Introduction

In *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Robert Hemenway quotes Hurston's definition of folklore:

Folklore, Hurston said, is the art people create before they find out there is such a thing as art; it comes from a folk's "first wondering contact with natural law" - that is, laws of human nature as well as laws of natural process, the truths of a group's experience as well as the principles of physics. (159)

Hurston's search for the "inner heart of truth," which she believed could be found in folklore, took her on many perilous adventures. Fearing for her life, Hurston fled Haiti shortly after writing *Their Eyes*, which is a fascinating blend of black folklore and Western literary tradition. Her intensive study of hoodoo (voodoo), which she believed to be rooted in African mysticism, came to an abrupt end. Hemenway states, "She had gone deeply enough into the Caribbean night" (248).

Hurston's study of African-American folklore took her into the secret world of hoodoo, and because she believed in personally participating in her research, she learned how to conjure. The belief in hoodoo, which Hurston claimed to be burning "with all the intensity of a suppressed religion" in America (120, Hemenway), functions in Hurston's fictive Eatonville which is often controlled by seemingly supernatural forces.

In *Their Eyes* when Tea Cake, Janie's third husband, becomes ill after being bitten by a rabid dog, he fears that he has been conjured. He is suspicious that Janie wants to be free of him so that she can marry a lighter skinned man. In an attempt to quell his fear, Janie says, "Maybe it wuz uh witch ridin' yuh, honey. Ah'll see can't Ah find some mustard seed whilst Ah's out" (166). Incidentally, Albert Price III, a man to whom Hurston was married for a short time, claimed that she had supernatural powers and could "fix him" (274, Hemenway).

The daughter of a Baptist minister, Hurston was raised to be a Christian but became pagan. She was educated to be a scholar but believed in the integrity of the genius of black vernacular. And she was a woman but found success in a predominately male profession. Hurston's multifaceted nature is reflected in her narrative voice; in her quest to discover the truth about her own nature, she creates a prose style that integrates all her disparate elements. The prose style that Hurston introduces into African-American literature utilizes the mode of free indirect discourse which blends standard English with black vernacular. A reviewer, cited by Karla Holloway in The Character of the Word, once wrote of Hurston: "Miss Hurston shuttles between the sexes, the professions and the races as if she were a man and a woman, scientist and creative writer, white and colored" (28).

Hurston embraced hoodoo for artistic inspiration because it freed her of the institutional restraints that restricted the freedom of a black woman in white

patriarchy. Although Hurston's integrated self was fragile, she sustained it long enough to create her masterpiece. Whether or not she actually conjured *Their Eyes*, she is a metaphoric conjurer. In Conjuring, Marjorie Pryse writes,

. . . black women novelists have become metaphorical conjure women. . . . By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature of literary tradition. (5)

Conjuring is a metaphor for the creating of texts by contemporary black women. Janie is a fictional conjurer who metamorphoses into a verbal artist; Hurston's protagonist evolves along with the language of her narrator. As a young girl, living in the materialistic world of her Nanny and her first husband, Logan Killicks, Janie chooses to listen to "the words of the trees and the wind" (23-24, *Their Eyes*). When she leaves Killicks to run off with Jody Starks, she thinks to herself, "Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (31). But when her marriage to Starks collapses, she again decides, "So new thoughts had to be thought and new words said" (77). And finally when she falls in love with Tea Cake, her third husband, she tells her friend Pheoby, "He done taught me de maiden language all over" (109). As Janie's life evolves, her narrator must continually create new words to express the changes.

Hurston's protagonist Janie is conjured into being along with the poetic images which Hurston conjures in her free indirect discourse. Hurston creates a poetic language which is black and female.

Signifying, often written as signifyin', is a slang term for the verbal word play that is unique to American blacks. Signifying, the language most often spoken by the men in Hurston's novel, lacks the power of conjuring - the woman's language. Janie's men represent a contrast to her integrated self; they fail to achieve an authentic voice because their language does not reflect inner truth. Mary Helen Washington writes about the men's inability to express themselves in language in her introduction to *Their Eyes*: "The language of the men in *Their Eyes* is almost always divorced from any kind of interiority, and the men are rarely shown in the process of growth. Their talking is either a game or a method of exerting power" (xiii). Michael Awkward in Inspiriting Influences expands on the theory of the ineffectiveness of the men's language. He states, "For these characters, major difficulties - including death - arise from or are signalled by an inability to bolster "big talk" with similarly "big action" - in other words, an inability to make voice represent more than merely unauthenticated noise" (44).

Joe Starks, Janie's second husband, aims to be a big voice and that is why he comes to Eatonville, Florida. He feels that he will have a better chance at being a big voice in an all black town than in a white man's town. The problem is that he has adopted white man's values and forces them upon the townspeople and, most notably, upon his wife Janie. Awkward points out the irony of Starks' dilemma: "Starks is able to 'set himself up as lord, master, and proprietor' everywhere in Eatonville, and not just in his general store. His power in Eatonville approximates the white man's

almost total institutional control of America" (27-28).

In a review titled "In the Florida Glades" in The New York Times Book Review on the publication of *Their Eyes* Were Watching God in 1937, Lucy Tompkins calls it "a well-nigh perfect story" (29). However, Richard Wright, a contemporary of Hurston's and a Marxist intellectual, did not agree. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow," Mary Helen Washington states,

[Richard] Wright said Hurston's characters were nothing but minstrels. In a niggling review of *Their Eyes* Were Watching God, in 1937, he says the novel "carries no theme, no message, no thought"; it is just a "minstrel technique" to make white folks laugh. (17-18, Introduction, *I Love Myself*)

Hurston was faulted by many of her peers for not writing protest novels for social change. In 1971 in In a Minor Chord, Darwin Turner agrees with the earlier critics. He writes "But, superficial and shallow in her artistic and social judgments, she became neither an impeccable raconteur nor a scholar. Always, she remained a wandering minstrel" (120).

Zora Neale Hurston died in poverty in a Florida welfare home in 1960. And although Theodore Pratt attempted to save her from obscurity in 1961 - "She is out of circulation and all her books are out of print. One cannot be rectified. The other should be." (40) - it was not until the late seventies with the diligence of Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway, and others that Hurston resurfaced. Since then many of the critical studies done by women such as Lillie Howard, Adele Newson, and Karla Holloway have been gender studies of Janie as a questing female character in relation to Hurston's own difficult life as a black woman artist. In her introduction to Zora Neale Hurston: A Reference Guide, Adele Newson states that ". . . the idea of the questing woman character - Janie's quest for love among equals as well as for self-discovery - was at the time of the novel's appearance a foreign concept" (xx).

What has been lacking until recently are close readings of her texts. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in his essay "Criticism in the Jungle," the language of all black texts has been repressed. He states,

The relation of the black text to its 'universes', its author, and its various readerships has been of such intense interest to critics that close or practical criticism has until recently been the exception rather than the rule. Accordingly, mimetic and expressive theories of black literature continue to predominate over the sorts of theories concerned with discrete uses of figurative language. (6, *Black Literature and Literary Theory*)

Three critics who have done excellent close readings of *Their Eyes* are Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michael Awkward, and Michael Cooke. Gates analyzes the free indirect discourse of Hurston's text, and after defining signifying, he relates the rhetorical strategy to the text. Of his critical work, he writes, "The Signifying Monkey explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition. . . .The black tradition is double-voiced. . . . Signifyin(g) is the figure of the

double-voiced. . ." (xix-xxv, Introduction). Although Awkward only briefly mentions free indirect discourse as reflecting the double-voiced consciousness of the African-American and never mentions signifying, he looks closely at how Hurston uses voice and the authentication of voice through action. He writes that "Janie's achievement of an integrated self is made possible by her knowledge of the natural relationship between voice and action . . ." (56, Inspiriting Influences). Cooke, on the other hand, in addition to giving an excellent close reading of the text, applies his theory of signifying to it. He believes that signifying is a compromise. He writes "And yet, at best, the signifying monkey fell short of expressing the substance and value of being black" (31, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*). Cooke also mentions conjuring but more as a subject matter for black texts than as a way of creating them.

Because my goal is to explicate examples of the poetic images in *Their Eyes*, I have found the close readings done by Gates, Awkward, and Cooke to be very helpful. But my ultimate goal is to show how Hurston creates a literary style of profound uniqueness from which her poetic images originate. Since Hurston conjures her images from her own life which is black and female, I have found the work of feminist scholars (black and white) to be very helpful. In "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women," her introduction to Conjuring, Marjorie Pryse states,

We propose our volume's title, Conjuring, as a tribute to the powers of Hurston and Walker and as a reminder, both of the "magic" involved in writing literary criticism as well as fiction, and of the oath we all must take to continue the work of speaking with each others' tongues in our mouths, thereby illuminating women's lives. (22)
In "Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance," Joanne Braxton cites Temma Kaplan: "The mother tongue is the oral tradition" (xxvi, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*). Because Hurston collected folklore as a scholar and wrote down these oral traditions as an artist, she broke "the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power" (12, Pryse).

Because Hurston's poetic images originate from her unique prose style, I will define three literary terms currently used in the critical analysis of African-American texts: free indirect discourse, signifying, and conjuring. I will define free indirect discourse and signifying by using critics Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Michael Awkward, Michael Cooke, and others. However, I will define conjuring by using feminist philosopher Mary Daly because she is concerned with the ramifications of sexism (and racism) inherent in language. Daly is particularly sympathetic to "the unspeakable oppression - of countless women, especially women of color and all poor women" (174, Pure Lust). Daly's philosophy "has its source in women breaking out of the tamed/tracked modes of thinking/feeling of phallocracy. It is the force of reason rooted in instinct, intuition, passion" (7). I will also be relying on other feminist scholars - Elizabeth Meese, Alice Walker, Marjorie Pryse, and Joanne Braxton - to define conjuring. And then I will set up an important contrast between signifying which is verbal word play and conjuring which is verbal magic. Although *Their Eyes* is full of examples of signifying, Hurston finds the language of signifying to be oftentimes a reaction to social powerlessness and an evasion of reality. And

although she believed that signifying achieves artistry in the verbal brilliance of its black vernacular, Hurston offers conjuring as a language which is powerful because it is an honest reflection of reality and makes things happen; the black woman creates while conjuring. The protagonist Janie and her narrator achieve an authentic voice in the powerful images conjured in Zora Neale Hurston's free indirect discourse in *Their Eyes* Were Watching God.

Most of the signifiers in *Their Eyes* are men, and the extent to which they signify corresponds to how disintegrated they have become by accepting Western values. The character Nanny, although a woman, signifies to evade the realities of her life and the life of her granddaughter Janie. When Nanny says, "Thank yuh, Massa Jesus," she is illustrating that although she is no longer a slave, the slave consciousness has caused her to view even her relationship with the deity in terms of slave and master. Robert Hemenway in Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography states:

In the notes to Mules and Men Zora observed that the devil in black folklore is not the terror he is in European folklore. Rather, he is a powerful trickster who often competes successfully with God. She added "There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an extension of the story-makers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters, who are nevertheless defeated by Negroes." This is a revolutionary principle, one which overturns the normative moral structure of the oppressing society. (223-4)

This may explain Hurston's title, *Their Eyes* Were Watching God. Janie's men, and some of the women in her life, passively watch the white patriarchal culture rather than act intuitively. The slave-holding consciousness confuses the slave master and God and holds Janie, a black woman, in low regard.

Male domination in Hurston's black community mimics universal male domination which perpetuates sexism and racism. Signifying, which is most often used by the men of Eatonville, provides a means of verbally oppressing women in the novel's black community. The narrator comments on signifying near the end of the novel at Janie's trial for the murder of her third husband:

Then she saw all of the colored people standing up in the back of the courtroom. . . . They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks. (176, *Their Eyes*) But earlier when Janie is on the muck of the wild Everglades and far from the sexist restrictions of Eatonville, she is free to inoffensively signify:

Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! She was sorry for her friends back there and scornful of the others. The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big

stories herself from listening to the rest. Because she loved to hear it, and the men loved to hear themselves, they would "woof" and "boogerboo" around the games to the limit. No matter how rough it was, people seldom got mad, because everything was done for a laugh. (127-28)

"Woof" and "boogerboo" are synonyms for signify. In Words About Words, David Grambs defines signifying as a simple "verbal game of exchanged insults," but he also quotes black linguist Geneva Smitherman's Talkin and Testifyin, which states that signifying "can also be heavy, that is, a way of teaching or driving home a cognitive message . . ." (333).

To free herself, and her protagonist Janie, from the oppressive disintegration of signifying, Hurston conjures free indirect discourse. "Janie's poetic self-realization is inseparable from Zora's concomitant awareness of her cultural situation" (236, Hemenway). Hurston is a woman, an artist, an African-American and a scholar; she is an urban New Yorker and a rural Floridian. In her essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston describes herself as ". . . a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall" (155, *I Love Myself*). It is in her free indirect discourse where Hurston conjures her most powerful images. She conjures images from her own natural and domestic worlds in her quest for authenticity. By giving voice to all her disparate elements while simultaneously respecting the autonomy of each, Hurston creates an authentic prose style.

The images in Hurston's fiction come from her self; her images authenticate her fiction, and her fiction authenticates her life; her words and her reality harmonize. Having been "born with a skillet in [her] hand," Hurston takes images from the kitchen, and having lived in "farthest Florida" for most of her life, Hurston takes images from the rural landscape of Florida. But she selects her images with the objectivity of the scholar, she adorns them with the poetic beauty of black vernacular, and she empowers them with the forces of elemental nature.

After explicating Hurston's use of free indirect discourse, signifying, and conjuring - and after showing how she distinguishes between signifying and conjuring - I will explicate examples of the original and powerful images in Hurston's lyrical novel.

Back to Conjured Into Being

Free Indirect Discourse

Before a fiction writer can write, the writer must develop a narrative voice. Finding a voice is not easy, especially for African-American women who have traditionally been denied literary self-expression. Mary Daly writes about the seemingly insurmountable problems that afflict women of color. She quotes Alice Walker who poses the following question: "How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write?" (174, Pure Lust). By refusing to repudiate her folk origins and by insisting on a natural unpretentious style, Zora Neale Hurston conjures a narrative voice which is her own. Although the poetic images she conjures are powerful, her genius is most evident in the style of writing which she created. The style that Hurston brings to African-American literature uses the narrative mode of free indirect discourse which is defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his introduction to The Signifying Monkey:

Free indirect discourse is represented in this canonical text [*Their Eyes* Were Watching God] as if it were a dynamic character, with shifts in its level of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness. (xxvi)

Hurston creates a narrative voice not only to be able to express herself as an artist but to give a literary voice to the people of her black community. In her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston writes about her mother's death and her mother's unspoken plea for her daughter to speak for her:

Papa was standing at the foot of the bed and turned it around so that Mama's eyes would face the east. I thought that she looked to me as the head of the bed was reversed. Her mouth was slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk. But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice (86-7). In her free indirect discourse, Hurston supplies her characters with words to enable them to articulate their thoughts.

Hurston employs two other modes of narration along with free indirect discourse; they are direct discourse and indirect discourse. In order to explain free indirect discourse, I will first give examples of direct discourse and indirect discourse. Then to illustrate the special qualities of Hurston's free indirect discourse, I will give an example. Simply put, direct discourse is written in black vernacular, indirect discourse is in standard English, and free indirect discourse is the integration of both. Yet, it is so much more, as Gates suggests:

The narrative voice Hurston created, and her legacy to Afro-American fiction, is a

lyrical and disembodied yet individual voice, from which emerges a singular longing and utterance, a transcendent, ultimately racial self, extending far beyond the merely individual. . . . For Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self. (183, The Signifying Monkey)

After her husband Joe Starks has provided the town with a general store and a street lamp and has become mayor of Eatonville, Janie realizes that the townspeople envy her. In the following episode, Hurston manipulates the narrative viewpoint by utilizing the three modes of narration mentioned above.

The evening after the ceremonial lighting of the town's first street light, Joe Starks and his wife Janie are in bed together. When they speak to each other in black vernacular, they speak in direct discourse:

"Well, honey, how yuh lak bein' Mrs. Mayor?"

"It's all right Ah reckon, but don't yuh think it keeps us in a kinda strain?" (43, *Their Eyes*)

After their conversation ends, the narrator enters and speaks about Janie in indirect discourse: "A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely" (44). Following a white space in the text, the narrator continues in indirect discourse: "Janie soon began to feel the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities" (44). But as one continues to read, the narrator's language makes a subtle shift as Hurston begins her free indirect discourse. In the following excerpt, the narrator shows how the townspeople feel about the fancy spittoon that Joe Starks bought for his wife:

He bought a little lady-size spitting pot for Janie to spit in. Had it right in the parlor with little sprigs of flowers painted all around the sides. . . . It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them. Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them, when they wasn't told no better than to spit in tomato cans. It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a 'gator. A familiar strangeness. You keep seeing your sister in the 'gator and the 'gator in your sister, and you'd rather not. There was no doubt that the town respected him and even admired him in a way. But any man who walks in the way of power and property is bound to meet hate. (45)

The free indirect discourse, while not written in the rural black dialect of central Florida, is not nearly as restrained nor as lacking in images as the language of the indirect discourse. Although the protagonist Janie and the narrator achieve an authentic voice in the powerful images conjured in the free indirect discourse, this unique mode of narration was problematic for many readers. The juxtaposition of language styles as evident in the excerpt of free indirect discourse given above proved irksome for many of the earlier critics. It proved difficult to accept a

sentence such as "Maybe more things in the world besides spitting pots had been hid from them, when they wasn't told no better than to spit in tomato cans" in the same paragraph with a sentence such as "But any man who walks in the way of power and property is bound to meet hate." Robert Hemenway, in his literary biography, Zora Neale Hurston, points out this problem:

As a dedicated Harlem Renaissance artist, Zora Hurston, searched hard for a way to transfer the life of the people, the folk ethos, into the accepted modes of formalized fiction. She knew the folkloric context better than any of her contemporaries, and this led to a personal style that many did not understand. (56)

In her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Hurston writes about the dichotomy of language she resolves in free indirect discourse. She writes:

His [The African-American's] words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile. . . . So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. (49-50)

Because of her special genius, Hurston was able to do both - to think in a written language and to think in hieroglyphics.

Back to Conjured Into Being

Signifying

Although I wrote about Hurston's integration of standard English and black vernacular in the previous chapter on free indirect discourse, it is important to note that she also explores the dichotomy of male and female expression. And although women signify, I believe that Hurston saw it clearly as a male's use of language. In their work Reading Zora, co-authored by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Barbara Johnson, they state that "Hurston's use of free indirect discourse is central to her larger strategy of critiquing what we might think of as a 'male writing' " (73, Bloom). This "male writing" of which Gates and Johnson speak is directly related to signifying.

Signifying may be defined as rhetorical games played out in the black vernacular tradition. It has also been called "playing the dozens," "giving a reading," or "specifying." In Black Literature and Literary Theory, Gates states that "Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures" (6). And in Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston writes "The bookless may have difficulty in reading a paragraph in a newspaper, but when they get down to 'playing the dozens' they have no equal in America, and, I'd risk a sizable bet, in the whole world" (217).

For its eighth entry for the word "signify" The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition) gives the following definition: "To boast or brag; to make insulting remarks or insinuations." Also, following the definition, the OED includes a quotation from Zora Neale Hurston's collection of Negro folklore, Mules and Men, for its 1935 example of how the word "signify" was being used chiefly by blacks in the United States:

"Aw, woman, quit tryin' to signify." "Ah kin signify all Ah please, Mr. Nappy-chin."

Hurston footnotes the above use of signify in her text; she glosses it as "To show off" (124, Mules and Men). The above exchange occurs between two lovers, Joe Willard and Big Sweet. The episode points out how signifying is often employed in the war between the sexes. A look at the entire conversation will illustrate this point:

"And speakin' 'bout hams," cut in Big Sweet meaningly, "if Joe Willard don't stay out of dat bunk he was in last night, Ah'm gointer sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar cure his hams."

Joe snatched his pole out of the water with a jerk and glared at Big Sweet, who stood sidewise looking at him most pointedly.

"Aw, woman, quit tryin' to signify."

"Ah kin signify all Ah please, Mr. Nappy-chin, so long as Ah know what Ah'm

talkin' about."

"See dat?" Joe appealed to the other men. "We git a day off and figger we kin ketch some fish and enjoy ourselves, but naw, some wimmins got to drag behind us, even to de lake." (124)

One of the "wimmins" happens to be Hurston, a professional anthropologist-folklorist, who is recording this conversation which continues with Big Sweet:

"You didn't figger Ah was draggin' behind you when you was bringin' dat Sears and Roebuck catalogue over to my house and beggin' me to choose my ruthers. Lemme tell you something, any time Ah shack up wid any man Ah gives myself de privilege to go wherever he might be, night or day. Ah got de law in my mouth" "Lawd, ain't she specifyin'!" sniggered Wiley. (124)

Although the the above exchange depicts a man and a woman who are involved in a power struggle, a man's ability to signify well can prove sexually stimulating and endearing to a woman. The art of mimicry is an entertaining form of signifying at which Janie's third husband Tea Cake is especially skilled. In "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Hurston writes about how blacks are world famous as mimics: ". . . let us say that the art of mimicry is better developed in the Negro than in other racial groups. He does it as the mocking-bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he wishes to be like the one imitated" (60).

At one point during their courtship, Janie overhears Tea Cake "mimicking the tuning of a guitar. He frowned and struggled with the pegs of his imaginary instrument watching her out of the corner of his eye with that secret joke playing over his face" (96, *Their Eyes*). And Janie enjoys Tea Cake's playful ways: " 'Crazy thing!' Janie commented, beaming out with light" (97). In Dust Tracks on a Road Hurston writes about her friendship with Big Sweet, also an accomplished signifier. Hurston writes that "she [Big Sweet] had told me, 'You sho is crazy!' Which is a way of saying I was witty" (188). Hurston was proud of her ability to signify, and some of her best friends and most memorable characters are skilled in the art of signifying. Hurston describes the crazy (witty) Tea Cake through Janie in free indirect discourse:

He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom - a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (101-2)

Before continuing a discussion about signifying, I must mention the signifying monkey. Hurston grew up hearing monkey stories, "in which the Negro, sometimes symbolized by the monkey, and sometimes named outright, ran off with the wrong understanding of what he had seen and heard" (224, Dust Tracks). Hurston continues:

There was a general acceptance of the monkey as kinfolks. Perhaps it was some distant memory of tribal monkey reverence from Africa which had been forgotten in

the main, but remembered in some vague way. Perhaps it was an acknowledgment of our talent for mimicry with the monkey as a symbol. (224)

In order to define signifying in terms of the signifying monkey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in The Signifying Monkey, offers Roger D. Abrahams' definition. Abrahams, "a well-known and highly regarded literary critic, linguist, and anthropologist" (74) gives the following definition: "The name 'Signifying Monkey' shows [the hero] to be a trickster, 'signifying' being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at 'direction through indirection' " (74).

While calling the signifying monkey a trickster, it is interesting to add that in black folklore the devil, a culture hero, is also considered a trickster. Robert Hemenway in Zora Neale Hurston states:

The origin of the identification between black story-teller and devil trickster is almost impossible to discover and may even be an African survival. Its human logic is self-evident. Confronted with the hypocrisy and paradox of white Christianity's sanction of slavery, the slave might naturally identify with an opposing power. The linguistic effects of this identification, adapted through history, can be striking. (224) Because of this strong identification between the devil and the storyteller, it is not so surprising that Hurston, a black pagan storyteller, made a covenant with the devil during a hoodoo initiation ceremony in New Orleans.

Hurston comes to realize that signifying can be very cruel to the person signified upon. Hurston writes: "I found the Negro, and always the blackest Negro, being made the butt of all jokes - particularly black women" (225, Dust Tracks). An example of this is when Joe Starks, Janie's second husband and mayor of Eatonville, ridicules her about her age in front of customers at his store. What he is doing, in fact, is trying to conceal his own advancing age by pointing out Janie's age while she is still a relatively young woman. Joe Starks signifies on Janie in direct discourse: "I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!" (74, *Their Eyes*). We know that Joe Starks is lying about Janie's "rump," because years later when she returns to Eatonville after the death of her third husband, Tea Cake, "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets . . ." (2).

Although the men take note of Janie's firm buttocks, when Hurston's characters speak in their own voices in direct discourse they tend to signify. Janie's grandmother Nanny, Janie's three husbands - Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake Woods - the porch sitters of Eatonville, and the migrant workers in the Everglades all signify, and they diminish Janie as they do so. Tea Cake signifies on Janie after he becomes ill with rabies and believes that she has conjured him. While Tea Cake is charming Janie by comparing her to a patch of roses, he is concealing a gun under his pillow, a gun with which he will eventually attempt to shoot her:

" . . . Everytime Ah see uh patch uh roses uh somethin' over sportin' they selves makin' out they pretty, Ah tell 'em 'Ah want yuh tuh see mah Janie sometime.' You

must let de flowers see yuh sometimes. heah, Janie?"

"You keep dat up, Tea Cake, Ah'll b'lieve yuh after while," Janie said archly and fixed him back in bed. It was then she felt the pistol under the pillow. It gave her a quick ugly throb . . ." (172, *Their Eyes*)

Michael Awkward in Inspiriting Influences comments on how Tea Cake's actions fail to complement his voice:

At this point, however, his actions do not complement his words. Just after he delivers his charming suggestion that Janie exhibit her beauty to a patch of egotistical roses, she "felt the pistol under [his] pillow. . . . Never had Tea Cake slept with a pistol under his head before" . . . . His subsequent actions, then, like Joe Starks' during his lingering physical deterioration, fail to authenticate his voice. (42) Not only are the signifiers in *Their Eyes* engaged in a futile struggle for power, they also fail to see that their words do not reflect reality. In Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century, Michael Cooke points out that "the signifier is the one who as best he can makes up for a lack of social power with an exercise of intellectual or critical power. . . . But signifying harbors a danger. . . . Signifying and sheer wishful thinking tend to coincide . . ." (26-29).

There was a time when Janie enjoyed the signifying of the porch-sitters whom she considered quite harmless; signifying was a pleasant pastime "When the people sat around on the porch and passed around pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see . . ." (48, *Their Eyes*). But when she returns from the Everglades after the hurricane and after Tea Cake's death, Janie sees the porch-sitters differently:

But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed notions through their mouths. They sat in judgment. . . . They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. (1-2)

Nanny was cruelly signifying when she told Janie that love comes with marriage in order to convince the young Janie to marry a much older man with property. At first Janie believes Nanny's lie so she attempts to make a life with Logan Killicks, who looks "like some ole skullhead in de grave yard" (13), but "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (24). It is at this moment that Janie sees through signifying and begins her metamorphosis into becoming a creator of art, a conjurer.

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Poetic Images

Zora Neale Hurston drew on her own life and experiences to create appropriate images for her fiction. Not only do her images come from the kitchen and the barnyard, but they reflect the oppression of the black woman as she works like a mule in the backwoods of Florida. Nonetheless, the integrity of Hurston's originality gives tremendous power to her unique prose style. The domestic images are important not only because they are "womanish" things, but also because many black women, including Hurston, have worked as domestic servants. When Janie's grandmother attempts to make Janie understand why she is forcing Janie to marry Logan Killicks, she says, "Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate" (*Their Eyes* 19). Nanny's life was hard as a slave, and her daughter's life was little better, so Nanny "can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa [Janie]" (19).

Nanny, like a cracked plate, has been a common kitchen convenience which, although damaged, will be used until it is discarded. But she wants more for Janie than to have her granddaughter treated like a lowly household object - a spit cup. In Jonah's Gourd Vine, when Lucy Pearson, the wife of the protagonist, John Pearson, is dying, she lets her friends and family know that she is ready to die. She tells them, "Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots" (131). Hurston uses the old Gulla proverb to express sadness in a way that would come naturally to a kitchen-bound woman.

But many of Hurston's characters, like the porch-sitters in *Their Eyes*, have great fun with images. In order to show how skinny Matt Bonner's yellow mule is, one of them says, "mah wife and some others had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh washboard . . . and hangin' things out on his hock-bones tuh dry" (49). Although the above passage is humorous, doing white folk's laundry is an image of oppression which Hurston uses in others works, most notably in her short story, "Sweat." The story is about Delia Jones, a washwoman, and her husband Sykes. The conflict centers around Sykes' resentment for the dirty piles of white folk's laundry that Delia is always washing and her contention that her constant washing pays the bills.

At one point in *Their Eyes* the porch-sitters see Daisy, an attractive young woman, walk by the general store. Hurston uses an interesting image in her free indirect discourse to describe the woman's hair: "Her hair is not what you might call straight. It's negro hair, but it's got a kind of white flavor. Like the piece of string out of a ham. It's not ham at all, but it's been around ham and got the flavor" (64). Hurston was particularly sensitive to the opinion held by many blacks that anything whiter or lighter was better. Intraracial prejudice is the theme of Hurston's early play, "Color Struck." Emma, a dark skinned black girl, is afraid that her boyfriend John is attracted to a lighter skinned girl. She laments:

Ah, mah God! He's in there with her - Oh, them half whites, they gets everything,

they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs - everything! The whole world has got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobblestones. (11) The theme of intraracial prejudice appears again in *Their Eyes* in the character of Mrs. Turner. Because Mrs. Turner has a slightly pointed nose and thin lips, she considers herself superior to anyone darker than she. Because Janie has a "coffee-and-cream complexion," Mrs. Turner befriends her and asks, "Who want any lil ole black baby layin' up in de baby buggy lookin' lak uh fly in buttermilk?" (135). Both the ham string and the fly in the buttermilk are two items a woman would commonly observe while attending to the cooking in a kitchen.

After the before-mentioned scene when Janie publicly humiliates Joe Starks by telling him in front of his customers, "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (75), living with the man becomes very difficult for her. Her husband refuses to speak to her, and Janie is determined to wait until he is no longer angry with her. But in the meantime, ". . . if she must eat out of a long-handled spoon, she must" (77). Again, Hurston uses a domestic image, eating with a long-handled spoon, to describe the discomfort of Janie's life. But Janie notices that Joe is looking ill and acting strangely. He has hired a root-doctor because he believes that Janie has had him "fixed." As his health fades, Janie "noticed how baggy Joe was getting all over. Like bags hanging from an ironing board" (77). After Joe dies, Hurston continues with the ironing image as Janie prepares to announce his death to the townspeople: "Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see, and opened up the window and cried, 'Come heah people! Jody is dead. Mah husband is gone from me' " (83).

After Joe Starks' funeral for which Janie starches and irons her face for the last time, Hurston moves away from her use of domestic images as her protagonist Janie moves away from her role as submissive wife and begins to live a freer lifestyle.

Along with the use of domestic images, Hurston also uses images drawn from the rural landscape of Florida. Born and raised in the small town of Eatonville, Hurston often returned to Florida to write and eventually to die and to be buried in a neglected, segregated cemetery. Until Alice Walker found and marked Hurston's grave, it was "lost like a ball in high grass" on "God's green dirt ball."

The mule, a common sight in rural Florida, appears frequently in Hurston's works. Janie identifies with Matt Bonner's skinny yellow mule and resents the way Bonner mistreats it. Nanny had warned Janie that the black woman is the mule of the world:

"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. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (14)

And when her first husband, Logan Killicks, goes off to buy a mule for Janie to plow behind, she decides to run off with Joe Starks. When Janie and Joe arrive in Eatonville, a typical small town in backwoods Florida, "Joe noted the scant dozen of shame-faced houses scattered in the sand and palmetto roots . . ." (32). Eatonville

also has live oaks, rattlesnakes, alligators, buzzards, and sandspurs. And when beautiful young women come down the street and walk past the store porch, "They have got that fresh, new taste about them like young mustard greens in the spring . . ." (63). Hurston's fiction is full of sleepy lakes, magnolia and chinaberry trees, and men who smile like oranges being squeezed.

During Joe Starks' illness, Janie comes into his room to see how he is feeling. When he saw her enter, "He gave a deep-growling sound like a hog dying down in the swamp and trying to drive off disturbance" (81). Janie attempts to warn her husband that the root-doctor, whom he has hired to cure him, is a "multiplied cockroach."

After Joe dies, Janie meets Tea Cake Woods, and they talk "from grass roots tuh pine trees." Tea Cake takes Janie fishing late at night and makes her lemonade with lemons he picks himself from the tree by her kitchen. Tea Cake is willing to cross the gender barriers; not only does he make lemonade, but he expects Janie to play checkers with him. While Joe Starks was alive, he considered checkers to be a man's game and had never allowed Janie to play. Janie's friend, Pheoby, is afraid that Tea Cake, a younger man, is going to take advantage of Janie, an older woman. Pheoby compares Tea Cake to a turkey and Janie a possum: "You know how dese young men is wid older women. Most of de time dey's after whut dey kin git, then dey's gone lak uh turkey through de corn. . . . Ah sho hope you ain't lak uh possum - de older you gits, de less sense yuh got" (108).

In The Character of the Word, Karla Holloway states, "The reliance on the strength of natural imagery to sustain significance is a distinct characteristic of black American women writers" (20).

When Tea Cake, now Janie's third husband, takes Janie on the muck, she sees a Florida she had never before seen:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (123)

The natural imagery of the text becomes wilder after Janie arrives at the 'Glades. The natural world of Eatonville was a tame, rural, domesticated region compared to the elementally black potent muck. Tea Cake teaches Janie how to shoot, and she hunts alligators with him.

But Janie is not really tested by nature until the hurricane during which Tea Cake, while trying to rescue Janie, is bitten by a rabid dog. In his rabies-induced delirium Tea Cake suspects that Janie is running after Mrs. Turner's light skinned brother and that Janie has conjured him. Tea Cake's friends encourage his suspicions: "But something Sop had told [Tea Cake] made his tongue lie cold and heavy like a dead lizard between his jaws" (171). After Janie shoots Tea Cake in self defense, she is

taken to court. Janie sees all the black people standing together in the back of the courtroom, "Packed tight like a case of celery, only much darker than that" (176), and she hears them speaking, ". . . a tongue storm struck the Negroes like wind among the palm trees" (177). The dead lizard, the case of celery, and the wind among the palm trees are all images of Florida which add integrity to Hurston's spirited prose.

Melvin Dixon in Ride Out the Wilderness comments on Hurston's images of place,

Janie effects her "deliverance" by exercising her autonomy audaciously. She changes ordinary regions of sexist restrictions into womanist places of control. These spaces include the road, the porch, the muck, and the porch again. . . . She womanizes the spaces, transforms them from gender-imposed prisons into freedom-granting environments. In so doing she reverses familiar stereotypes associating men with the abandon of the road and women with the stationary, confining domesticity of the house. (90-91)

In addition to the natural images Hurston found in the flora and fauna of Florida, she uses powerful images of elemental nature. In a courageous attempt to lift the restrictions imposed by the institutional power of white patriarchy, she looked to the elements of nature for potent images. Elizabeth Meese states in Crossing the Double-Cross, "As in white patriarchal culture, language serves as a locus for social control through its centrality within an order of meaning" (47). Meese is referring to the black community of Eatonville, and she continues "Phallocentrism is so fundamentally pervasive that it is difficult to conceive of one's self, actions, and meaning outside of its system of control" (47). But by turning to the African belief of God-in-nature (Holloway 107-8), Hurston and her character Janie find the strength to conjure their own true beings from the elements.

The story of Janie's life begins as a child in the white folk's backyard. She remembers how "Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (*Their Eyes* 9). Mary Daly, a radical feminist who also believes in the power of the elements, has conjured a philosophy which goes beyond patriarchy. The elements of Mary Daly's elemental feminist philosophy begin with the spoken letters of the alphabet - Janie's nickname as a child. Daly's other elements include the natural components of the world: fire, air, earth, and water; the natural components of the universe: sun, moon, planets, and stars; and the elemental spirits such as angels and demons (Pure Lust 10-11).

Most of Hurston's fiction is semi-autobiographical. An early short story, "Drenched in Light," has been called by critics "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl." Hurston names the little girl in the story Isis, and in her novel about her parents' life, Jonah's Gourd Vine, she also names the daughter, who represents herself, Isis. Isis is not only an Egyptian goddess, but she is also a goddess of words. Mary Daly, in her text on elemental feminist philosophy, cites E.A. Wallis Budge from his text, The Gods of the Egyptians: ". . . for I am Isis the goddess, and I am the lady of words of power, and I know how to work with words of power, and most mighty are my words!" (1 Pure Lust 18). In *Their Eyes*, Hurston shows how truly powerful words

can be, especially when they are acted upon.

In her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston writes about her lifelong fascination with trees, and in her novel, *Their Eyes*, "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (8). In Pure Lust, Daly also writes about "the Elemental power of living trees," "the ancient 'Tree of Life,' and the Sacred Tree, symbol of the Goddess" (97). Daly continues,

For Lusty women experience our Elemental connection with trees - who are rooted in the depth of the earth, and who are in contact with water and air and with the light and warmth of the sun, the rhythms of the moon and stars. (409)

Tea Cake, Janie's most elemental man, is a later manifestation of her tree. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes,

Tea Cake not only embodies Janie's tree, he is the woods themselves, the delectable veritable woods, as his name connotes ("Vergible" being a vernacular term for veritable). Vergible Tea Cake Woods is a sign of verity, one who speaks the truth, one genuine and real . . . . (The Signifying Monkey 191)

Of Janie's men, Tea Cake is the least affected, the least disintegrated, by white patriarchy. Citing Cheryl Wall, Michael Awkward explains why Janie would find Tea Cake more appealing than her former husbands: "Tea Cake . . . is in Wall's view 'so thoroughly immune to the influence of white American society that he does not even desire [this society's] external manifestations of money, power, and position' " (Inspiriting Influences 37). In Dust Tracks, Hurston describes the man after whom she modeled Tea Cake: "He had no money . . . and [he] had nothing to offer but what it takes - a bright soul, a fine mind in a fine body, and courage" (255).

In her novel Hurston writes that as a young girl Janie could hear elemental sounds: "She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind" (23-24). Women who are even remotely in touch with these elements feel that they - living within the restrictions of patriarchal institutions - have become too far removed from their natural selves and are on a quest to rediscover elemental wisdom. Zora Neale Hurston was an elementally-inspired woman, and she created an elemental character in Janie. Both Hurston and Janie may be seen as prototypes of Daly's metamorphosing women or Pure "Lusters [who] uncover the Archimage - the Original Witch - within [them]Selves.

. . . Weirds conjure the courage to Sin - to Realize be-ing" (31). Daly's metamorphosing women, like Hurston and her protagonist Janie, must create themselves anew. Janie must repeatedly break away from the disintegration of her men caused by white phallocracy's myths and institutions. Daly writes,

Women are held back from remembering consciousness which is thus dismembered by phallocrats, who fashion and promote the Biggest Lies, the cruelest degradations, deadening deep intuitive powers over and over again, forcing women repeatedly to

re-invent the wheel. (50) But while relying on elemental forces, women can escape the lies. The natural fury of the hurricane that killed Tea Cake is an example of a natural force beyond patriarchal control. The hurricane produces "Houses without roofs, and roofs without houses" (161). This seemingly chaotic image may appear quite liberating to a woman who has been domestically imprisoned within the confining walls of a house. Janie explains to her friend Pheoby how it felt to be confined in her husband Joe's house: "And Ah'd sit dere wid de walls creepin' up on me and squeezin' all de life outa me" (107). In free indirect discourse, Janie and her narrator give utterance to the power of the storm:

That night the palm and banana trees began that long distance talk with the rain. . . . Sometime that night the winds came back. . . . It woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. . . . The sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel. . . . Havoc was there with her mouth wide open. (147-58)

Havoc, which is personified as a woman with her mouth wide open, may be seen as a negative force as, indeed, it was in the sermon given by Hurston's father, a black minister, from whom she first heard the image. The lines from his sermon read,

Havoc will be there, my friends, hah!
With her jaws wide open, hah! (Dust Tracks 217)

But I believe that as an image of an elemental woman's power, Hurston meant it to be positive. When Janie was married to Joe Starks, she was forced into an unnatural silence, and when she did speak, her husband was quick to remind her, "You gettin' too moufy, Janie" (71). Starks resorts to violence to keep Janie subjugated. After he slaps her face in the kitchen,

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. . . . She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (67-68)

Daly comments on the lack of respect afforded to a woman's "insides:" "Women who have been thingified, deprived of conscious participation in Be-ing, have trouble believing in the sanctity of women's 'insides' - both their own and those of other women. This doubt extends to spirit, personality, Self " (59). But by the end of *Their Eyes*, Janie has been transfigured into an integrated whole, and she is at peace with her being: "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net" (184). Mary Daly also speaks of a "net, visible to the Third Eye, that stretches across the spiritual abysses that have been manufactured by the fraternity of fragmenters" (405). At the end of the novel, Janie has achieved spiritual wholeness, a quality of being created by a woman of courage and integrity.

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