hurston 160) depict their predicament; that in the face of darkness, people resort to higher power, for meaning and control. For Janie, God did not mean an external saviour, but a divine force she had to find within herself. Her agency, shaped through love and survival, internalized this feeling of painting her own version of the horizon. The 'pear tree' gives us one of the first pictures of her notion of divine, as she yearns to experience that feeling of fulfilment. Through the course of the novel, we observe that Janie's perception of finding her divine is colossally

[17] Mother of Christ as depicted in the Roman Catholic Bible.

influenced by finding her autonomy through her speech, ultimately connecting her divine with her language. Speaking her truth becomes her new form of divine. She realises that romantic love can be confining, while autonomy empowered through her words is liberating.

In the novel, this higher power isn't solely divine. It's represented by the white slave owner, who held control and claimed authority over Black lives. What was meant to guide and protect became a symbol of power and dominance instead. "Ole Massa is doin' *His* work now. Us oughta keep quiet" (Hurston 159). Janie's position of powerlessness blurs the lines between God and the white slave owner revealing how deeply internalized oppression had merged with religious belief. This mindset encourages silence and endurance, rather than resistance or questioning it. Hurston critiques this passivity by showing how such beliefs strip individuals of agency, reducing them to vulnerability in the face of destruction. "Six eyes were questioning God" (Hurston 159). It reflects how the system conditions the voice of the vulnerable to see suffering as a divine order that must and cannot be challenged.

3.2 Dialect as a Rhetorical Strategy

Gates argued that Hurston's use of Black vernacular, oral traditions, and folk storytelling was not a lack of sophistication but a deliberate rhetorical strategy. He notes, "Hurston's text is the first example in our tradition of 'the speakerly text', by which I mean a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition" (Gates 195). While a section of critics subverted Hurston's work, theorists like Henry Louis Gates Jr devised a rhetorical strategy rooted in African American vernacular traditions involving irony and satire that advocated for Hurston's style and writing aesthetic. In his framework, he explains, "I have selected to write the black term with a bracketed final *g* 'Signifyin(g)' and the white term as 'signifying.' The bracketed *g* enables me to connote the fact that this word is, more

often than not, spoken by black people without the final '*g'* as 'signifyin'" (Gates 51). He implemented the trickster model to provide a comprehensive understanding of Hurston's intentions with her work. [18] This Signifyin(g) played with gender and power not by directly confronting the system, but by re-defining Black speech. By applying his theory to her work, Gates legitimized her aesthetic on its own cultural terms and not those of white or assimilationist literary standards. Hurston's use of words like beginnin'(46), runnin'(48) and chastisin' feelin'(49) in her novel are tools of signifyin(g) the black experience through her use of vernacular to give the reader an intimate dimension of Janie's journey.

In her essay *The Characteristics of Negro Expression*, Hurston gives the reader an understanding of what a Negro would describe an authentic way of communication. She asserts:

Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact—must add action to it to make it do. So we have "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use (1).

Gates points out the representation of the black voice as a form of black poetic diction; where the action associated with the object would add as a prefix to the spoken word as Hurston points out in the lines above. The Black man's syntax did not conform to the

[18] He asserts the 'monkey' in his *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* to be a trickster that possesses the ability to play around with words that suggest that imply, beg or boast by indirect verbal means. Scholar Roger D. Abrahams concludes that "the name 'signifying,' shows the monkey to be a trickster, signifying being the language of trickery" (59).

standard English literary tradition. "Dialect signified both 'black difference', and that the figure of the black in literature existed primarily as object, not subject" (Gates 190). Through these lines Gates suggests that the black man lived in the American white society with a prefix; not a fully sufficient being with his own authentic voice and thought. Descriptions commonly used to describe Black folk such as 'mulatto girl' or 'the Negro man' limited their existence to objects that needed a prefix, not in the literal form, but rather a distinguishable identity; the one that did not fit into the white norm.

In addition to Gates' rhetorical interpretation of Hurston's aesthetic, the use of call-and-response exhibits her folkloric adaptation of Black heritage in her narration through the manner of conversations between her characters. In the very beginning of the novel where the townspeople throw comments on her return to Eatonville; "What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?" (Hurston 2). They call on her and Janie responds by narrating her story to her friend Pheoby. In her work, "Words Walking without Masters": Ethnography and the Creative Process in *Their Eyes were Watching God*', Emily Dalgarno notes, "Janie and Pheoby together employ a 'rhetoric of intimacy' developed from the collaborative habit of call and response" (537). Through this exchange, Hurston portrays Pheoby as a listener; responsive but subtly so. While Janie speaks her truth, Pheoby does not interrupt, allowing Janie to narrate her story without an external point of view. This strongly foregrounds the act of communal storytelling, authentic to Black traditions, where Pheoby becomes a witness to her dear friend, Janie's experience, allowing the reader to perceive an unfiltered account of Janie's story. In the meantime. The third person narrator steps back, still providing metaphorical context to the conversation, bridging the past and present in order to provide the reader with a sense of time and space while participating in their conversation.

IV

The Legacy of Hurston's Work in Contemporary African American Literature

4.1 Who Gets to Represent Black Speech? Literary vs. Media Adaptations

A good piece of literature survives time based on its authenticity. Although the novel faced a massive amount of criticism from prominent Black critics like Wright and Du Bois who dismissed it as purposeless and comedic, it made its way into Darnell Martin's film inventory. The movie adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* hit cinemas in 2005 holding the same title. Directed by Martin, the film captures Janie's role of finding her the love she romanticized all along. While in conversation with Mark Koplik on the occasion of the Albany Film Festival of the New York State Writers Institute, Darnell Martin urged the need to re-educate people on African American history. She further articulated on the barbarities caused to the black community and the inability of the marginalised to reconstruct a free identity due to repeated acts of history and thus, the failure to eradicate racism. On the art of understanding characters and their emotions, she emphasizes, "As an artist I need to listen, because if I do, I'll get a greater understanding of the whole picture." However, the film takes some liberties that shift the focus, particularly in emphasizing the romantic aspects of Janie's story, whereas Hurston's novel focuses more on Janie's inner spiritual connect and her journey of self -realisation. The film follows the plot and setting of the novel, barely following the authenticity of the dialogues. A major limitation of the film is that its subtitles

conform to Standard English, thereby erasing the linguistic nuances of the African American vernacular dialect. This shift raises the question, did the film fully listen to Hurston's deeper themes, or did it reshape the "whole picture" into something more digestible for mainstream audiences?

Art is perceived in its entirety regardless of its medium, but sometimes art can fail to grasp the true meaning of its muse and hence completely alter the purpose of its creation. When the movie adaptation was released featuring Halle Berry, a sensational actress of the time, it gained significant fame. Can we then deduce that the same narrative was presented to the audience, but this time altered to align with their tastes? Who, then, truly gets to represent Black speech? Hurston's deliberate yet subtle resistance to the dominant culture was quickly flattened with the film's release, thus creating a digestible version of the film. The lack of vernacular and originality erased the potential of her intended aesthetic. Another critical observation that caught my attention was the lack of depth given to other characters than Janie's character. The absence of the third person narrator in the film seems to water down the imagination of the novel. Although the imagery in the film seems to provide the metaphorical display of the setting narrated by the third reader, it disrupts the reader's imagination of the scene, leaving the reader with no choice to delve and explore what the figurative language in the novel offers. This raises yet another question: was there a fear that the movie could be banned if it appeared too political, or would it have been rejected for being overly didactic and promoting Black speech in a way that audiences would find unrelatable, thus discarded from today's "films to watch" list?

A notable characteristic of the film making process is the director's personal preference towards timing and framing of the cast. In order to earn a successful audience, most directors prefer actors that possess a fanbase that consist a multitude. This affects the distribution of screentime, neglecting the authenticity of the original narrative. In the case of

Their Eyes Were Watching God, this seems to be the film's significant setback. One cannot fully appreciate the legitimacy of the intimate act of oral storytelling between Janie and Pheoby. The film immediately makes a shift from their conversation, orbiting the whole plot around Janie and her romantic relationships. This takes away Hurston's main act of cultural defiance causing the film to simply be a performative act. Producer Oprah Winfrey comments on the intimate relationship between Janie and Tea Cake, "If you can get a kiss like that, you can die a happy woman". The movie thus explicitly centres the romantic relationship than Janie's self-discovery of her womanhood.

A significant observation made in the film is the repetition of the words "I'm watching God" uttered by Janie in the beginning (Martin 00:12:30) and the last scenes (Martin 01:51:24). This phrase functions as a marker of Janie's spiritual fulfilment. In the beginning of the novel, she replies to Nanny as she floats at the surface of the river, while contemplating her miserable marital arrangement with Logan Killicks. The life that she is forced to envision, sickens her idea of marriage. Janie starts to exist within the confinement that set by her relationships. Her passive act of 'watching' life happen to her rather than creating and moulding her own, creates a sense of submitting her life to a higher power. This uncertainty is put at when she makes the choice to end Tea Cake's suffering. Here, she does not have any external divine form to resort to, but her own internal divine. When Janie repeats the same phrase near the film's conclusion, its meaning completely transforms. She still watches life, but now as an active participant, resilient and bold enough to carry the pain of Tea Cake's tragic death and her widowed life. The phrase "I'm watching God" now comes from a place of understanding, acceptance and courage. The ultimate cinematic frame of the sky gives the reader a picture of 'the horizon' that she dreamt of.

The film although brilliantly shot as an enjoyable romantic drama, it still suffers from a few discrepancies with regard to the novel. The adaptation skips a couple of sensitive

moments from the Hurston's text; for instance, Nanny's narrative experience of sexual exploitation holds a paramount role in the history of African American slavery. Her memory of this traumatic event is a crucial lens that explains her overprotective relationship with her grandchild. It justifies her obsession with security, stability and respectability, even at the cost of Janie's happiness. This scar in Janie's journey holds crucial to collective memory in racial history. Similarly, the film's neglect of Janie's childhood silences an essential stage of her emotional upbringing and her youthfulness. The omission of her moments of grief and loss, deprives the reader of close-watching Janie's search for love and yearning. Thus, redefining the yearning for romantic love than finding herself.

This yet again ties in the question of a radical purpose to a narrative whether the text can only earn its authenticity if exhibited with a political purpose. Hurston's critics argued that Black literature should serve as a political tool against oppression. By softening the horrors of slavery, the film tends to sanitize Black history for a more appealing and romantic narrative over cultural truth. To Black writers, 'art for art's sake was a luxury that a few other Black artists could not afford. While the film celebrated Black culture visually and emotionally, its lack of dialect and narrative resistance created a detachment from the radical tools that defined Black literary authenticity. Thus, the adaptation leaned more towards creating a visually palatable narrative than cultural confrontation. This choice undermines Hurston's intent of providing a voice to those who were silenced, especially Black women who were ogled, judged, mocked, sexually abused, objectified and neglected. The erasure of these sensitive issues in way enforces this historical pattern of suppression and negligence of these uncomfortable truths. The question thus remains, does honouring Black life through art without revolutionizing it, dilute the text's power, or does it broaden its accessibility? This tension between revolutionary purpose and cultural celebration is central to evaluating who gets to define Black expression and on what terms.

4.2 Reinterpreting Hurston: The Emergence of African American Feminist Literary Criticism

While Hurston did not live post the civil rights era, her contemporaries, namely Bell Hooks, Henry Louis Gates Jr and Alice Walker advocated for her act of defiance that celebrated Black culture through the use of language. Bell Hooks in her findings on Hurston asserted that "Hurston no longer needed to be the focus of everyone's gaze to feel her presence acknowledged or valued" (Hooks 141). In her work *Yearning,* she highlights the politics of 'high art' during the Black aesthetic movement. She further articulates the "call for critical re-thinking of aesthetics" in order to truly create an authentic significance for Black art and expression. She asserted that there could never be one critical paradigm for the evaluation of artistic work and that there would always be a shift in place, idea, feeling that concern with an artist's critical thinking. This when the use of vernacular would allow one to articulate his raw thought into language, regardless of it being comprehensible by all those who read. Like Hurston, Hooks passionately wrote on the lived experiences of the marginalized, particularly the oppressed who have been globally shaped in the African diaspora and live off the informed experience of exile and domination. She notably remarks, "we must learn to see" (Hooks 111) as a reminder to those who label art and language to a crisis rather than experiencing its artistic privilege.

Alice Walker reintroduced Zora Neale Hurston to the literary world through her seminal essay *Looking For Zora* where she personally empathises with Hurston's contributions to Black culture. Walker wrote several essays that advocated for Hurston's work, namely, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens,* where she wrote on the importance of passing down her mother's lived stories that needed to be penned down. She continues to say,

"I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories-like her life-must be recorded" (Walker 407). Walker emphasized the importance of reclaiming erased or dismissed voices from Black history, especially those of women. She captures the white instinct of understanding a Black woman's existence to belong to a white man, completely unaware of the creativity she possessed. Her works mainly orbit around the experiences of struggle and survival and the issue of negating Black women's writing.

Hurston's male contemporary Henry Louis Gates Jr further exemplifies this discourse by encouraging the need for satire and irony in writing that he believed added flavour and texture to the narrative. Through his theory of Signifyin(g), he highlights the richness of storytelling as form of defiance and resistance to the conventional style of writing. Hurston continues to stand as a prominent figure in African American literature albeit she was dismissed by critics like Wright and Du Bois for not politicizing language in a radical manner. Through her work, she explicitly in her own form of defiance resisted the dominant narrative that birthed a new direction for the readers ahead of her generation.

Like Hurston, Black women writers and feminists grappled to establish their views on a political platform. Their ideas and views on politics were perceived as highly contradictory to dominant norms or rather looked upon as figures that lacked radical intelligence. The black feminist movement in literary history was essential to uplift the lived experiences of Black woman. African American theorists such as Hazel Carby, Toni Morrison and Angela Davis wrote on these issues as a testimony to the oppressive treatment experienced by Black women during their attempts to seek emancipation. In her work *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby states that white women are at a better position to negotiate their roles in society while Black women do not stand a chance in having the opportunity to create this alliance. Carby felt that a literary movement dedicated to feminist writing would empower the role of women's

literature in society. This shares parallels with Hurston's career as a Black woman writer whose work was dismissed as 'primitive' or 'quaint' in a time that was dominated by her masculine contemporaries. Her intentions of centering her main protagonist Janie, in a similar patriarchal atmosphere was a projection of her own position as a Black woman finding her agency and voice through selfhood and aesthetic. Her strongest armour, the art of storytelling, stands as a tool of defiance in her *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Angela Davis in her *Woman, Race & Class* reflects on the critical experience of woman as slaveholders, as "breeders". She asserts, "In the eyes of the slaveholder, slave woman were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of slave labour force". This is highlighted through Janie's marriage with Logan Killicks. "Considerin' youse born in a carriage 'thout no top to it, and yo' mama and you bein' born and raised in de white folks back-yard" (Hurston 30) These words reflect the very opportunity the patriarchy, like Logan, take to delimit a woman's role in a society that robs her of her voice and knowledge to seek for selfhood and black female agency.

4.3 Hurston in the Context of Modern African American Literary Movements

African American literature was mainly marked by the experiences of the horrors of slavery and oppression that was passed on from generation to generation through orality. These stories were testimonies that were bound to finding agency, selfhood and reclamation. Hurston greatly contributed to the African American literary canon well ahead of her time. In her *What White Publishers Won't Print*, Hurston asserts, "To grasp the penetration of western civilization in a minority, it is necessary to know how the average behaves and lives" (121). Celebrating the richness of Black culture was a prominent act that was imperative to challenging colonial stereotypes and shaping collective identity in postcolonial Africa. Pan-

Africanism was a central movement that emerged during independence that advocated for unity amongst Black folk. Although Hurston's attempts of defiance were challenged by her contemporaries, modern literary movements that tasted her ideas of defiance, strived to satiate these distortions between Black writers that were created due to extensive colonial brutality leading to impaired and contradictory methods of resistance.

Although modern African literary intellectuals might not overtly speak of Hurston's ideals, their stories of revolution and change exhibit similar linguistic issues as Hurston. In her speech at TED Global 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a literary successor to Achebe, reflects upon her experiences of finding her cultural voice surrounded by a society that only knew and believed one story of the Black folk; a culture that was primitive and pitied. Adichie spoke about the white conventional wisdom that was taught to her; "Nigerians don't read literature and that if they could, they would". These words were from the same mouths that starved them of literacy and wrote about their dark visits to the American South. Adichie's take on the need to find one's authentic cultural voice draws strong parallels to Hurston's manner of emancipation; the need to write from one's own native lived life, as stories read to young children and not as stories of protest. This would strongly defy the dominant and emancipate Black folk from pity. Hurston's aesthetic of storytelling diversified through generations as Black writers engaged globally by writing and speaking on political platforms. This led to the democratization of their words and works which created politically unified opinions on liberation of Black art and literature. A book review by Erin A. Smith on Brooks Hefner's *The Word on the Streets* (2017)[19] attempts a study on 'vernacular

[19] On American Vernacular Modernism, see: Hefner, Brooks E. *The Word on the Streets: The American Language of Vernacular Modernism*. University of Virginia Press, 2017.

modernism' to understand vernacular not based on its exclusion over the years, rather by its cross racial and ethnic experiments by writers of the time. This shows that Hurston's use of vernacular that was once dismissed, now stands as proof that authentic Black expression belongs at the heart of American literary modernism and not at its margins.

Malcolm X, an African American civil rights leader of the time spoke on the importance of a Negro finding his agency through self- knowledge. In an interview with Mark Wallace, Malcolm X asserted the need for moral reclamation; a knowledge on the self, inspired from the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He continues to say, "If we could cure ourselves of the slave mentality, the black man could provide for himself, just as the white man does for his kind". Malcolm rejected his former surname "Little" and replaced it with an "X" not intending on stripping away his Black identity but the colonial and white-imposed identity that had overwritten Black ancestry. Although an intellectual contemporary to Wright in his political movements, the rejection of the idea that freedom comes through white validation or assimilation draws in parallels to Hurston's refusal to submit to white domination. Although both, Malcolm X and Hurston understood that language and representation are political, their tone of defiance differed. While Malcolm X leaned towards the political reclamation of lost Black identity, Hurston anchored to attaining cultural reclamation of a lived Black identity.

Conclusion

Hurston had fluctuating approaches towards the politics of writing. Her aesthetic demanded that she saw Black culture and folks as independent of racism. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Hurston highlights the duality of AAVE that seamlessly transitions from thought to speech, allowing the reader to take the passenger seat rather than the backseat, in order to explore Janie's attainment of self-actualization. The modern adaptation of AAVE by teenagers used via social media and slang conversations question the authenticity of this linguistic evolution. The African American vernacular has been adopted by native speakers and non-native speakers across various entertainment industries. For instance, American rapper Kendrick Lamar's song "Alright"[20] features the African American dialect in protest to the Black Lives Matter Movement. The lyrics "Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure" (Lamar) might be a reference to the viral murder of George Floyd. The appropriation of AAVE by non-black individuals may have also created expressions such as 'woke'[21] and 'lit' [22] as performative trends of language. This may risk the authenticity of the language solely

[20] For full lyrics to Kendrick Lamar's track "Alright", see: https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/kendrick_lamar-alright

[21] According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, 'woke' refers to an AAVE slang term that means to be alerted about pressing issues, especially in the context of racism or discrimination. https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/woke-meaning-origin

[22] According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, 'lit' refers to an exciting event or excellent moment. https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/lit-meaning-origin

defined by visibility and performance rather than lived experience. This vessel (AAVE) of collective memory and traditional folk narratives possess the ability of connecting modern speakers to a lineage of knowledge. Modern adaptations of the dialect in the form of catchy phrases, comments and expressions may trivialise its influence on readers and listeners, having native speakers grapple with who could be considered a "legitimate" speaker of AAVE and who is truly allowed to represent Black speech.

Despite this risks, one must realise that language evolves and so, no single individual can lay down the rules to the correct manner of the way linguistic evolution of the AAVE should be guided. Hurston's purpose of speech and voice encourage the very liberty of interpretation and representation, allowing generations to express humor, tension and grief in their own version. To Hurston and writers of her kind, respectability politics pre-dominantly carried the risk of a performative standard of expression through language. It emerged as a strategy of confinement where Black men and women were policed in terms of livelihood, economic wealth, education and marriage. Standardized English erased the raw realities of Black life, something that appeared to be shameful than to be celebrated.

In order to live with this categorisation, the Black man had to choose either to assimilate, protest or celebrate Black identity and culture as it was. At times, the Black man was given no choice but to endure violent physical abuse, poor wages or abandonment. From Hurston's perspective, Black life involved much more than being victimized by or responding to racism. Today, racism continues to be a destructive weapon of the self. Throughout the years, several movements that were built upon these ideas initiated to eradicate racism partially failed, and still fails to achieve its purpose not because it lacks support, but rather because it weaponizes the mode of bringing change. Instead of reclamation, it calls for revolution, something that Du Bois and Wright resorted to. Hurston's take on appreciating the minimalist 'quaint' and 'primitive' lifestyle of Black folklore continued to empower several

readers to write in their own choice of language and voice, that would feed the complexity of their stories; not intending to provide a sophisticated and synthetic account of their lives, but rather a raw, flawed account of their experiences.

Orality stood out as a major tool of defiance in Hurston's expertise. The call and response manner entwined with satire and humor, enforces the rhetorical claim made by Gates in his theory, which makes Hurston's use of vernacular a deliberate attempt to authenticate the complexity of the Black experience. This is clearly exhibited in her narrative technique that draws parallels with the African American art of storytelling. The call and response tradition traces to be one of the oldest traditions imperative to Black folklore. In her novel, the conversation between Janie and Pheobie tend to provide a quintessential act of storytelling, where wisdom is shared without being interrupted. Hurston transforms the call and response form from a serious act of unity under oppression into a celebratory exchange between women, rooted in empathy, memory, and mutual respect; a story that Pheoby knew she had to carry on.

Janie's search for a life that trespassed the lines drawn by her Nanny is a testimony of the lines drawn by mainstream literature. The need to fit into a medium; here, language, to be able to speak a clear language that does not risk being read through a stereotyped filter is a canon experience faced by Black authors. Chinua Achebe in his *The African Writer and the English Language* takes on Black writing leaning towards a form of expression that attempts to neither protest against the dominant language, nor assimilate, but rather to create a new form of language that is altered and negotiated where the roots of either culture are not trivialised or dismissed. He writes, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Achebe 6). This ambiguity that negotiates the use of language as plainly didactic or a tool for

revolution further calls for a space that allows both interpretations to co-exist in a manner that ultimately hears the voices that are marginalised due to expectations that are birthed from superior ideologies.

Religion played a massive role within the politics of respectability. It became a social framework that demanded adherence to Christian morality, proper speech, modest behavior, and self-restraint as evidence of cultural worthiness and acceptance. A section of Black writers of the time believed that these religious ideals and morales shielded them from being violently called out. While for artists like Zora Neale Hurston, such conformity threatened to suffocate individuality, creativity, and cultural authenticity. Through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston explicitly exposes the hypocrisy and rigidity of respectability politics as the definition of searching for the divine through Janie's yearning for self -actualization. She rather celebrated the spiritual richness of ordinary Black folk whose faith, humor, folktales cultural practices transcended these religious attitudes and moral constraints. Hurston's interests in her anthropological fieldwork rebelled against this moral rigidity. Hurston viewed these traditions not as superstitions but as powerful expressions of cultural heritage. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston presents a world where spirituality is not confined to the church, but embedded in nature, love, and self-discovery. In the very beginning of the novel, Janie Crawford's spiritual awakening with the 'pear tree' as her notion of fulfilment and her eventual agency with her own soul, embody a sacred autonomy that defies institutional religion. Hurston's use of vernacular language through characters, live fully laughing, loving dancing and cursing; neither adhering to religious or social codes. Hurston's religion seems to be the celebration of Black experience in its entirety, something that era of her time could not digest.

Finally, who gets to represent Black speech? Hurston pushed back against the idea that Black speech and culture should be reduced to mere caricatures or simplified depictions

of "weirdness" or "otherness." In her novel, Hurston allows her characters to experience one's desire and passion being fulfilled without adhering to the tag of shame labelled by the white gaze. The complexity of her characters challenge the social hierarchy by exhibiting a range of behaviours through gossip, judgement, communal games, porch-talking, dancing, music, elections where every possible humanly action is allowed to exist in its own complexity. Hurston's mission was to capture the truth as it was being spoken. What makes her work a critical masterpiece is her unspoken mode of resistance that is ironically something that she celebrates and does not establish a propaganda like her contemporaries.

As the dialogues progress in AAVE, the narrator enhances this articulation by providing a poetic imagery blending in the connect between native speech, musicality and nature, something that Hurston would whole-heartedly embrace. She critiques the representation of Black speech that was exaggerated by both mainstream writers and performers, such as the "burnt-cork artists" that referred to Blackface performers. Hurston's stance suggests that Black people themselves should be the ones to define and express their cultural identity, rather than allowing outsiders or even other Black writers to impose narrow expectations that reduce the authenticity of one's voice with the sole purpose of adhering to dignity or respectability. Today, this legacy continues. From rappers and songwriters to everyday texting speech among teenagers, these adapted forms of AAVE are not only embraced, but seen as markers of cultural coolness and expressive power. These words transcend the mere use of communication; they carry rhythm and identity.

Finally, in its entirety, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* insists on the preservation of authentic language; here, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a repository of Black cultural memory and identity. Hurston's decision to write in her people's truth demonstrates that beauty lies in flaws, and that one cannot escape from their true selves. To escape from your true self is to conform to a life that does not belong to

you. The final line in the novel, "She called in her soul to come and see" (Hurston 193), captures the essence of Hurston's vision of self-reconciliation and inner wholeness. This is not a call to God or an external divine, but to her own soul. Janie no longer depends on external validation or romantic fulfilment as she becomes her own witness. The phrase evokes both prayer and celebration as she calls her soul "to see" to recognize the completeness of her journey.

This brings me back to empathise with Alice Walker's final feelings as she stood by Hurston's graveyard. Only if Zora knew how she changed the African American literary canon with her colossal contribution to African American literature in the midst of patriarchal criticism and degradation. If she knew the fierce thunderbolt that she was; to be a Black woman in a society that deemed women worthy of solely a babymaker and a beast of emotional and physical burden. If she knew how her unfiltered truth brought so much joy and inspiration to having a film created on the life of a Black woman finding her long lost fulfilment of her soul. If she knew how several feminist movements based on her ethics of free speech and voice created an impact on several Black women. And lastly, if she only knew how her work inspired me to taste the richness of native language in its raw, unfiltered authentic form.

To write a narrative that is only intended for change, makes room for cultural debate rather than unify the culture within its ideals. This thesis thus significantly headlines the scope of language; with a focus on the use of vernacular in Hurston's *Ther Eyes Were Watching God*, within a critical environment that I articulate, as the 'Black literary debate' that sought to celebrate Black culture and folklore through one's voice and speech and negated the glorification of activism and the political ideals, that dismissed the purpose to simply write a story, freely and boldly.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. "English and the African Writer." *Transition*, no. 75/76, 1997, pp. 342–49. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2935429.

Adam, Sibyl. "The African-American Poet's Dilemma: Langston Hughes' and Countee Cullen's Poetic Response to a Prejudiced World." *Groundings Undergraduate Journal*, vol. 5, Apr. 2012, pp. 120–35. https://doi.org/10.36399/GroundingsUG.5.243

Adichie, Chimamanda. "The Danger Of A Single Story", TED Global 2009 https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Bal, Mieke. "Memory Acts: Performing Subjectivity." *Performance Research* 5.3 (2000): 102-114. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2000.10871753

Barry, Betsy. "It's Hard Fuh Me to Understand What You Mean, de Way You Tell It": Representing Language in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Language and Literature*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2015, pp. 241–255. SAGE Publications, 'It's hard fuh me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it': Representing language in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God | Request PDF

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist.* 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 1987. https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/permalink/31UKB_LEU/1knc4sp/alma9938073439602711

Dalgarno, Emily. "'Words Walking without Masters': Ethnography and the Creative Process in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." American Literature, vol. 64, no. 3, Sept. 1992, pp. 519–541. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2927750

Daniels, Douglas Henry. "The Significance of Blues for American History." *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 70, no. 1/2, 1985, pp. 14–23. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717635.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, race, & class*. Vintage, 2011. Women, Race, & Class - Angela Y. Davis - Google Books

Dennis, Rutledge M. "W.E.B. Du Bois's Concept of Double Consciousness." *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*, 2003, pp. 13–27. *ResearchGate*, www.researchgate.net/publication/334657575_WEB_Du_Bois's_Concept_of_Double_Consciousness.

Dilbeck, Keiko. "Symbolic Representation of Identity in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The Explicator*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2008, pp. 102–104. Symbolic Representation of Identity in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: The Explicator: Vol 66, No 2

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. 1903. *Freeditorial*, The Souls of Black Folk|W. E. B. Du Bois|Free download|PDF EPUB|Freeditorial

Du Bois, W.E.B. *Talented Tenth*, 1903, https://librarycollections.law.umn.edu/documents/darrow/Talented_Tenth.pdf

Claudrena N. Harold. *New Negro Politics in the Jim Crow South*. University of Georgia Press, 2016. *EBSCOhost*,

research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=8a913016-ce92-3611-8d0c-beb0f4f22d8c

Etedali Rezapoorian, S.N. Sanchez, Joshua. "Reclaiming Humanity in Literature: A Dialectical Analysis of Zora Neale Hurston and Her Critics", American, British and Canadian Studies, 2024. ResearchGate, PDF File. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387528341_Reclaiming_Humanity_in_Literature_A_Dialectical_Analysis_of_Zora_Neale_Hurston_and_Her_Critics

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press, 1986. *Monoskop*, https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon_Frantz_Black_Skin_White_Masks_1986.pdf.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2014. *Oxford Academic Preview*, https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9780199874514_A24395620/preview-9780199874514_A24395620.pdf

Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies.* Cambridge UP, 1982.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement In the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.* E-book, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993, https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/2027/heb00476.0001.001.

Hooks, Bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 2014, (2nd ed.). Routledge, https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.4324/9781315743110

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, pp. 692–94. Reprinted in *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 4, no. 1,

Spring 1985, pp. 1–4. *Langston Hughes Society / Penn State University Press*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26432664.

Hurston, Zora Neale. "Characteristics of Negro Expression". *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 79-94. https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1515/9780822399889-010

Hurston, Zora Neale. *How It Feels To Be Coloured By Me*, Carlisle, Mass: Applewood Books, 1928. How It Feels To Be Colored Me | Project Gutenberg

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Perennial Classics,1998. Google Docs, PDF File. https://drive.usercontent.google.com/download?id=0ByXs9ZnCw2b5eFRfbHdKNnVNb3c&export=download&authuser=0

Hurston, Zora Neale. *What White Publishers Won't Print*.1950, https://pages.ucsd.edu/~bgoldfarb/cogn150s12/reading/Hurston-What-White-Publishers-Wont-Print.pdf

King, Lovalerie. *The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston,* Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 105-125. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817052

Malcolm X. "Malcolm X on Self-Knowledge". Interview by Mark Wallace, YouTube, 9 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IjQKajHoko.

Mallocci, Martina. "'All Art Is Propaganda': W.E.B. Du Bois's The Crisis and the Construction of a Black Public Image". *USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, Jan. 2018, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-2752/7177

Manuel, Carme. *Mule Bone*, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of an African-American Theatre of the Black Word, African American Review, 2001 Spring, MLA International Bibliography

Martin, Darnell. "A Conversation with Darnell Martin. Interview by Mark Koplik. Albany Film Festival of the New York State Writers Institute, Youtube, 1 May 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ph5pWquPHTg

Racine, Maria J. "Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *African American Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, Summer 1994, pp. 283–292. Johns Hopkins University Press, doi:10.2307/3042000.

Rapp, Brenda, and Simon Fischer-Baum. "Representation of Orthographic Knowledge." The Oxford Handbook of Language Production, edited by Matthew Goldrick, Victor S. Ferreira, and Michele Miozzo, Oxford Library of Psychology, Oxford University Press, 2014. Oxford Academic, 1 July 2014, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9_780199735471.013.026

Smethurst, James. "Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes." *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 112.

Smith, Erin A. Review of *The Word on the Streets: The American Language of Vernacular Modernism*, by Brooks E. Hefner. *Modern Philology*, vol. 116, no. 2, 2018, pp. E134–E136. https://doi.org/10.1086/698968

Smokoski, Hanna L., "Voicing the Other: Mock AAVE on Social Media" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works.* https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/708

Their Eyes Were Watching God. Directed by Darnell Martin, performances by Halle Berry and Michael Ealy, Harpo Films, 2005, ABC. https://myflixerz.to/watch-movie/their-eyes-were-watching-god-53764.5404057

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, https://archive.org/details/goneprimitive0090/page/8/mode/2up

Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 401-409. https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1515/9780822399889-032

Walker, Alice. "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." *Ms. Magazine*, Mar. 1975, pp. 74–79, www.allisonbolah.com/site_resources/reading_list/Walker_In_Search_of_Zora.pdf.

West, M. Genevieve. *Zora Neale Hurston & American Literary Culture,* 2005. https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/permalink/31UKB_LEU/rdnp04/cdi_proquest_ebookcentral_EBC744827

Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing (1937)". *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, edited by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 268-274. https://doi-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/10.1515/9781400827879-050

Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears", *New Masses*, 5 October 1937 Richard Wright on Hurston.pdf