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MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: WOMEN'S VOICE IN ZORA NEALE  
HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AND "SWEAT"

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MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: WOMEN'S VOICE IN ZORA NEALE  
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A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts Degree  
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VeAnda L. Hemphill

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## DEDICATION

This thesis and all the tears and sweat that it holds is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Shirley Autmon Griffin because she exemplified strength, determination, and love for her fellow human beings.

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis shows the effects a male-dominated society has on the voice and identity of the African American female in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat." First, this thesis delves into the life of Janie Crawford Killecks Sparks Woods as she struggles against her placement upon the pedestal and becoming the mule of the world. Second, this thesis will investigate Delia's struggle to fight against a husband who will not work toward advancing their lives, though he mentally and physically abuses her for working as a laundress for white folks. The idea of objectification is carried through a discussion of the need for African American men and women to cater to a capitalist society and eventually become imprisoned by that identity crisis. As a result, the females become imprisoned by the failures of their men. Additionally, the thesis shows that Janie and Delia must endure years of silence as they suffer through their husbands' mental and physical abuse until they find their "voices" that eventually break the invisible ties that imprison them. At the end of the study, my hope is that readers will see that Janie and Delia are strong and powerful voices for African American women.

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*So the white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.*  
--from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

## Chapter One Introduction

Like many I am transfixed on making sure women of the present as well as the future do not have to fight for a voice like women of the past. I closely watch television programs and the news media for the ways in which women are portrayed; more often than not, I am thoroughly disappointed in the female representation. The objectification of women through music videos and reality shows saddens me. The more women become objectified for entertainment purposes, the more difficult it will be for my daughters to be taken seriously as professional women.

One may inquire as to the reasons Zora Neale Hurston chose to write about women's struggles for identity in a patriarchal society. The answer can be found in the story of her life. As the granddaughter of former slaves, Hurston was aware of the changes black men had to endure in order to survive in a white world; they had the difficult job of attempting to become as good as white men. As Nathan Grant says, "she may have been in her personal relationships so frequently disappointed by the worst aspects of black man's urban sophistication" (93). A good

example of a black man molding himself in the master's image is Hurston's father, John. As the mayor of an all-black Eatonville, he felt the pressures of maintaining a high level of respect. He was the center of conversation of Joe Clarke's porch and a well-known womanizer as well. In point of fact, the front of Joe Clarke's store was the place where voice developed into an important means of expressing strength through the means of storytelling.

Storytelling in the black community occurred mainly in a location where the community could gather during the day (frequently at the end of the day) and use their voice because they could not use it in the presence of Whites. Storytelling enables the speaker to become the signifier (the person who holds the power) and the listener becomes the signified (the person who holds the least power). As a result, the person who could tell the longest and most interesting story holds the power. Effectively, the voice became a powerful force and it was often the black male who took the position of storyteller on the front porch. Black women, as they were usually left on the sidelines, were usually the observers as they were not allowed to participate.

Zora Neale Hurston's mother, Lucy, taught her primary lessons about the importance of a woman's voice. Hurston's upbringing by a mother, who encouraged her to take every

opportunity and "jump at the sun," allowed her to become the voice of an unspoken gender (*Dust Tracks*). Gladly, Hurston did not heed her overprotective father's advice to be seen and not heard. In her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, she tells the story of her strong mother's refusal to silently watch as her father committed adultery with other women in the town. In one incident, Lucy watched as John prepared to take another woman shoes and later in the darkness of night she chased him home with an ax while carrying the shoes over her shoulder. Moreover, Hurston found that silence can be very damaging when she failed to be her mother's voice as the women of Eatonville performed funeral rites that her mother did not want. Eventually, through her works, Hurston became the voice for all women who are unable to articulate for themselves.

Zora Neale Hurston was a woman before her time because, unlike other African Americans who surrounded her in the Harlem Renaissance, she did not feel the heavy weight of her color. She wanted to tell black women that they did not have to be silenced by the patriarchal society. Hurston's works make readers painfully aware of the effects of slavery on women before and after slavery and until the Women's Liberation Movement; she provides invaluable lessons for developing a voice as a means for survival.

One way of analyzing the objectification of women is looking at the patriarchy that shapes it. Deeply rooted in Western culture, the patriarchy defines all of society's actions and attitudes. Since dominance already exists in the patriarchal system, one must question the need for mental and physical violence of women in order to keep them in an oppressive state. Simone de Beauvoir illustrates the framework that keeps this relationship of power between men and women in place. Woman, according to Simone de Beauvoir, "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xvi).

I propose to show how marriage and society take away the power of women by suppressing their ability to exert that power through voice by exploring the women characters of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat." Hurston shows that without voice, women cannot become individuals outside of their marriage. The voice is a powerful attribute, and the moment it is released—nothing remains the same. The voice is a metaphor for the power that opens the shackles that bind women as they move from passivity to activity.

## CHAPTER TWO

Voice as a Metaphor for Strength: Their Eyes Were Watching  
God and "Sweat"

Black feminist writing is a result of the misrepresentation of black women by black and white male writers in addition to white female writers. As a black southern woman writer, Hurston's works mirror the obstacles she has endured in a white male-dominated society. Opportunities for a black woman in the early to mid-1900s were almost nonexistent and marriage was, for many women, the only means of survival. Consequently, the bonds of matrimony become a noose around the black woman's neck, slowly oppressing and eventually silencing her voice. Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat" are good models of breaking the silence as Janie and Delia fight for survival in their marriages. The key to their survival is the use of voice.

*I. Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Their Eyes Were Watching God is one example of a black woman's struggle for identity. Janie and the women who surround her early and later in life lose their identity because of their placement in society. In her essay on black feminist theory, Valerie Smith maintains that Hurston's work is a black feminist approach as it "[announces] itself . . . as a celebration of

heterosexual love, but Hurston manipulates narrative strategies to ensure that the male is eliminated and the female liberated" (Smith 377). On the surface, Their Eyes Were Watching God appears to be a woman's search for love as she endures the pains of three marriages. On closer examination, however, the reader will find the real story within the story—a woman's search for identity.

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with Janie walking through Eatonville like a fallen Eve as the townspeople judge her style of clothing. The women ask, "What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls" (2)? The women of the town believe that a woman of Janie's age should be dressed according to the standards of society—in a dress that stretches to the ankles. Despite the women's cruel looks and their scorching comments, Janie keeps her head up as her hair swings down her back as the women scorch her with their tongues. The men of the town judge Janie's overalls quite differently as they lustfully watch her physical attributes through the overalls, noticing "her firm buttocks . . . the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist . . . her pugnacious breasts trying to [bear] holes in her shirt" (2-3). Following the dehumanizing gaze of the town, Janie must tell Phoeby, her oldest and dearest friend, of the trials and tribulations the women in her family have undergone as they struggled to individualize themselves in a male-

dominated society. She must relate the story of the women as storytelling, an important element of a person's ability to use voice as a means to forge an identity.

Janie's story to Phoeby begins with her grandmother, Nanny, the first person to teach her about the absence of identity in the black female. Nanny has troubles with her own identity because as the property of a white slave holder,—her identity was absent. Yvonne Johnson, the author of The Voices of African American Women, suggests that Nanny shares the role of sex object with Harriet Jacobs in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Johnson makes this comparison because the master's wife and the female slave are "victims of the patriarchal system that hold them both in bondage to some degree" because the wife suffers the betrayal while the slave suffers continuous rape and silence (38). In time, Nanny's job to her slave owner as sex object and breeder results in the birth of a daughter. One day, during the absence of the slave owner, the mistress of the plantation confronts Nanny about the paternity of her child. Nanny answers: "Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave'" (21). With these words, Nanny is telling the master's wife—and the world—that she does not have an identity outside of being another person's property. As a means to save the life of the daughter as well as herself, Nanny escapes the plantation, into what she

perceives as freedom. Conversely, she is only physically free because her mind and spirit are continually imprisoned by the need to live up to the expectations of the white lifestyle.

Motherhood, however, does not give Nanny the freedom she desires. In fact, it hampers her prospects of making a mark on the world. As a young woman after slavery, Nanny wants to be a preacher, but freedom finds her with a young daughter to raise and leaving her to take on the role of mother and sole provider. She finds herself taking "a broom and a crock-pot and throwing up highway through the wilderness" for her daughter (19). For the sake of her daughter, Nanny becomes the master of her will when she decides to remain unmarried in a society that thinks that all women need to marry. Even though the shackles of marriage do not bind Nanny, gender constraints still define her choices and her daughter's.

Nanny's attempt to simulate the white world by giving her daughter a "white" education leads to the daughter's brutal rape by the white schoolmaster. Nanny's daughter involuntarily becomes a victim of the white patriarchy, just like her mother, and she cannot recover from the violation and wanders the town in a drug-induced fog. The namelessness of Janie's mother shows that the pervasiveness of this sexual violence against black women by white men. As a result of the daughter's inability to

participate in society, Nanny becomes Janie's caregiver and nurturer.

Nanny continues to believe that anything good is white, despite the fact that the white world causes her daughter's silence. Nanny raises Janie with her white employer's children, a choice that results in Janie's confusion about her racial identity. Janie tells Phoeby that as a six year old, she becomes painfully aware of her skin color for the first time. As the white playmates and Janie look at a photograph of themselves, she cannot find herself and says, "Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, `where is me? Ah don't see me'" (11).

An observer of nature, Janie looks to it for answers to life's questions. As a sixteen year old, Janie becomes sexually curious. On a lazy afternoon while lying under a pear tree, Janie sees "a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom" (13). At this sight, Janie experiences her first orgasm and believes that this feeling defines marriage. The tree becomes Janie's emotional center where she defines marriage as a physical and emotional connection between male and female. She explores more answers to her questions about marriage and finds them in her grandmother's kitchen where "flies were tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage" (14).

Ironically, the next moment causes confusion for Janie as she notices a "glorious being coming up the road"—it is the slick field hand, Johnny Taylor (14). Her teenage yearnings result in a kiss with Johnny Taylor, a man Nanny describes as a "trashy nigger" (15). This moment leaves Janie's heart open like a flower waiting for a bee to pollinate it and make her happy.

Throughout her teens, Nanny continues to be the voice behind Janie's life. It is ironic that though Nanny never wanted to marry, while she rushes Janie into marriage with a much older Logan Killicks so that Janie may have the life white women have—financial stability and status. Nanny believes that men like Johnny Taylor will use Janie sexually and give her nothing in return. Nanny, however, does not realize that she is trading Janie's freedom and voice for monetary and social gain. Janie wants to marry for emotional rather than financial reasons. Janie asks, "Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun the day" (25)? In effect, Nanny becomes the first desecrator of Janie's tree because she sees marriage as a way out of poverty and abuse, a means to sit on a pedestal. Nanny wants Janie to avoid the established providence of the black woman as "de mule of the world" (17). However, Janie pays a high price as she exchanges voice for the financial stability Nanny wants for her.

Janie does not realize that as this marriage is set in motion, she will completely disappear—she will no longer be Janie Crawford, but Mrs. Killicks as her identity transforms from Nanny's possession to Killick's possession. Janie is set up for this kind of marriage because of Nanny. During the first months of marriage, Logan Killicks places Janie on a pedestal so that he can admire and worship her, but it does not make Janie love him. In a conversation with Nanny, Janie tells her that she wants to love Killicks, but she cannot because she is not physically attracted to him. Nanny's immediate response is that she is talking "foolishness" because the property, protection, and respect that comes from being Mrs. Killicks is enough (27). Janie is miserable in her marriage to Logan Killicks because he pays more attention to his wealth than her, even though he is working to provide for her after his death. Janie's decision to settle into a loveless marriage begins a downward spiral into voicelessness.

After a long look at her marriage, Janie comes to the conclusion that marriage does not equal love. Janie also begins to believe that womanhood means accepting things that she cannot change while living in misery. Six months after her marriage, visible changes occur, and Killicks removes Janie from the pedestal, a position of adoration and objectification. Killicks asserts his position as man of the house and attempts to place

Janie in the "mule" position so that she can help him in the fields. As a result, Logan becomes the second desecrator of Janie's tree.

Janie meets Jody Sparks outside of the Killicks' property, and he becomes a light in Janie's dark world. Conversely, he is not the type of man she thinks he is; he will later place her back on the pedestal from which Killicks has taken her down. The reader becomes aware of Joe's future placement of Janie on the pedestal as he balks at the slightest notion that Janie's husband wants her to work behind a plow in the fields. He tells her, "A pretty dollbaby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters that other folks plant just special for you" (34). Janie falls prey to Sparks' sweet words and, she leaves Killick's prison for another golden cage.

A sense of renewal comes over Janie as she walks out the doors of Killick's prison. Janie believes that "[f]rom now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything" (39). Before Janie and Joe marry, he dresses her in the finest clothes, making her his object of possession because he needs to look important as he arrives in Eatonville. Joe's entrance into the downtrodden town immediately makes him feel important; his responses to any situation begin with "I god." He replaces the white master, as he becomes the ruler of the people of Eatonville, including

Janie. Though Janie thinks she might find her voice with Joe, she never will because he will always overpower and quieten her voice. Sparks symbolically takes the place of the white man in the physical objects he obtains. Susan E. Meisenhelder describes the house Joe builds with its "sparkly white" as a symbol of "his power over the community and the light post he installs as an "imitation of the white god he worships" (66). Sparks is a victim of the white male patriarchy because he believes the attainment of objects will make him important as well as happy.

Janie's initial physical presence in Eatonville immediately threatens the manhood of Coker and Hicks, the first men the Sparks encounter as they enter Eatonville. Coker and Hicks believe that a man needs wealth to get a pretty woman, thus implying that that women like Janie are materialistic. Additionally, the men place women in the position of the "other" because they believe they are incapable of understanding anything that is not interpreted for them. Case in point, Janie is a threat to Hick's manhood because she ignores his constant flirting. As a result to the threat of his manhood, he degrades Janie's physical features to Coker: "Tain't nothin' to her 'ceptin' dat long hair" (45). Coker's ignorance keeps him from seeing the real Janie—a woman in need of an equal partner for life.

Joe objectifies and isolates Janie by placing her in the best clothes. Joe insists that: "She must look on herself as a bell-cow, the other women [are] the gang" (48). Everything revolves around Joe as Janie is left outside the circle in her pretty attire. The more visible Joe becomes in Eatonville, the more Janie disappears. Case in point, as the town encircles the sparks with praise, Joe tells Janie and the entire town the role his wife will play in the governing of the town: "Mah wife don't know nothin' bout no speech makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (51). As a result of the embarrassment, Janie becomes lifeless as her free spirit withers, and she completely loses her voice.

The general store Joe purchases in Eatonville becomes Janie's prison just as Logan Killick's house and farm. The head-rag that Joe makes Janie wear is a means of stifling her independence and—her hair becomes immobile and hidden. Joe feels threatened by the townsmen because he believes that given the opportunity, Janie will leave him. He believes that, "[s]he is there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (65). As the years pass, Janie becomes sadder, and Joe feels like it is a slap in the face because with all she has in the world, she does not have a right to be sad. He tells her that "[h]ere he was pouring honor all over her; building a high chair

for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it" (73). Joe fails to realize that it is not the pedestal or "high chair" that Janie seeks, but love, respect, and equality from a husband she adores. Joe's real feelings about women soon present themselves. After an argument about a lost order form, Joe declares, "Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves" (83). Janie realizes that exchanging words with Joe makes him angrier because "he [wants] submission and he'd keep on fighting until he [has] it" (84). Eventually, Janie realizes that Joe is not the man of her dreams; he is "just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over" (85). From this conclusion, Janie continues to hope and pray for the man of her dreams—someone to freely speak her mind to without fear of repercussion. She continues to believe that there is hope for a passionate love affair because the lovemaking she once had with Sparks is a thing of the past. Effectively, Sparks becomes the third desecrator of Janie's tree because his purpose in life is the attainment of property as well as glorification.

The ill treatment of Matt's yellow mule by the men on the store porch gives Janie something/someone she can feel as though she has a kindred spirit. Unfortunately, she cannot connect with the women of Eatonville because her position as Joe's wife

separates her from the other wives. The yellow mule represents her struggles against the dominant forces of patriarchy; it is determined not to fall under Joe's rules of imprisonment and hard labor. She comments under her breath that the mule: "Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin' 'im tuh death" (67). She does not realize the weight her voice carries as Joe overhears her and immediately acts upon her disdain. Her opinion results in the mule's ability to roam freely through the town in peace; Janie is the true liberator of the mule because she places the thoughts of freedom into action, but of course, Joe gets the credit. Although, Janie has not liberated herself yet; but she steps into unshackling her gender constraints by recognizing the oppression of the mule.

Later in Their Eyes Were Watching God, in a conversation that takes place between Joe and Coker, one comes to realize the force which holds women in a signified position of physical/mental abuse. For example, Joe and Coker chat about the marital relationship of a couple in Eatonville—Tony and his wife. Joe and Coker feel that Tony needs to put his wife in her proper place because she has a very strong mind and refuses to follow Tony's directions. Apparently, Tony cannot control his wife in the manner in which Joe and Coker want him to because they feel abuse is the best method. Coker states, "Ah could

break her or kill her" (88). Joe and Coker believe that Tony is weak because he refuses to harm his wife in order to make her surrender to his will. The conversation forces Janie from her silence, and she declares, "It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens" (88-89). It is from this moment of broken silence that Janie realizes that she can no longer remain silent.

The constant mental abuse ages Janie beyond her 35 years—"her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun" (90). Janie's age and financial situation keep her from running away from the marriage. The older and weaker Joe becomes, the more he mentally abuses Janie by demeaning her physical appearance. This mental abuse serves as a vehicle to keep her down so she feels inadequate and will not leave him because "[h]e didn't want her to stay young while he grew old" (91). Unbelievably, the degradation has the opposite effect on Janie; she becomes stronger with each word. Joe punishes Janie for speaking to him in such a strong manner by denying her the right to work in the store. Joe unknowingly gives Janie the first step into freedom and independence because the store was one of many prisons for her.

As Joe becomes weak and near death, Janie tells him what she really thinks of him and the years of their tortuous marriage. Joe's manhood will not allow him to accept Janie's

strength, and he dies in a verbal battle with her. Afterwards, Janie turns to the mirror to see if she can find the girl she left behind 20 years ago. After Joe's death, she tears away her source of bondage from her hair to look at the beautiful woman hidden underneath. However, she immediately replaces it in order to conform to the widow's image of grieving. After the funeral, Janie burns all the head rags and lets her hair hang, as she "would have the rest of her life to do as she [pleases]" (106).

Although Janie is twenty years older from when she first married, she remains an object of lust for the men of Eatonville because she has refused many marriage proposals after Joe's death. The money and property she inherits make her a mark that needs protecting. Janie is worried that if she chooses to marry again, she will lose the identity and voice she has acquired since Joe's death.

Her prayers for an emotional and physical love are answered in the form of Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, who enters the general store because he has confused the location of the ball game that the townspeople have taken off to observe. There is an immediate connection, and Janie realizes that Tea Cake can give her the passionate love for which she yearns. "After a long time of passive happiness, she got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind. [And]

that was the beginning of things" (128). Sadly, Janie continues to carry the scars from the verbal abuse of two husbands and doubts that Tea Cake can love her because of her age. In fact, Tea Cake represents all that her Nanny has warned her against: he does not have property or money and does not define his life by mere possessions—Janie and Tea Cake are kindred spirits. He will, however, be the "bee for her bloom." Tea Cake makes Janie feel alive, free, young, and wanted and—he promises her happiness. As she releases her inhibitions, Janie trades her beautiful silk dresses for the independence and comfort of overalls.

Janie tells Pheoby that her relationship with Tea Cake is real, and it is not a "race after property and titles . . . Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (134). Janie also tells Pheoby that she sat on the "high chair" that her grandmother wanted her to and "nearly languished tuh death up dere" (135). The relationship with Tea Cake gives Janie a sense of renewal and a means to use her voice to shout to the world.

Janie decides to leave Eatonville with Tea Cake because she does not want the town to compare him with Joe. Janie defines the relationship with Tea Cake as a love game. She has lived Nanny's way and now Janie has to live her own way (134). The Everglades signify a place in which Janie's "soul can crawl out

from its hiding place" (151). Furthermore, the Everglades represent a place in which Janie can become an active participant in her own survival and within the community.

Unfortunately, life in the Everglades does not come without its problems. Janie meets Mrs. Turner, a woman who resembles Nanny's frame of mind in that she believes that anything white has to be better than black. Mrs. Turner's features are not worth complimenting, but she believes that because she possesses "white" features, they "set her aside from the Negroes." Mrs. Turner believes that Janie's "coffee and cream complexion and luxurious hair" make her a match for her brother, not "a man as dark as Tea Cake" (164). As Tea Cake overhears Mrs. Turner playing matchmaker for Janie, his jealous side comes to light when he fears Janie's white characteristics will cause other men to come between them; he physically beats her in order to maintain control over his "possession."

God shows Janie that she has the means to take full control of her life because Tea Cake is only a springboard towards her independence. God can also be the beautiful side of nature, but He can also be the turbulent side of nature. Case in point, the hurricane in the Everglades forces Janie and Tea Cake outside to battle the natural forces. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, writer of Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick, points out that

"Hurston casts the foaming, boiling sea as a godlike force is a counter to the male domestication and control" (107).

As Tea Cake and Janie attempt to flee the storm, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and Janie has to kill him in order to save her own life. Janie's life with Tea Cake ends, as she has to shoot him as his mind succumbs to the poison of a bite from a rabid dog. His death, however, gives Janie the ultimate test to her strength and voice. Janie is devastated by Tea Cake's death as she rocks his head back and forth while thanking him for giving her the chance for loving service (216). Janie is arrested and placed on trial for the death of Tea Cake. She must once again, fight for her life as she is placed under the gaze of a white male jury. Janie's voice becomes the saving grace as she convinces the jury of her love for Tea Cake and the agonizing decision to end his suffering. Additionally, Janie's voice bonds her with the white women in the courthouse. At the end of the trial, the white women cry and stand "around her like a protecting wall" as the angry blacks of the working community leave the courthouse (221). Even though, the women have different skin colors, they share the same struggle for love without objectification.

## II. "Sweat"

Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" is a story that explores the marriage of Delia and Sykes Jones, a marriage that turns from love to pure hatred. The story opens with Delia washing the clothes of her white clients on a late Sunday night as she wonders about the whereabouts of her husband as he has "her horse and backward" (197). In the same scene, as Delia sits doing the laundry, "something, long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her" (197). In a moment of paralyzing terror, she realizes that it is a bullwhip with her husband on the other end of it. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder proposes, "Hurston uses the phallic imagery of the whip to suggest a notion of masculinity expressed in soul-crushing force and rooted in racial oppression" (44). It is obvious that Sykes' masculinity is threatened by his wife's position as the main source of income because he uses the object of which she is most afraid—the snake.

One may say that Delia struggles to wash white people's clothes for the reason that she falls victim to the white capitalist definition of success—the attainment of material wealth. Laurie Champion disagrees with this assumption in her essay, "Socioeconomics in Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston." Champion feels that Delia's sweat allows her to release the "toxin or poison that represents the social system

that exploits her" so that she does not become corrupted physically or spiritually (84). In turn, Delia's "sweat" is a metaphor for her physical voice.

The Jones marriage experiences trouble after only two months; Sykes tires of Delia. Sykes begins to physically abuse Delia and initiates affairs with various women in town (199). Sykes eventually settles into a relationship with Bertha, who Elijah Moseley describes as a "big black greasy Mogul . . . who couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done thowed out in de back do' way las' yeah" (22). It is evident Sykes is unhappy with Delia's slim looks as he often criticizes her, but her haggard looks are the result of her hard work as she feeds him and pays for the house in which they live.

Sykes attempts to hide his embarrassment of dependency on Delia by ridiculing her religious convictions as she does laundry after church service. Sykes calls Delia a hypocrite...one of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, and then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath" (198). Suzanne D. Green, author of "Fear, Freedom and the Perils of Ethnicity," agrees that Sykes "masterfully manipulates Delia in such a way that her guilt keeps her in a subservient position . . . [a] guilt couched in religious terms" (109). The townspeople acknowledge the physical abuse by stating he has beaten her "enuf tuh kill three women" (200). Fifteen

years of marriage has taken its toll on Delia as her "habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf" (198). In many ways, the community participates in Sykes' abuse of Delia because they fail to come to her aid.

Delia's usual silent voice can no longer remain quiet as she senses that Sykes wants to take the product of her hard labor—the house—and give it to Bertha. Delia raises a skillet to Sykes and says, "You ain't paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer to stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost" (199). This is the point where Sykes realizes that he must kill Delia in order to get the house for Bertha.

Sykes begins to prey on Delia's obsessive fear of snakes in an effort to bring about her demise, and he places a snake in a box at the door through which Delia has to enter. A strong symbol for the plot of "Sweat," the snake signifies danger and evil to Delia. The snake is the last thing Delia can take following the beatings, starving, and the numerous affairs. Delia pleads with Sykes to take it away, and upon his refusal, she finally says, "Ah hates you, Sykes. Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah usteer love yuh" (204). These powerful words from Delia contrast with her passive demeanor, shocking Sykes, and he immediately retaliates by speaking of her "rawbony laigs an' arms" and how much he has hated her for years (204). Her voice becomes the strength that forces Sykes to leave the house.

Delia, not anticipating Sykes' retaliation, goes to church the next day.

Sykes takes the snake out of the box and places it in Delia's clothes' hamper, the source of her income and "sweat," as Delia is coming home from church. Delia discovers the snake as she enters the bedroom, and she flees to a nearby haystack. In religious terms, this tree might be a symbol for sustenance as it gives her the means to escape a physical death. At the same time Delia is in the tree, a drunken Sykes returns to the house in anticipation of seeing Delia's dead body, and he receives a fatal blow from the snake. Does Sykes seek redemption at the time of his death as he calls out to the god he has criticized Delia for worshiping? Ironically, Sykes seeks light at the time of his death, and Delia crawls into darkness as she passively watches him die from a nearby chinaberry tree. Does Delia succumb to the darkness as she becomes stronger at the sight of Sykes' death?

The tree from which Delia seeks protection can symbolize the "tree of life," as she escapes physical death in order to receive the sustenance of a Sykes-free life. One critic views this scene as Delia's spiritual demise because she appears emotionless as Sykes dies from the snake bite. In his article, "What Goes Around Comes Around," Myles Raymond Hurd insists that a Christian Delia is unable to enter the "circle of evil" that

encompasses Sykes without jeopardizing herself (13). Therefore, Delia becomes a worse person than Sykes. On the other hand, the "chinaberry tree" to which Delia escapes can represent the biblical "tree of knowledge of good and evil" as she suffers a spiritual death. Just as the snake in the Garden of Eden causes the downfall of humankind, the snake in "Sweat" causes Delia's spiritual downfall. No matter how the ending is interpreted, however, Delia wins the battle against male domination.

On the contrary, Delia's spirituality remains and becomes stronger. The scene in which Delia watches Sykes die from the poisonous snake bite does not minimize her character. In the battle between the evil forces of the patriarchy and female selfhood, a woman must exhibit self defense mechanisms in order to survive. The act of eliminating the male constructs the liberation of the female. Conclusively, Delia now has the tools in which to use her voice fearlessly in the male dominated community.

## Chapter Three

### Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat" illustrate the need for African American women to bring themselves into selfhood while under the dominating forces of a patriarchal society. This selfhood or individual identity can only take place when the female stands up to her oppressor, usually in the form of a husband, parent, or guardian, and adamantly refuse to be objectified. Janie of Their Eyes Were Watching God and Delia of "Sweat" must become active participants in their relationships.

African American females must refuse their placement on the bottom of the societal totem pole. Additionally, the pedestal on which women are placed by the patriarchy alienates and obstructs a woman's progress in society. The male and female characters of Hurston's works are unable to relate to each other as they fight against their placement in the community. The African American male wants to become the oppressor and the African American female refuses to be oppressed. Janie of Their Eyes Were Watching God makes every effort to use her voice to fight being placed on the pedestal—she wants to be an active participant in the community. Similarly, Delia in "Sweat" refuses to be oppressed. Although she does not use her physical

voice, the sweat she exudes from the hard work as a laundress is her means of breaking from an oppressed position.

The progression from the bowed to the upright position of the head exemplifies the ideal state for the African American female. She realizes that the slave position previously held by her ancestors does not necessarily define her future. In order for the female to escape the past and characterize her potential, she must commit to speaking aloud in order to shake off the shackles of the patriarchal society. In other words, the African American female must become a majority of one because her voice becomes a threat to the power of her male counterpart, she must be placed outside the community as punishment. Therefore, Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat" show a progression from an inactive to active African American females.

Their Eyes Were Watching God presents Janie Crawford Killicks Sparks Woods whose three marriages tell of her struggles for voice in a male-dominated society. Janie's primary dilemma is escaping her grandmother's definition of womanhood. As a former slave, Nanny defines African American womanhood by the standards of former white mistresses. Nanny wants Janie to marry a man of financial means so that Janie can sit on the porch of her house for all to see and admire. The generational shift between the two women is the basis for their

separate definitions of womanhood. Janie wants to be a woman who is free to express her desires and needs; her definition of womanhood is very different from her grandmother's ideas of quietude and submissiveness.

Regrettably, it is the murder of Janie's last husband, Tea Cake, by her hands and the ultimate criminal trial to save her own life where Janie finally uses her voice. The postponement of Janie's dreams for over 20 years are well worth the struggle as she comes to realize the value of true happiness and the strength that comes with it. There is a sense of hope that she can participate without being burdened by her gender. Janie's struggle for voice over more than twenty years culminates in her strength to walk through the Eatonville community and relate her story to her friend, Phoeby.

Delia's struggle for selfhood in Hurston's "Sweat" is quite different than that of Janie. Delia suffers physical and mental abuse at the hands of a womanizing husband. Conversely, Delia is the mule of the world as she does the back and soul-breaking laundry of white folks. Unlike Janie, she does not remain beautiful, but becomes skinny and haggard in an attempt to grab on to something she can see and hold--her house. Whereas, Janie is happy living in the muck and lacks the desire for wealth, Delia wants both love and material possessions. Delia is willing to replace love with objects. The reader is happy to

see Delia's husband, Sykes, die by the snake with which he means to kill Delia; there is a sense that he gets the punishment from the god which Delia serves. Of course, there is the extra bonus of Sykes crawling on his knees and hands while calling Delia's name. The reader feels optimistic that Delia has enough faith and grace to make it without Sykes because she has taken care of herself all along. There is also a sense of hope that she finds the love that makes her happy to crawl in bed at night.

Although, Janie and Delia must continue to face the constrictions of gender, their voices show a rebellion against imposed gender rules. But will Janie and Delia become voices for all African American women? At the end of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie does not speak to the women of the community, but encloses herself in the house with Phoeby in order to share her story. Janie tells her story to Phoeby, anticipating that she will share with the other women of the community. In contrast to Janie, Delia is left alone to ponder her future after Sykes' death—she does not speak. Jennifer Gordan asserts that Janie and Delia are no better than their male counterparts by the end of each work because their "allegiance to other women of any class is minimal" (qtd. in Plant 169). Janie and Delia may have begun in silence; nevertheless, they will no longer be able to remain silent because the ties have been broken.

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Green, Suzanne D. "Fear, Freedom and the Perils of Ethnicity: Otherness in Kate Chopin's 'Beyond the Bayou' and Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat'." *Southern Studies*. 5:3-4 (Fall-Winter 1994): 105-24. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 6 February 2006. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>

Hurd, Myles Raymond. "What Goes Around Comes Around: Characterization, Climax and Closure in Hurston's 'Sweat'." Langston Hughes Review. 12.2 (Fall 1993): 7-15. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 6 February 2006. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

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Johnson, Yvonne. "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The Voices of African American Women. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998.

Meisenhelder, Susan Edwards. Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999.

Plant, Deborah G. "Politics of Self." Every Tub Must Sit On Its Bottom. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Smith, Valerie. "Black Feminist Theory." African American  
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Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Self. Trans. H. M. Parshley.  
New York: Knopf, 1952.

Beauvoir explores the definition of "woman." She believes that a man should not be a man, and a woman should not be a woman—just humans. In reality, the woman is second shelf to a man because she possesses a womb and therefore, she is the second sex—the Other.

Cantarow, Ellen. "Sex, Race, and Criticism: Thoughts of a White Feminist on Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston." Radical Teacher. 3 (September 1978): 30-33. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 4 December 2005. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>.

Cantarow gives a white feminist opinion of Chopin's The Awakening and Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. In her opinion, Janie is a lot stronger than Edna because she has to endure racism as well as sexism. She bases her opinion on the fact that Edna, a woman of white privilege, would not have survived in Janie's world. "The black woman was used for manual labor and house service ... she was a breeder woman." This opinion is Nanny's opinion as well the plight of the black woman in a man's world. Edna and Janie are alike in that they are objects for their husbands, but Janie removes herself from the pedestal when she verbally stands up to her husband. Cantarow

ends her essay by stating the she is a white feminist reading Zora Neale Hurston because she gives her "vicarious strength" and understanding.

Champion, Laurie. "Socioeconomics in Selected Short Stories of Zora Neale Hurston." Southern Quarterly. 40.1 (Fall 2001): 79-92. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 6 February 2006. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>.

Champion asserts that the women in Hurston's short stories "develop independence in spite of oppressive social conditions, particularly those influenced by a politics of gender- and ethnic-based economics." In the short story, "Sweat," the depiction of Delia's willingness to wash white folk's clothes in order to pay for a house and financially support herself without the help of her husband, Sykes, is one of the reasons he despises her. Additionally, Delia experiences a spiritual downfall when she does not offer aid to her husband as he dies from a snake bite. "Delia's sweat represents both literal bodily toxins and symbolic poisons that represent the social system that has caused her to sweat.

Clarke, Deborah. "The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." African American Review. 35.4 (Winter 2001): 599-704. Info Trac

OneFile. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN.  
28 September 2005. <http://www.find.galegroup.com>.

Clarke opens her article by stating that before Janie's story can be understood by Phoebe, she must be able to visualize through voice. Essentially, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Charles Chestnutt use voice so that the reader can visualize their world. "The construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see, a voice that celebrates the visible presence of black bodies." Clarke admits that Hurston does not display a minstrel show through the dialect and lives of African Americans.

Additionally, Clarke compares Hurston's need to offer evidence of racial oppression to the videotaped beating of Rodney King. She also uses many quotes from Audre Lourde on the invisibility of black women to prove Hurston's need to make Janie visible through voice. Hurston does not throw the racial and sexual oppression of African Americans in the reader's face; she gives visualization in small doses. Through voice African Americans are no longer spectacles for white audiences.

Crabtree, Claire. "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." The Southern Literary Journal. 17.2 (Spring 1985): 54-66. Info Trac. Austin Peay State

University. Clarksville, TN. 21 September 2005.

<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>.

Crabtree uses the concept of folklore in the black community to show how Hurston uses it in Their Eyes Were Watching God to show how women and men use voice to forge their identity. Hurston uses four aspects of folk material into the body of the tale of Janie Crawford's journey through three marriages to a final position of self-realization. They are: The storytelling frame from oral tradition; the use of language through metaphors and symbols; merging of different types of gaming and other performances in the narrative; and her attempt to situate the narrative voice in a collective folk consciousness toward the end of the book. Crabtree believes that folklore is the basis for feminism and black self-determination.

Crabtree states that it is not until Janie travels through the three marriages that she finds her individual identity. Janie's marriage to Killicks is one arranged by her grandmother's vision of what she needed—hard work and no talk. The marriage to Sparks completely silences her for twenty years until she grows tired and kills him with her words. The marriage to Tea Cake takes her away from surroundings she is

accustomed to and she obtains the freedom of thought and voice she has always wanted and needed.

Gates, Henry Louis Jr.. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text." The Signifying Monkey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Gates opens the chapter with narratives from Frederick Douglass and Zora Neale Hurston in which they describe ships leaving shore; in the man's vision transforms into a Watcher and the woman's vision seeks the truth of a dream. Gates uses the term "speakerly text" to describe Hurston's narrative strategies in Their Eyes Were Watching God. He defines it as "that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance..." Janie's mission is to become conscious of her surroundings and to become a "black speaking subject." Unlike Richard Wright's Native Son, Hurston does not use wallowing self-pity to make the reader identify with Janie.

Grant, Nathan. "Hurston's Masculinist Critique of the South." Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004.

Grant begins the essay by stating that Janie's quest for fulfillment was more spiritual than geographical because her journey remains in the South instead of the industrialized North. Hurston's critiques of black men stems from the disappointment she experiences as they become independent of slave labor. The analysis of black men is an indirect way of criticizing the economics and politics that surround them. Hurston realizes that in an attempt to live up to standards set by white men, black men are corrupted and oppress their women in one stroke. "Joe's implication in white, male, capitalist desire is indeed found by Hurston to be a destructive influence to African American maleness."

Green, Suzanne D. "Fear, Freedom and the Perils of Ethnicity: Otherness in Kate Chopin's 'Beyond the Bayou' and Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat'." *Southern Studies*. 5:3-4 (Fall-Winter 1994): 105-24. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 6 February 2006. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>

According to Green, "societal control by a dominant gender or race leads to the exclusion or suppression of those that are not part of the controlling group, and the result is the disempowerment of the nondominant group. Delia's otherness is based on gender and race. Delia's oppression comes from an

abusive husband. Green adds that Hurston places Delia in the black community so that the reader can concentrate on her oppression by the marriage instead of in the white community. Effectively, the black male becomes the slave master and the black woman becomes the slave. Green proves that Delia is a woman in control of her own destiny because she is the primary breadwinner of the family, but she is bound by the restrictions of a patriarchal society. Green cites Simone de Beauvoir's treatise *The Second Self*. In the treatise, Beauvoir states that men are considered "the One" in society because of physical strength and women are "Other" because they lack physical strength.

Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." African American Literary Theory: A Reader. Winston Napier, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Henderson shows how the court scene in which Janie is talking for her life in an attempt to defend herself in the murdering of Tea Cakes demonstrates subjectivity of black women's discourse. Hurston speaks to a varied audience to about a racist and sexist society through Their Eyes Were Watching God. Black women must speak in multiple, as well as different

voices because it makes them pure in their experiences just as women in the Pentecostal church.

Hurd, Myles Raymond. "What Goes Around Comes Around: Characterization, Climax and Closure in Hurston's 'Sweat'." Langston Hughes Review. 12.2 (Fall 1993): 7-15. Literature Resource Center. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 6 February 2006. <http://www.galenet.galegroup.com>.

Hurd explores Delia's character throughout the work and the juxtaposition of Hurston's life experiences. Delia's religious convictions allow the town to feel sympathy for her as Sykes flaunts his many affairs in plain sight. Delia's voice is a result of Hurston's hand in that she has the courage and the ability to remove herself from the oppressed position. Delia's refusal to help her dying husband does not make her look less Christian, just human.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.

Hurston explores the implications for women in that it protests against the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women by a masculine society. She writes of the story of Janie Crawford in search of self and genuine happiness, of people rather than things. Although Janie's search is the main action

of the novel, there are other themes—freedom from materialism, intraracial prejudice, and gender stereotyping.

Johnson, Yvonne. "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The Voices of African American Women. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998.

Johnson asserts that Hurston's true personality and personal life comes through the narration of Their Eyes Were Watching God; it provides a link between the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs and the writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century African American women. Hurston makes a self-conscious effort to give voice to women of color. Janie does not fit the stereotype or "conform to earlier plot line established by white predecessors.

Jordan, Jennifer. "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature. 7.1(Spring 1988): 105-117. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Austin Peay State University.

Clarksville, TN. 21 September 2005.

<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>.

Jordan begins the essay in agreement with Alice Walker that Hurston was a lover of her culture and people; as an artist, she shaped her ideas to bring awareness to the black culture. Consequently, her agreement with Walker ends there because she does not believe Hurston is ready for feminist sainthood. Hurston's work portrays the struggle of a woman search for

identity under the feet of financially secure men; it does not depict "the black woman whose working-class existences are dominated by hard labor and financial instability." By the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie fulfills self-definition, but does not achieve social commitment with the black women in the community.

Meisenhelder, Susan Edwards. "Mink Skin or Coon Hide." Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999.

Meisenhelder explores the importance of race and gender in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Joe Sparks' quest to mimic the white male divides him from the Blacks in Eatonville. Nanny causes confusion in Janie's movement into womanhood because she tells her that her plight in the world is to be the mule of men. Janie does not want to be the "mule" of men, but she settles in her role in her marriage to Joe Sparks. Mrs. Turner does not mind her placement in society as long as she remains above the "darkest" people of her raise. She is a person that glorifies the quadroon or the mulatto because she believes whiter is better.

Plant, Deborah G. "Politics of Self." Every Tub Must Sit On Its Bottom. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Plant explores Hurston's handling of color in Their Eyes Were Watching God as a product of her childhood. Hurston adored her father's gray-green eyes, light skin, and his strong build. "The mulatto image as the one of beauty and privilege is a specter in many of her works." Janie is beautiful because she is a quadroon and deserves nothing but the best in life; it is the reason Joe wants to use her as an arm piece. The men of Eatonville cannot give Janie the financial stability she requires, but they can lust after her. Janie's heavy hair is the symbol of her beauty and the reason Joe needs to cover it—in order to cover her sexuality. Plant asserts that Janie is not the ideal model of femininity because she does not make an effort to bond with the women that surround her.

Sanders, James Roberts. "Womanism as the Key to Understanding Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *The Hollins Critic*. 25.4 (October 1988): 1-11. Info Trac OneFile. Austin Peay State University. Clarksville, TN. 28 September 2005.  
<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>.

Saunders offers Alice Walker's statement that "there is no book more important to me than this one." Walker's admiration for Hurston goes to such great length that she writes a poem entitled, "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." Saunders also talks about how porch talk is an effort to demean

women through speech. Consequently, Janie tires of the way Joe dehumanizes her in front of customers and uses her voice stop the mental abuse and causes Sparks inability to move on in life. Smith, Valerie. "Black Feminist Theory." African American

Literary Theory: A Reader. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Smith analyzes Their Eyes Were Watching God from a historical point of view. The presence of the woman as "other" serves to historicize a vignette that had existed for the narrator as a moment out of time. The stories thus enact a tension between the narrative of the community of privilege, posited as ahistorical, and a destabilizing eruption, posited as inescapably historical. Janie is a historicizing presence testifying to the power of the insistent voices of black feminist theory and cultural critics.

## STATEMENT OF CRITICAL INFLUENCES

since early childhood, I have always been interested in reading literature by black authors because they were not taught in the public school system. It was not until I was exposed to Richard Wright's *Simple character* and the poetry of Langston Hughes at Tougaloo College that I became enamored by Harlem Renaissance writers. I noticed that life was not all about black romanticism, but there was an underlying message of struggle.

As I entered Austin Peay State University in the Fall of 2004 after a ten-year absence from higher education, I was able to immerse myself once again in the concepts of literature. It was not until the Spring of 2005 that I was introduced to Dr. Jill Eichhorn's *Women in Literature*. The experience opened a whole new world to me. I realized I was not only immersed in a struggle with my black identity but my gender identity as well. Through the course I learned that women have struggled for voice since the creation of the church because their strength and knowledge made clergymen nervous. It was because of the fears of men that women were imprisoned and burned at the stake; a woman's power in a man's world is a force to be reckoned with. By the end of the course, I felt the need to use the my voice.

The following semester, Dr. Eichhorn suggested that I take Dr. Dwonna Goldstone's class in African American Literature because she felt there was more for me to learn from my own history. I must say that she was absolutely correct in her assumption. Dr. Goldstone's class opened my eyes to a whole new experience that I could not have possibly dreamed. The readings of Richard Wright's Native Son, Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry, and Assata Shakur's autobiography made me realize I did not know a fourth about my cultural history. I began to ask myself, "How do I teach my children about the future, if I do not know as much about the struggles of the past?" That experience left me thirsting for more so I enrolled for the course in African Writers for the next semester. This course educated me about the struggles of my ancestors and the problems African Americans face today.

During the period of the previous classes, I became a student of Linguistics under the instruction of Dr. Cynthia McWilliams. I never contemplated the study of the language as a necessary tool until I took this class. During this time, I became curious about the different dialects and began studying the nature of Black Vernacular. Dr. McWilliams exhibited patience and a willingness to talk to me about the influences languages have on life today.

When I decided to pursue a thesis, I was very confused about what and whom I would write about because there was so much information in my head—language, feminism, and African literature. My first decision was to write on the works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, but my heart was with Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's well-known demeanor of being her own woman and choosing to write the way she saw fit made her an interesting topic. Of course, I decided to put all my interests in one woman because I could study Black feminism and the use of language and dialect.

Before I began writing the thesis, Dr. Eichhorn exposed me to Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Beauvoir is very influential in her study on the female condition. I became very interested in her analysis of the female not existing without the male presence—she is essentially the other. Her theory helped explain the reason women seem invisible in a patriarchal society—we are seen as only a walking womb.

Dr. Goldstone recommended a reading of African American Theory by Winston Napier. Although his work gave me a wide variety of views on how to read from an African American point of view, I found Valerie Smith's "Black Feminist Theory" essential to understanding the works of Zora Neale Hurston. Black Feminist Theory began as a response to the exclusion and disdain from white male and female scholars as well as African

American male scholars. Essentially, the sufferings of black females are not spoken of. Hurston's works exhibit the plight of the black female as she is on the bottom of the oppression heap. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s anthropological study of black voice in The Signifying Monkey was an essential piece I needed in order to study how Hurston uses voice and dialect to bring credit to her work.

At the moment I finished reading all the above criticisms and theories, I decided that I would concentrate on Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and "Sweat." I chose these works because they are centered on the marriage of two women who are oppressed by a patriarchal society. I decided on a novel and short story because I would be able to give the thesis all the attention it deserved.

## VITA

VeAnda LaTrese Hemphill was born in Pascagoula, Mississippi. She obtained her Bachelor of Science in English from Austin Peay State University in December 2005. Currently, she is a candidate for a Master of Arts degree in English at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. Life after the master's program will involve teaching.